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Silence as a political strategy in international diplomacy

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to determine the functional purpose, mechanisms, and consequences of diplomatic silence in international crises. The work employed typologisation to classify the functions of silence, case study analysis to examine diplomatic cases, comparative analysis to compare models of silence, as well as discursive and political-communicative analysis to interpret political consequences. The analysis allowed for the consideration of diplomatic silence as an independent form of political communication. A classification of the main functions was formulated, which included deterrence, signalling, crisis management, protection of the negotiation process, demonstration of position, and creation of strategic uncertainty. The comparison of relations between China and the United States of America and between China and Taiwan revealed a distinction between the crisis-regulatory and status-symbolic models of the use of silence. The study of Russia's war with Ukraine showed that the restriction of public information was used to enhance operational security and preserve uncertainty regarding the intentions and capabilities of the parties. The analysis of sanction conflicts around Russia and Iran demonstrated the use of silence as an instrument of strategic insurance aimed at minimizing political risks. The examination of India's diplomatic behaviour demonstrated the use of silence for balancing between competing centres of power without losing foreign policy flexibility. The advantages of silence are manifested through reducing the risk of escalation, maintaining negotiation channels, and protecting sensitive information, while the main threats remain the misinterpretation of intentions, the growth of distrust, and the accumulation of informational uncertainty. The results can be used by diplomatic agencies and specialists in international relations to assess the feasibility of using silence in crisis communications, negotiation processes, and the development of foreign policy strategies

Keywords: demonstration of position; protection of the negotiation process; crisis communication; signalling; deterrence

INTRODUCTION

For the problematic of international relations at the beginning of the 21st century, a rethinking of the role of communication in the processes of foreign policy decision-making has become characteristic. The growth of conflict in the international environment, the intensification of rivalry among leading states, the spread of hybrid forms of

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confrontation, and the acceleration of digital communications have changed the conditions for the functioning of diplomacy. Silence has ceased to be perceived exclusively as an absence of communication and is now considered as a tool for managing international uncertainty, a mechanism for preserving negotiation opportunities, a means of avoiding premature commitments, and a form of political influence. Under such conditions, diplomatic silence has acquired functions traditionally associated with open diplomatic actions, which actualises the need for its conceptual understanding as a separate phenomenon of international politics.

In the scholarly literature, a direction of research has gradually formed, devoted to the analysis of silence. Strategic ambiguity in US foreign policy regarding the possibility of using weapons (including chemical weapons) in Ukraine is examined by M. Bentley (2024). Deliberate uncertainty, he finds, enabled Washington to avoid rigid commitments and retain crisis-response flexibility. The reorientation of US policy toward China under Donald Trump is traced by E. Ashbee & S. Hurst (2021), who show that strategic competition hardened into a lasting foreign policy orientation, outlasting the administration that promoted it. The researchers established that the concept of strategic competition became entrenched as a long-term foreign policy orientation even after the change of administration.

The problem of state silence in the international legal dimension was thoroughly examined by D. Azaria (2025). The author systematised various forms of diplomatic silence and established that silence has a polyfunctional character, as it can create legal consequences and influence the behaviour of international actors. The concept of deliberative complicity, formulated by J.L.A. Donohue (2024), holds that refusing to speak out in situations of injustice can constitute moral participation in negative processes. Silence, within this logic, ceases to be neutral and acquires a normative weight. O. Tan & A.C. Tan (2025) addressed strategic uncertainty in international relations, showing that escalation between the USA, China, and Taiwan stems not only from power imbalances but also from competing national identities and domestic narratives. Symbolic and communicative factors can matter as much as military or economic resources – and identity politics shapes foreign policy strategies. The long-term silencing of the Herero and Nama genocide in German political discourse is taken up by P. Augsten *et al.* (2022). The authors established that silence performed the function of discursive exclusion and supported dominant historical narratives. The proposed typology of silencing regimes made it possible to explain the mechanisms through which political communities postpone the recognition of complex historical events.

The problematic of quiet diplomacy was developed in the work of N. Fitria (2023). The author established that the combination of informal negotiations, mediation, and interfaith dialogue contributed to reducing the level of tension between the parties to the conflict. The study demonstrated the effectiveness of restrained diplomatic behaviour under conditions of complex humanitarian crises, where open confrontation could worsen the prospects for settlement. Of interest was the work of M. Ilyas *et al.* (2026), devoted to the reactions of Afghan civil society after the Taliban's return to power. The authors established the dominance of strategic silence among representatives of civil organisations. The obtained results demonstrated that silence performs the function of an adaptive survival strategy under conditions of political risks, control, and security threats. The issues of knowledge production and the politics of silence in the academic environment were raised by O. Burlyuk & V. Musliu (2023). The authors questioned the established hierarchies of expertise in studies of Russia's war with Ukraine and concluded that academic silence is capable of performing a critical function and becoming a form of resistance to dominant practices of knowledge production.

Despite the existence of a number of works, the comparative functioning of diplomatic silence as a universal instrument of international interaction in different types of interstate relations, conflicts, and negotiation processes remained insufficiently studied. The purpose of this study was to systematically conceptualise diplomatic silence in international relations in terms of its functions, mechanisms, and political consequences. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were defined: to establish the main theoretical approaches to the interpretation of diplomatic silence in political science and international relations; to carry out a comparative analysis of the use of silence in different international-political cases and to determine its functional models; to clarify the advantages, risks, and conditions for the effective use of diplomatic silence in crisis and conflict situations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article combined a conceptual analysis of diplomatic silence with a study of international crises using discursive analysis, political-communicative analysis, and the comparative method. The chronological scope covered the period from the beginning of the 21st century to 2026, while the main body was focused on the events of 2020-2026, when the role of informational control, digital diplomacy, and crisis communications in international politics intensified. For the analysis of the conceptual foundations of silence as a political action, the method of theoretical generalisation was applied. The processing of sources was carried out through content analysis of scientific publications, comparison of conceptual approaches, and subsequent integration of the obtained findings into a single analytical model. To construct a generalised classification of the functions of diplomatic silence, the method of typologisation was used. Its application made it possible to structure the main directions of the use of silence in international diplomacy and to form a system of criteria that became the basis of the first comparative matrix. The analysis included the following criteria: the function of silence, the mechanism of implementation, the conditions for effective application, and political consequences. The formation of the criteria

was carried out on the basis of a comparison of the theoretical provisions set forth in the works of S. Dingli (2015), E. Schweiger (2022), and B.K. Yoder & W. Spaniel (2022). The analysis also drew on the contributions of A. Martini (2023) and O. Snytko (2023). For the analysis of tactical, strategic, and protest silence, the method of case study analysis was used. The selection of cases was carried out according to the principle of maximum analytical representativeness. The study included examples that demonstrated different functional models of the use of silence. India's reaction to the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran in 2026, Israel's policy of nuclear ambivalence, and the crisis in Niger after the military coup of 2023.

The study of the role of silence in relations between China, the USA, and Taiwan was based on comparative political analysis. The choice of these cases was explained by the fact that they represent two different models of international interaction. Relations between China and the USA are characterised by competition between great powers with global consequences for international security. Relations between China and Taiwan combine territorial conflict, issues of statehood, and the problem of international recognition. For the collection of materials, analytical reports from the Council on Foreign Relations (2025), studies by Y. Huang *et al.* (2023), and M. Zhao & H. Yang (2024) were used. Additional sources included works by L. Wu (2025), M. Turpin (2026), and informational materials from Focus Taiwan (14 PLA aircraft…, 2024). The comparison was carried out according to the following criteria: the main purpose of using silence, the nature of international relations, the mechanism of silence, the level of strategic uncertainty, an example of application, the relationship with the military factor, the main risk, and the significance for the international order. The interpretation of the results was based on identifying functional differences between the crisis-regulatory and status-symbolic models of diplomatic silence.

The analysis of the use of silence in crisis diplomacy and international conflicts was carried out using the comparative-historical method and the method of political case study analysis. The sample included cases of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Ghincea, 2025) and sanction confrontation around Russia (Xu & Zhao, 2025). US-Iranian sanction conflicts (Al Awsat, 2025) and India's diplomatic behaviour after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine (Verma, 2024) were also examined. The analysis further covered disputes between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean (Koukakis, 2025), as well as the negotiation confrontation between Hungary and the European Commission (Koranyi, 2025). The choice of these cases was explained by their belonging to different types of international crises: military, sanction, diplomatic, regional, and negotiation. This approach made it possible to assess the universality of the mechanisms of diplomatic silence under different political conditions. The research materials also included publications by Z. Zhu (2025), as well as official materials from the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian (The Cuban missile…, n.d.) regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis. The interpretation of the obtained results was carried out within the framework of constructivist approaches to international relations, with an emphasis on how norms, identities, and strategic interaction shape the use of diplomatic silence. The analysis was aimed not at establishing cause-and-effect relationships in the statistical sense, but at identifying patterns in the use of silence as an instrument of political influence.

RESULTS

Silence as a tool of political communication and diplomatic interaction

In studies of international relations, silence is considered not as an absence of communication, but as a separate form of political action. This approach was formed under the influence of constructivist and discursive theories, which interpret international politics as a system of interaction not only through expressed statements but also through deliberately hidden or unspoken positions. In this understanding, silence performs the role of a specific political message, the content of which is determined by context, the distribution of power, and the nature of relations between the subjects of the international system. Silence is a constant element of international politics and influences the decision-making process no less than public diplomatic communication (Dingli, 2015). The rethinking of silence resulted from a departure from the traditional idea of diplomacy as a continuous process of exchanging messages. Silence cannot be interpreted exclusively as an absence of voice or reaction. It constitutes a part of the global political environment within which actors form expectations, interpret the intentions of opponents, and determine the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (Cornago, 2018). Political significance is acquired not only by what is officially proclaimed but also by what states refrain from publicly stating.

The phenomenon of silence is closely connected with the category of power. In international relations, the ability to refrain from reacting to the actions of other participants constitutes a manifestation of political resource. Strong states can afford a pause in response to diplomatic challenges, while weaker actors are compelled to demonstrate an active reaction to maintain their own international subjectivity. The capacity to determine which issues gain international salience and which remain outside the agenda is itself an instrument of hierarchy reproduction (Martini, 2023). In diplomatic practice, silence also performs a deterrent function. A refusal to react immediately enables states to avoid escalation and preserve room for further negotiations. This mechanism becomes evident in crisis situations, where any public statement risks deepening confrontation. The restriction of information flows and deliberate limitation of official comments can contribute to stabilising the conflict environment (Snytko, 2023).

Another dimension is the creation of strategic uncertainty. Incomplete or delayed communication complicates the forecasting of a state's actions and forces the other side

to consider a wider range of possible scenarios. In the theory of international security, such uncertainty is capable of performing a deterrent function, since a potential opponent does not have sufficient information for an accurate calculation of their own risks (Yoder & Spaniel, 2022). The absence of comments after a certain international event is perceived as a manifestation of disagreement, distancing, or unwillingness to legitimise the actions of the other side. The significance lies not in the absence of the statement itself, but in its correlation with the expected behaviour of the diplomatic actor (Dingli, 2015). Another function is the demonstration of position. In many cases, the absence of a reaction means a refusal to recognise the legitimacy of certain actions or the status of another subject of international relations. Silence turns into a symbolic act that fixes political distance without direct confrontation. A similar mechanism makes it possible to avoid diplomatic costs that arise in the case of an official protest or public condemnation (Schweiger, 2022).

The development of digital diplomacy and the acceleration of information flows have not diminished the role of silence. On the contrary, under conditions of constant communication activity, the absence of a reaction becomes more noticeable than ever. If in traditional diplomacy silence could remain unnoticed, then in the media environment of the 21st century, it turns into an independent political signal. For this reason, silence is considered as a form of strategic management of international interaction, which allows combining deterrence, uncertainty, signalling, and demonstration of political position within a single diplomatic toolkit. The functions of silence in international diplomacy are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. The main functions of silence in international diplomacy and their political consequences

Silence function	Implementation mechanism	Conditions for effective application	Political consequences
Containment	Temporary abstention from official statements, public assessments, or ultimatums during a crisis	High risk of escalation, availability of alternative channels of diplomatic communication	Reducing confrontational rhetoric, preserving opportunities for negotiations, preventing the political crisis from turning into a violent confrontation
Formation of strategic uncertainty	Limiting information about the state's intentions, possible solutions, or response parameters	Situations of competition between states where predictability of behaviour reduces the effectiveness of deterrence	Making it more difficult to predict the state's actions, increasing the strategic costs of a potential opponent, and strengthening the deterrent effect
Signalling	Demonstrative lack of response to diplomatic appeals, international initiatives, or actions of another actor	The existence of established diplomatic norms that require an official response	Sending political signals without direct confrontation, showing dissatisfaction, or reconsidering the nature of the interaction
Position demonstration	Refusal to comment on certain decisions, international events, or the status of individual entities	The need to avoid formal recognition, approval or legitimisation of certain actions	Emphasizing political distancing, fixing the boundaries of diplomatic acceptability, forming symbolic markers of foreign policy
Crisis management	Controlling the volume and intensity of public communication during times of international tension	High information sensitivity of the conflict and the risk of misinterpretation of statements	Reducing the information burden on the decision-making process, creating time for consultations and coordination of positions
Protection of the negotiation process	Non-disclosure of the content of consultations, interim agreements or negotiation proposals	Multilateral negotiations and conflicts with a high level of political sensitivity	Maintaining trust between the participants in the negotiations, increasing the flexibility of diplomatic bargaining, reducing external political pressure
Symbolic display of status	Selective ignoring of political statements or actions of other actors of the international system	The presence of asymmetry of political influence between the parties	Consolidation of the status hierarchy, strengthening the symbolic authority of the state, demonstration of political self-sufficiency
A tool of political pressure	Deliberately delaying a response to diplomatic requests, proposals or initiatives	A negotiation process in which one party has a more advantageous position	Creating psychological and political pressure on the counterparty, encouraging concessions without the use of sanctions or military means

Source: compiled by the authors based on S. Dingli (2015), E. Schweiger (2022), B.K. Yoder & W. Spaniel (2022), A. Martini (2023), O. Snytko (2023)

The political significance of silence extends far beyond the boundaries of communicative passivity. In international relations, it functions as an instrument of symbolic power, through which states influence the perception of events, determine the boundaries of legitimacy, and shape the agenda of international politics. Control over information implies not only the production of messages but also the management of their absence. That is precisely why silence acquires the characteristics of a political resource capable of changing the behaviour of other actors without the use of coercion or open diplomatic pressure.

The theoretical foundation of this approach is connected with the concept of symbolic power by P. Bourdieu (1991), according to which domination is ensured through control over meanings and public recognition of certain interpretations of reality. In international politics, a similar mechanism manifests itself through the ability of states to determine which issues deserve a reaction and which remain

outside official discourse. The selective absence of reaction by international actors creates a hierarchy of problems and influences the priorities of international security (Martini, 2023). The symbolic power of silence manifests itself through its ability to shape the perception of legitimacy. If a state does not comment on the actions of another actor, such behaviour can be interpreted as neutrality, hidden consent, or a refusal to recognise the political weight of the corresponding event. The meaning is determined not by the very fact of the absence of a statement, but by the correlation between expected and actual behaviour.

Studies of strategic communication in international politics show that control over information and selective disclosure of positions have become one of the instruments of diplomacy under conditions of growing geopolitical uncertainty (Riemer, 2021). In the practice of international relations, tactical silence is applied. Its main purpose is to gain additional time for assessing the situation, coordinating positions, and developing an agreed solution. This type of silence has a short-term character and is used primarily at the initial stages of crises. The political value of such a pause lies in the ability to avoid premature statements, which may subsequently limit diplomatic actions (Köremezli, 2021). An example was India's reaction during the war in Iran in 2026. New Delhi chose strategic silence, which analysts characterise as calculated, measured quietness – a conscious choice in favour of preserving strategic autonomy in conditions where India's partners (the USA, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Iran) found themselves on different sides of the conflict (Acharya, 2026). The political result was that silence allowed India to avoid premature commitments, preserve space for diplomatic maneuver, and simultaneously conduct negotiations with different centres of power – strategic partnership with the USA, defence cooperation with Israel, energy agreements with the UAE, and attracting capital from Saudi Arabia, while not losing ties with Iran through the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) transport corridor. In the absence of such a pause, the likelihood of contradictory statements or premature decisions that could have limited India's diplomatic actions and weakened its position as an independent player in the geopolitical environment of Western Asia would have increased.

Tactical silence is associated with short-term crisis management. Strategic silence pursues different goals. Its application is oriented toward the long-term formation of a political environment in which uncertainty itself becomes an element of deterrence (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2026). In this case, silence turns into an instrument of influence on the calculations of potential opponents. An example is Israel's policy of nuclear ambivalence. Since the late 1960s, Israeli governments have adhered to the principle of the absence of official confirmation or denial of the possession of nuclear weapons. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in its annual reviews, estimates Israel's arsenal at approximately 90 nuclear warheads, but the official position of the state remains unchanged (Kristensen & Korda, 2022). The political effect lies in the creation of asymmetric uncertainty. Potential opponents are forced to take into account the possibility of the existence of a deterrent potential even in the absence of formal recognition. Under such conditions, silence performs a function traditionally provided by open military-political declarations. A different logic is demonstrated by protest silence. Its content lies not in concealing intentions and not in gaining time for decision-making, but in conveying a political signal through refusal of communication. The mechanism of influence is based on symbolic distancing. The absence of a reaction begins to be perceived as an independent political message (Kaura-aho, 2021a). An illustrative example was observed after the military coup in Niger in July 2023 (Arieff, 2025). Some African states refrained from official statements regarding the legitimacy of the new authorities during the first weeks of the crisis. Such behaviour did not mean neutrality. It reflected an unwillingness to support the actions of the military, while simultaneously avoiding open conflict with the new regime or its regional allies. This position allowed some states to preserve communication channels with all parties to the conflict, although at the same time it weakened the collective diplomatic pressure on the organisers of the coup. The comparison of the three types of silence demonstrates differences not only in the time horizon of application but also in the nature of political influence. Tactical silence ensures the manageability of crisis processes. Strategic silence forms long-term uncertainty as an element of deterrence. Protest silence performs the function of symbolic pressure and political distancing. A common feature of all forms is the ability to influence the international environment without the formal use of diplomatic rhetoric.

Communicative silence – understood as the deliberate restriction of contacts between political elites – represents a distinct instrument of diplomatic signaling (Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022). One illustrative practice, observed in China's foreign policy behaviour, is the tactic of suspending or delaying diplomatic exchanges, which functions as a signal of discontent or a recalibration of bilateral relations (Wu, 2025). The absence of contact, in this framework, ceases to be a passive state and becomes an active foreign policy tool. The choice of a particular form of silence is shaped by a combination of contextual factors. The nature of the international crisis appears to be primary among them: the higher the risk of escalation, the more likely states are to adopt restrained communicative strategies. The balance of power between the parties also conditions the meaning and effectiveness of silence. In asymmetric relationships, the silence of the stronger actor tends to be perceived as a demonstration of superiority or an instrument of pressure, whereas the weaker party may lack the same interpretive weight. Domestic political considerations further complicate the decision to speak or remain silent. Governments delay or withhold statements when confronted with internal divisions or the absence of a consolidated position.

Such postponement helps avoid premature commitments and reduces the risk of domestic political costs, while preserving the appearance of a unified foreign policy line.

The evolution of diplomatic silence demonstrates a change in its functional significance. In traditional diplomacy, silence was primarily associated with the secrecy of negotiations, confidentiality, and the principle of limited access to information. Most diplomatic contacts took place outside the public space. For this reason, the absence of statements did not become an independent subject of international attention. The situation changed with the rapid development of global media and digital communications. Diplomatic activity came under the constant scrutiny of journalists, expert centres, and social networks. According to the Digital News Report 2025 by the Reuters Institute, over half of users in many countries regularly receive international news through digital platforms, which increases the speed of dissemination of political information and public expectations regarding states' reactions to international events. In the United States, for the first time, the share of the population that receives news through social media and video platforms (54%) exceeded television (50%) and websites and applications (48%) (Newman *et al.*, 2025). Under such conditions, silence ceased to be an inconspicuous element of diplomacy. The absence of a reaction itself becomes an informational event. Political actors are forced to take into account not only the content of their statements but also the consequences of their absence. A new type of diplomatic interaction is being formed, within which silence simultaneously performs symbolic, communicative, and strategic functions. Its significance is determined not by a lack of information, but by the ability to influence the interpretation of international reality, the distribution of political attention, and the process of making foreign policy decisions.

Using the strategy of silence in crisis diplomacy and international conflicts

In crisis situations, international communication performs a dual function. It can contribute to de-escalation or, conversely, intensify conflict potential. For this reason, silence acquires the significance of a separate instrument of crisis management. Its use is associated with the restriction of informational signals that are capable of causing an undesirable reaction from the other side. Diplomatic practice demonstrates that restraint in statements becomes not a manifestation of weakness, but a mechanism for controlling the dynamics of conflict. A greater risk of escalation arises under conditions of informational uncertainty and misinterpretation of the opponent's intentions. An excessive number of public messages increases the likelihood of erroneous interpretation of political intentions, especially between states that are in a state of strategic rivalry (Mandel, 2019). Under such conditions, the restriction of communication sometimes turns out to be more effective than active informational interaction. Such practice has become widespread among leading states after the growing role of social networks, where even one statement by a senior official can influence financial markets, military-political decisions, or public opinion.

This trend is clearly visible in relations between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. As of 2025, it is this bilateral interaction that is considered the central line of strategic competition in the international system (Shahida *et al.,* 2026). Under such conditions, any public statement is capable of transforming into a diplomatic signal with long-term consequences. For this reason, both sides use silence as an instrument for deterring risks. An example was the crisis surrounding the Chinese aerial platform detected over US territory in early 2023 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). After the incident, official contacts between the military structures of the two states were limited. The Chinese leadership refrained from detailed comments regarding the further resumption of military dialogue for a long time. The American administration also avoided sharp public statements after the initial phase of the crisis. As a result, the parties returned to negotiations during the summit in San Francisco in November 2023. Such a period of communicative restraint is considered an attempt to reduce the risk of uncontrolled escalation between nuclear states (Huang *et al.*, 2023).

The mechanism of silence in relations between great powers differs from its use in regional conflicts. The main goal is not to conceal a position, but to preserve strategic stability. The concept of "managed uncertainty" involves refraining from public formulations that could force the other side to an immediate reaction. Such a model is applied to issues where there is a risk of military clash or the destruction of diplomatic channels. In the scholarly literature, this phenomenon is defined as strategic ambiguity – a practice in which a state deliberately maintains flexible or contradictory positions in order to maximise autonomy and preserve leverage between competing powers, while avoiding rigid commitments that could provoke undesirable escalation (Abrenica *et al.,* 2024). Similar logic can be traced in the Taiwan issue. The Taiwan Strait remains one of the most conflict-generating regions in the world (Chen, 2025). According to the Taiwan Ministry of National Defence, during 2024 alone, hundreds of cases of People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) aircraft entering Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone were recorded. For example, in April 2024, 14 PLA aircraft were detected within 24 hours, six of which crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait (14 PLA aircraft…, 2024). Each such incident is potentially capable of provoking a political crisis. Despite the high tension, the parties apply a strategy of selective silence. Some military maneuvers or political statements remain without an official response. For example, the meeting of US and Chinese leaders in Busan in October 2025, where the Taiwan issue, which is usually central to bilateral negotiations, was completely bypassed in official statements (Zhu, 2025). Such behaviour is explained by the desire not to create additional reasons for escalation. The instrument

of silence in Sino-Taiwanese relations performs another function. It helps to maintain political ambiguity regarding future actions. It was strategic uncertainty that remained one of the factors deterring a forceful scenario around the island. Excessive specification of positions can reduce space for diplomatic maneuver and increasing the risks of erroneous decisions during crisis situations. The comparison of these examples is reflected in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of the role of silence in China-US and China-Taiwan diplomatic relations

Comparison criterion	China-USA	China-Taiwan
The main purpose of using silence	Management of strategic competition and prevention of direct confrontation between the leading states of the world	Controlling the political status quo and preventing the formalisation of positions that could change the balance in the Taiwan Strait
The nature of international relations	Competitive coexistence with a high level of economic interdependence and global consequences of any escalation	Asymmetric conflict around issues of sovereignty, statehood and territoriality
The mechanism of silence	Postponement of official comments, suspension of military contacts, use of closed communication channels	Selective ignoring of political statements, refusal to respond to individual symbolic or diplomatic actions of the opposing side
Level of strategic uncertainty	High. Silence is used to conceal future political or security decisions	Medium. Silence is used to avoid official recognition or denial of Taiwan's political status
Application example	After the incident with the Chinese balloon in February 2023, China and the United States effectively reduced official military communication. The dialogue was resumed only in late 2023 after a series of non-public contacts between representatives of both states	After the presidential elections in Taiwan in January 2024, official Beijing refrained from direct political contacts with the new Lai Qingde administration, focusing on military and diplomatic signals without recognising the political legitimacy of the new course
Relationship with the military factor	Silence is accompanied by maintaining informal or closed channels of communication to prevent military incidents	Silence is combined with a demonstration of military presence around the Taiwan Strait as an alternative way of transmitting signals
Main risk	Misinterpreting lack of communication as a sign of preparation for tougher action	Increasing political isolation and accumulation of mutual distrust between the parties
Role for the international order	Affects global security, the world economy, and the functioning of international institutions	Affects the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region and the balance of power in East Asia

Source: compiled by the authors based on Y. Huang *et al.* (2023), M. Zhao & H. Yang (2024), L. Wu (2025), Council on Foreign Relations (2025), M. Turpin (2026)

The comparison of the two diplomatic directions demonstrated the different functional nature of silence depending on the structure of international relations. In the interaction between China and the United States, silence performs primarily a crisis-regulatory function. Its application is aimed at managing risks between states that possess global political, economic, and military resources. In relations between China and Taiwan, the status-symbolic function of silence dominates. The absence of an official reaction or contacts is used as an instrument for controlling legitimacy and political recognition. If in the China-US case silence helps to maintain strategic stability under conditions of rivalry, then in the China-Taiwan case it contributes to preserving uncertainty regarding the future political status of the island.

Armed conflicts change the nature of diplomatic communication. Under conditions of high uncertainty, any official statement can influence not only political decisions but also military planning, the behaviour of allies, financial markets, and the information environment. For this reason, silence is used as an instrument for managing strategic uncertainty. Its function lies not in concealing information as such, but in limiting the opponent's access to data that could be used to predict the state's future actions. Such practice became noticeable after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Ukrainian leadership and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) partners regularly refrained from commenting on the details of military assistance, weapons supply routes, and specific stages of the preparation of counteroffensive operations. A similar approach was applied during the transfer of long-range Storm Shadow missiles, Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), and other types of precision-guided weapons (Holland & Ali, 2024). Information was made public after the actual use of the systems or after the completion of critical stages of their deployment. The political effect was the preservation of the element of surprise and the complication of Russian planning (Ghincea, 2025).

The mechanism of silence also acquires significance under conditions of sanction confrontation. Economic restrictions have long gone beyond the boundaries of financial policy and have become part of geopolitical competition. Under such conditions, states try to control not only the economic consequences of sanctions but also the interpretation of these consequences by the international audience. China's position after the imposition of large-scale Western sanctions against Russia is indicative (Xu & Zhao, 2025). The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs consistently criticised unilateral sanction mechanisms but avoided public assessments of their actual effectiveness regarding the Russian economy. Such caution allowed Beijing to maintain economic cooperation with Moscow, while simultaneously

not taking on political responsibility for predicting the results of the West's sanction policy. In this case, silence performed the function of strategic insurance. Under any scenario of events, China retained the ability to adapt its own position without losing diplomatic reputation. Similar practice was observed in Iran after the reinstatement of US sanctions (Al Awsat, 2025). Official Tehran avoided specific predictions regarding the long-term consequences of the sanction regime, concentrating on political statements about its illegitimacy. Such behaviour allowed avoiding the public fixation of economic expectations that could be disproven by the further development of events.

The use of silence under conditions of armed conflicts and sanction pressure is associated with a change in the very understanding of political influence. Traditional diplomacy considered active presence in the international information space as a sign of strength. The digitalisation of politics has changed this logic. The surplus of information increased the value of controlled absence of information. Political advantage is gained by actors capable of independently determining the moment and format of communication (Honryo & Yano, 2021). An illustrative example is India after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In the votes of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, New Delhi did not openly support Russia but systematically refrained from harsh political assessments of Moscow's actions. In parallel, India increased its purchases of Russian oil, maintained military-technical cooperation with Russia, and continued to develop strategic partnership with the United States. Such silence was not a manifestation of foreign policy uncertainty. It performed the function of balancing between several centres of power. The result was the strengthening of India's international autonomy and the expansion of its negotiation opportunities in relations with both the West and the states of the Global South (Verma, 2024).

The transformation of the international order also manifests itself in the fact that silence is used as an instrument for shaping political status. Its influence depends on the state's place in the international hierarchy and on its ability to impose its own agenda on others (Morse & Coggins, 2024). Great powers are capable of transforming the absence of a reaction into a separate diplomatic signal. Smaller countries usually do not have a similar resource, since their silence does not become a subject of international attention. Such a pattern was observed during disputes over maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2020-2021, Turkey repeatedly left without an official response certain diplomatic statement by Greece regarding disputed zones of maritime jurisdiction (Koukakis, 2025). The political significance lay not in the ignoring itself, but in the demonstration of the ability to determine the order of communication. The absence of a reaction created an asymmetry of statuses, in which one side demanded a response, while the other reserved the right to decide whether the issue deserved an official comment. A similar mechanism can be traced within relations between supranational structures and individual states. Hungary in 2022-2023 repeatedly delayed responses to the demands of the European Commission regarding reforms related to the unblocking of funding from the European Union (EU) funds (Koranyi, 2025). The political effect was the creation of a negotiation resource. The absence of a quick response allowed Budapest to raise the price of future compromises and use the time factor as an instrument of political bargaining. In this case, silence did not reflect weakness or a lack of information. It acted as an element of a rational strategy aimed at changing the balance of negotiation positions.

The effectiveness of silence in crises depends on the contextual sensitivity of the international environment. In highly conflictual situations, excessive communication creates the risk of an "information spiral", when each statement provokes a counterstatement and increases the overall level of tension. The analysis of crisis episodes of the Cold War shows that the restriction of public rhetoric during the Cuban Missile Crisis facilitated the transition to closed negotiation channels, which reduced the likelihood of a direct military clash between nuclear states. In particular, Kennedy ignored Khrushchev's public letter with the demand to remove missiles from Turkey, instead, a private proposal was conveyed through Robert Kennedy and Ambassador Dobrynin, which made it possible to avoid a public defeat for either side and reach a compromise (The Cuban missile..., n.d.). Therefore, strategic uncertainty in foreign policy can perform a stabilizing function in relations between states, but excessive use of such practice increases the risk of structural instability of the international system. The advantages and risks of diplomatic silence in crisis situations are reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of the benefits and risks of diplomatic silence in crisis situations

The aspect of using silence	Advantages	Risks	Empirical confirmation
Managing military escalation	Reduces the likelihood of impulsive political decisions and public confrontation; creates time to assess the situation	May be perceived as indecisiveness or lack of readiness to respond	During the Russian-Ukrainian war, some information about military operations and arms supplies was not disclosed for operational security reasons
Protection of the negotiation process	Allows parties to negotiate without external political pressure and media influence	Lack of transparency breeds distrust and information speculation	Negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program in Vienna were accompanied by limited disclosure of the content of the consultations
Maintaining diplomatic channels	Provides the opportunity to maintain informal contacts even in conditions of public confrontation	Prolonged silence may hide the lack of real progress in negotiations	Geneva international discussions on Georgia have been ongoing for many years despite the lack of public agreements

Table 3. Continued

The aspect of using silence	Advantages	Risks	Empirical confirmation
Mediation diplomacy	Facilitates the role of a neutral mediator between conflicting parties	Raises doubts about the mediator's true position	Turkey has maintained limited public rhetoric on certain aspects of the war in Ukraine, maintaining contacts with both sides
Strategic uncertainty	Makes it more difficult to predict the state's actions and increases the deterrent effect	The risk of misinterpreting the opponent's intentions and making erroneous decisions increases	This practice is regularly used in security-related crises in the Black Sea and Middle East regions
Information space management	Prevents the spread of sensitive information and reduces informational pressure on diplomatic decisions	The information vacuum is quickly filled with disinformation and unofficial versions of events	During the war in Ukraine, international organisations repeatedly documented the use of information gaps to spread disinformation
Avoiding premature political commitments	Allows states to adapt their position to changing international situations	Reduces predictability of foreign policy for partners and allies	The response of individual states to the crises in Niger and Sudan was characterised by a long waiting period before official statements
International reputation control	Provides an opportunity to avoid politically disadvantageous statements until complete information is obtained	Silence can be interpreted as indifference or hidden support for one of the parties to the conflict	Similar discussions arose around the reaction of a number of countries of the Global South to the Russian-Ukrainian war after 2022

Source: compiled by authors based on S. Maetz (2014), T. Tevdoradze (2022), M.M.G. Casquinho (2024), R. Verma (2024), M. Ghincea (2025), T. Dadabaev & S. Sonoda (2026), G. Ulas (2026)

The comparison of crisis cases demonstrated that the effectiveness of diplomatic silence is determined by the nature of the political goal pursued by the state or international mediator. In situations where the priority is the protection of the negotiation process or the preservation of operational security, silence provides a tangible practical result. It is precisely this logic that can be traced during the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, humanitarian consultations surrounding the war between Israel and Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), as well as in matters of military support for Ukraine. A different effect is observed in protracted territorial conflicts. In the Georgian and Kosovar cases, silence contributed to maintaining dialogue, but at the same time became a factor in the conservation of unresolved contradictions. The strategy demonstrates effectiveness when silence is combined with closed diplomatic channels and active mediation activities. If the absence of a public position is not accompanied by real negotiation mechanisms, it turns from an instrument of crisis management into a factor of growing uncertainty and distrust. Therefore, the criterion for evaluating diplomatic silence is not the level of communication as such, but its ability to ensure a specific political result within the framework of crisis settlement. The final analysis showed that silence does not have an unambiguous function of stabilisation or destabilisation. Its effectiveness depends on the combination of context, the level of international tension, and the structure of relations between actors. In crisis situations, it is capable of reducing the risk of escalation; however, in the long term, it creates additional interpretive risks and transforms the balance of political power in the international system.

DISCUSSION

The conducted research confirmed that silence in international diplomacy is not reducible to the absence of communication, but functions as an independent political mechanism for influencing the behaviour of other actors in the international system. The obtained results revealed that diplomatic silence performs the functions of deterrence, signalling, the formation of strategic uncertainty, the protection of the negotiation process, and crisis management. Such an interpretation is generally consistent with the conclusions of K. Kaura-aho (2021b), who examined silence as an active form of political communication capable of transforming public discourses and influencing the structure of power relations. The conducted analysis of international crises demonstrated a similar logic of the functioning of silence. Informational restraint regarding the supply of Western weapons to Ukraine did not reflect passivity or a deficit of information. It ensured the preservation of the element of surprise and limited the possibilities for predicting actions on the part of the opponent. In contrast to K. Kaura-aho's approach, which concentrated primarily on the domestic political and discursive dimensions of silence, the conducted research demonstrated its practical effectiveness in the sphere of international security, where the absence of public information directly affects the military-political calculations of the parties to the conflict.

The conclusions of the conducted research also correlate with the concept of O. Hoffjann (2026), who proposed a distinction between strategic silence and strategic non-talking. The analysis of diplomatic cases showed that some forms of international silence indeed remained almost imperceptible to external observers and were not accompanied by the expectation of an official reaction. A similar situation was observed during Israel's application of strategic uncertainty regarding its own nuclear potential. The political effect was created not through a demonstrative refusal to comment, but through the long-term absence of an official statement on the status of the nuclear

program. At the same time, the conducted research showed that under conditions of digital diplomacy, the more prominent forms of silence began to play a greater role, when the international audience expects a state's reaction but does not receive it. For this reason, the author's concept received additional confirmation, although empirical examples demonstrated the growing political role of precisely the visible forms of diplomatic silence.

The results of the analysis of the diplomatic behaviour of India, China, and a number of Global South states revealed much in common with the conclusions of M.C. Mkhize (2024), devoted to the quiet diplomacy of the Republic of South Africa. The study showed that silence is used as an instrument for preserving strategic autonomy between competing centres of power. The analysis of India's position after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war demonstrated a similar model of behaviour. New Delhi refrained from harsh political assessments, maintaining cooperation with various international partners. This practice corresponds to the logic of balancing described by the author regarding the Republic of South Africa (RSA). At the same time, the conducted research revealed a broader scope of the application of silence. If the South African case was primarily associated with the maintenance of diplomatic dialogue, then the examples of India, China, and Turkey demonstrated the use of silence as a resource for geopolitical manoeuvring, which went beyond the boundaries of classical quiet diplomacy.

The obtained results also correlate with the conceptual provisions of L. Lonardo (2023), who proposed distinguishing between inaction as a conscious choice and inaction as a consequence of the inability to act. The comparative analysis of international crises showed that diplomatic silence cannot be automatically interpreted as a manifestation of weakness or institutional incapacity. In the cases of China, India, Israel, and Turkey, the absence of a reaction was rational in nature and pursued specific political goals. The analysis made it possible to separate situations where silence performed the function of a strategic instrument from cases where it could be a consequence of domestic political contradictions or limited possibilities of foreign policy response. This result supports the author's logic and expands it through many diplomatic cases related to security crises, sanction confrontation, and geopolitical competition. The conducted research demonstrated proximity to the theoretical conclusions of M. Freeden (2022), who examined silence as a component of political thinking and a mechanism for the formation of legitimacy. The analysis of diplomatic practice showed that silence affects not only information flows but also the symbolic dimension of international politics. Examples of states' reactions to the coup in Niger, China's positioning regarding Taiwan, and the practice of non-recognition of certain political decisions through the absence of official comments demonstrated the use of silence to define the boundaries of legitimacy. The results demonstrated that an unspoken position could shape political interpretations no less than official statements. This conclusion correlates with the scholar's approach, although the conducted analysis showed its applied significance specifically for diplomatic interaction between states.

The comparison of the results with the study by G.S.A. İnce (2025) revealed a high level of conceptual consistency. The author demonstrated that silence in international relations does not mean neutrality but acts as a form of protecting national interests and an instrument for managing reputational risks. The analysis of the behaviour of India, China, the RSA, and several African states confirmed this pattern. The absence of a reaction does not reflect indifference to international events. On the contrary, it allows maintaining diplomatic flexibility and minimizing political costs. Certain discrepancies concerned the assessment of the consequences of silence. The author emphasised ethical contradictions. The conducted research also recorded a similar risk. The analysis of crisis situations demonstrated that silence can simultaneously reduce the risk of escalation and create conditions for ambiguous moral interpretations of international behaviour. The concept of public expectations proposed by T. Jung (2021) received convincing confirmation during the analysis of diplomatic cases. The study demonstrated that the political effect of silence depends not on the very fact of the absence of a statement, but on its correlation with the expected model of the actor's behaviour. This pattern was clearly manifested in the China-Taiwan and China-US cases. The absence of a reaction to certain events acquired significance precisely because international observers expected an official comment. As a result, silence was transformed into a separate diplomatic signal. The conclusions of T. Jung correlate with the conducted research, since both approaches proceed from the fact that the meaning of silence is determined by the system of political expectations, and not by the very fact of a communicative pause.

The study by A. Pang *et al.* (2022) examined strategic silence primarily in the anti-crisis communication of organisations. The obtained results revealed a number of similarities despite the difference in the objects of analysis. In international diplomacy, a dependence was also observed between the information vacuum and the risk of uncontrolled dissemination of alternative interpretations of events. The analysis of crisis situations showed that prolonged silence can create conditions for disinformation, political speculation, and erroneous interpretation of states' intentions. At the same time, the conducted research demonstrated that in international conflicts, silence does not always have negative consequences. In cases of operational security or the negotiation process, the absence of information increases the effectiveness of diplomatic actions. For this reason, the results of the scholars were only partially confirmed. The diplomatic environment turned out to be more complex than organisational crisis communication, since the effect of silence depended on the nature of the international situation.

The theoretical model of S.W. Gray (2023), which interpreted silence as a separate form of political expression,

also found empirical confirmation. The conducted analysis showed that silence functions as an instrument for transmitting political signals even in the absence of a verbal message. This pattern was identified during the examination of protest silence after the coup in Niger, the selective non-recognition of political decisions, and diplomatic practices of status distancing. The results made it possible to expand the author's approach, since specific mechanisms of the influence of silence on international security, negotiation processes, and the structure of geopolitical relations were established. If the author concentrated primarily on the conceptual dimension of political expression, the conducted research demonstrated the functioning of such mechanisms in real international conflicts. The comparison of the results with the totality of the reviewed works made it possible to identify several stable patterns. The majority of researchers examined silence as an active political practice, which coincided with the results of the conducted analysis. Discrepancies concerned mainly the scale of influence and the scope of application. Some works concentrated on the discursive, symbolic, or ethical dimensions of silence. The conducted analysis made it possible to show that the political effectiveness of silence is determined not by the very fact of the absence of statements, but by its integration into a broader diplomatic strategy. The analysis of international conflicts, sanction confrontation, security crises, and diplomatic balancing demonstrated that silence was used to manage risks, control legitimacy, form strategic uncertainty, and maintain negotiation positions. It is precisely this multifunctionality that explains the high level of consistency of the obtained results with the theoretical approaches to the study of political silence and its role in international relations.

CONCLUSIONS

The study confirmed that silence in international diplomacy acts not as a passive state, but as an active-constructive strategy that performs a number of functions within the framework of political interaction between states. Theoretical analysis made it possible to systematise these functions: deterrence, formation of strategic uncertainty, signalling, demonstration of position, crisis management, and protection of the negotiation process. Varieties of silence were identified – tactical, strategic, and protest – each of which has its own time horizon, mechanism of influence, and political consequences. A comparative analysis of relations between China and the US, on the one hand, and China and Taiwan, on the other, revealed a fundamental difference in the functional load of silence: in the first case, it performs a crisis-regulatory function, while in the second, a status-symbolic one. Empirical cases of the Russian-Ukrainian war demonstrated the use of silence as an instrument of operational security and management of strategic uncertainty, while the sanction confrontation around Russia and Iran showed its role as a mechanism of strategic insurance. Special attention was paid to the analysis of India's diplomatic behaviour, which through silence implemented balancing between several centres of power, as well as to the cases of Turkey and Hungary, where the delay of responses or selective ignoring of diplomatic statements was used to create a negotiation resource and demonstrate status asymmetry.

The generalisation of the obtained results made it possible to identify both the advantages of diplomatic silence (reduction of the risk of escalation, protection of the negotiation process, preservation of diplomatic channels) and its risks (informational uncertainty, misinterpretation of intentions, increase of distrust). The digitalisation of diplomacy has strengthened the political weight of silence, since under conditions of constant communication activity, the absence of a reaction becomes a noticeable independent signal. It was determined that the effectiveness of silence depends on the context of the international situation, the status position of the state in the global hierarchy, and the structure of relations between actors, while its effectiveness increases under the condition of combination with closed channels and active mediation activities. The limitation of the study is its focus on the analysis of individual crisis episodes, which does not cover all possible configurations of the use of silence in different regional and cultural contexts. Further research should be directed towards a quantitative analysis of the correlation between types of silence and specific political results in different types of international systems.

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Migration of political elites and its influence on political transformation in postcolonial countries

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Abstract. The study aimed to establish the mechanisms and institutional conditions through which mobile ruling, opposition, technocratic and economic actors converted external resources into domestic political effects in postcolonial settings. The research combined structural-functional, typological, comparative, case-study and content-analysis methods. The empirical comparison covered Africa, Latin America and South Asia through South Africa, Ghana, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, India and Sri Lanka. The analysis was diachronic: it traced formative exile, return and diaspora-governance trajectories from post-independence and authoritarian-transition periods to 2025, while contemporary migration, governance and democracy data were assessed mainly for 2020-2025. Elite migration was treated as a political process distinct from ordinary population movement. Although recorded international migration reached 304 million people in 2024 and one postcolonial recipient attracted more than 111 billion United States dollars in remittances in 2022, the political weight of mobile elites followed from authority, expertise and capital rather than from sheer numbers. Six mechanisms were established: exile, returnee technocratic transfer, diaspora lobbying, transnational party networking, economic elite mobility and the state institutionalisation of diaspora engagement. The comparison produced three regional pathways: liberation-exile and reconstruction in Africa, authoritarian exile and democratic restoration in Latin America, and diaspora diplomacy or conflict externalisation in South Asia. Across the cases, migration acquired transformative force only where external resources entered institutions open to domestic contestation. The findings may be useful for comparative analysts and policymakers assessing diaspora engagement, external voting and returnee appointments

Keywords: exile; returnees; diaspora engagement; external voting; accountability; remittances

INTRODUCTION

The migration of political elites affects postcolonial transformation because it redistributes authority, expertise, finance, and legitimacy across national borders. In postcolonial states, where institutions often remain shaped by inherited administrative hierarchies and contested citizenship, elite mobility may change the balance between domestic actors and external networks. Former officials, opposition leaders, technocrats, party organisers, business elites, and diaspora representatives can influence political competition without being territorially present. Elite migration therefore matters as a mechanism through which political resources circulate and re-enter domestic institutions, which sets it apart from ordinary population movement. The issue belongs to comparative politics and institutional development, since it concerns the conditions under which transnational resources alter regimes, parties, state capacity, and representation.

The literature offered several concepts for this connection without treating elite migration as a separate transformation mechanism. The postcolonial migration state framework developed by K. Sadiq & G. Tsourapas (2021) had shown that citizenship and mobility regimes in the Global South reproduced colonial classifications after formal independence, which explained why elites abroad remained connected to domestic struggles over sovereignty, representation, and membership. A later contribution by the same authors had shifted attention from migration control to the transnational social contract between states and citizens abroad. They had established that rights, remittances, obligations, and symbolic belonging created a de-territorialised form of state-society relations in which migrant elites acted as brokers of resources and claims. The broader migration literature clarified why postcolonial elite mobility could not

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be reduced to integration into host societies. A. Favell (2022) had argued that conventional models of immigration, integration, and citizenship remained tied to liberal and Eurocentric assumptions about political membership, which supported a postcolonial reading of elite mobility as linked to unequal power, historical hierarchy, and contested belonging. K. Natter & H. Thiollet (2022) had concluded that migration politics both reflected and shaped political regimes, an account that explained why the same form of elite mobility could support reform in one institutional setting and reinforce closure in another. Case-based studies specified how these dynamics worked through concrete channels. In the Philippine case, S. Rother (2022) had shown that labour-export governance was shaped by civil society and multilevel contestation extending beyond state policy, which indicated that migration governance in postcolonial countries could become a field of representation, accountability, and institutional bargaining. M. Koinova *et al.* (2023) had demonstrated that migration crises and the COVID-19 pandemic intensified securitisation, politicisation, and international coordination, which made it possible to treat crisis as a trigger that activated diaspora networks and external political claims.

Diaspora governance studies revealed the ambivalent effects of state engagement with populations abroad. B. Baser & A.E. Öztürk (2020) had distinguished positive diaspora governance from negative forms connected with transnational authoritarianism, showing that one diaspora policy could promote public diplomacy and development while also enabling surveillance, loyalty extraction, and pressure on opposition groups. B. Baser & G. Bocu (2025) had examined selective diaspora mobilisation by Turkey and had demonstrated that state-led outreach privileged regime-loyal groups over the wider migrant community and deepened political division abroad. For Sri Lankan Tamils, C.R. Craven (2022) had shown that the sending state and the security practices of host and international arenas jointly constrained diaspora political action, which located diaspora influence inside complex security entanglements rather than a simple homeland-diaspora relationship. Studies of electoral and representative mechanisms addressed political participation from abroad. B. Nyblade *et al.* (2022) had found that transnational voting rights in violent democracies reflected attempts to maintain inclusion under conditions of insecurity, which suggested that external voting could affect party competition and legitimacy when emigrant citizens remained tied to domestic conflict. D. Karabegović (2025) had shown that diaspora politicians used diasporic identity strategically to shape transnational engagement, demonstrating how actors outside the homeland claimed authority to influence domestic reform. O.P. Oluwasanmi & O.M. Fagbadebo (2025) had linked diaspora voting to the relationship between legislative authority and political leadership in Nigeria, finding that institutional resistance, constitutional design, and electoral reform determined whether citizens abroad could be incorporated into national political life. The existing literature still insufficiently explained how the migration of political elites operated through specific mechanisms, regional pathways, and institutional conditions to reshape postcolonial transformation.

The aim of the study was to establish how mobile ruling, opposition, technocratic and economic actors convert resources accumulated abroad into domestic political effects in former colonial settings, and to identify the institutional conditions that determine whether such effects support reform or reinforce closure. To achieve this aim, three tasks were set: first, to identify the mechanisms through which mobile elites transmit authority, expertise, finance and advocacy into homeland politics; second, to compare the regional pathways through which these mechanisms operate in Africa, Latin America and South Asia; and third, to determine the institutional outcomes of elite migration and the conditions on which their direction depends.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted within the conceptual frameworks of elite-circulation theory, diaspora-politics theory and the institutional analysis of migration governance. The classification of knowledge, entrepreneurial and political elites provided the field within which the mobility of leaders, officials, professionals and business actors was examined (Solimano & Avanzini, 2010), and the exit-and-voice distinction supplied the logic for treating departure and external political action as connected outcomes (Hirschman, 1970). The reading of diasporas as political actors, and as internally differentiated groups, framed the analysis of transnational mobilisation (Koinova, 2018; Adamson & Han, 2024). The conception of diaspora institutions as techniques of state power (Gamlen, 2014), together with the institutional account of skilled migration and norm transfer (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012), oriented the assessment of administrative and governance effects.

Sources were selected according to four criteria. First, peer-reviewed studies were included where they directly addressed elite circulation, diaspora politics, return migration, external voting, transnational repression, political remittances or postcolonial migration governance. Second, preference was given to publications from 2020-2026 for the contemporary debate, while earlier works were retained only where they performed a foundational theoretical or case-historical function, such as the exit-and-voice framework, diaspora-institution theory or studies of liberation and authoritarian exile. Third, official and intergovernmental sources were included only where they supplied contextual migration, remittance, governance or democracy indicators rather than substituting for scholarly analysis. Fourth, sources were excluded where they discussed migration in general without a clear connection to political elites, diaspora institutions, external political participation or postcolonial transformation.

The research proceeded in three stages. At the first stage, structural-functional and typological methods served to identify the channels through which mobile elites enter homeland politics and to order them by actor,

transmission route, conditional effect and institutional risk; the treatment of return, economic mobility and diaspora strategy was informed by studies of post-conflict knowledge transfer, diaspora-linked finance and diaspora politics as a field of state action (Hughes, 2011; Leblang, 2017). The typological reading also drew on the comparative analysis of diaspora policies (Ragazzi, 2014) and on the account of diaspora politics as a domain of growing political weight (Adamson, 2016). At the second stage, the comparative and case-study methods were applied to Africa, Latin America and South Asia. These regions were selected because they represent three analytically different postcolonial routes through which elite mobility entered domestic politics: liberation-era state formation and administrative reconstruction, authoritarian rupture followed by democratic restoration, and partition-era or identity-based diaspora formation. The individual cases were selected by purposive comparison. South Africa and Ghana represented, respectively, exile-based liberation politics and state-led diaspora governance; Chile, Argentina and Uruguay represented authoritarian exile and post-authoritarian rights-based return; India and Sri Lanka represented large-scale diaspora diplomacy and conflict-generated transnational mobilisation. Each case was coded by four identical criteria: dominant elite-migration pattern, principal transformation channel, institutional mode of re-entry and condition of institutional absorption. This secured functional comparability without requiring identical statistical indicators. The exile-politics framework structured the regional reading (Sznajder & Roniger, 2009). The African cases drew on documentary studies of liberation exile and diaspora governance (Ellis, 2013; Kandilige & Teye, 2023) and on national diaspora-engagement mapping (Diaspora for Development, 2020). The Latin American cases used research on Southern Cone exile and post-transition return (Perry, 2016; Doña-Reveco, 2020). The South Asian cases used studies of Tamil diaspora mobilisation and homeland-oriented identity politics (Guyot, 2021; Tripathi, 2024). A diachronic perspective traced mechanisms that originated before the current reporting period yet continued to shape institutional outcomes.

At the third stage, qualitative content analysis was used to classify the institutional effects of elite migration. The document corpus consisted of intergovernmental migration and remittance reports, official records of overseas populations, national diaspora-engagement materials and governance or democracy indicator frameworks, including the International Organization for Migration (2024), the World Bank (2024) and International IDEA (2024), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025), the Ministry of External Affairs of India (n.d.). The unit of analysis was not an individual migrant but a documented institutional channel through which external resources entered domestic politics: diaspora office, external voting rule, returnee appointment, advocacy network, remittance or investment mechanism, party-finance channel, or governance-indicator dimension. The coding categories were: form of elite mobility, channel of institutional re-entry, resource transmitted, openness to domestic contestation, accountability mechanism, and institutional risk. Institutional effects were interpreted as reform-supporting where the coded channel widened participation, transparency, representation or administrative capacity, and as closure-supporting where it strengthened loyalty extraction, opaque finance, factional capture, surveillance or exclusion. Migration-policy analysis of advanced economies supplied a comparative reference (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Generalisation then consolidated the stage-specific findings into the analytical model set out in the results.

The study had three limitations. First, the available international datasets report general migrant stocks, remittance flows and governance indicators rather than elite-specific mobility, which prevented direct quantitative measurement of elite migration. Second, the selected cases were used for qualitative-comparative interpretation rather than for exhaustive regional coverage. Third, the diachronic design combined historical exile and return trajectories with contemporary policy and indicator data, so the findings identify institutional mechanisms and conditions rather than statistically testing causal effects.

RESULTS

Elite migration as a postcolonial transformation mechanism

The analysis established that the cross-border movement of political elites in postcolonial states operated as a distinct political process rather than as a demographic subset of international migration. Global stock data placed the total number of international migrants at 304 million in 2024 (United Nations Department..., 2025), yet the political weight of elite migration derived from the authority, organisational capacity and external access of the actors involved, not from their number. Within this study the term denoted the cross-border movement of individuals and groups that held or could mobilise political authority, administrative competence, party leadership, technocratic knowledge, diplomatic access or concentrated capital connected with a former colony or a postcolonial state. Defined in these terms, the category absorbed forced exile, professional emigration, return after education or office abroad, organised diaspora advocacy and the relocation of economic elites whose networks and policy preferences shaped domestic coalitions. The inclusion of economic actors followed from the structure of postcolonial transformation, in which reform coalitions combined state officials, party financiers, media proprietors and internationally connected professionals, so that the displacement of such actors redistributed political resources inside the country of origin rather than merely altering individual careers. The category accordingly spanned actors whose principal transferable resource was public authority and actors whose resource was capital or expertise, a breadth required by the coalitional form that postcolonial transformation repeatedly assumed.

The first result concerned the conditional character of this process. Comparative work on the international circulation of elites separated knowledge, entrepreneurial and political elites and treated their mobility as a channel for the transfer of skills, capital and access to external institutions (Solimano & Avanzini, 2010). The postcolonial setting modified that channel, because outward elite migration was structured by colonial education routes, metropolitan labour markets, repression, military rule, civil conflict and asymmetric access to global financial centres. Mobility therefore did not transmit human capital in a neutral manner; it reorganised the relationship between domestic institutions and the external arenas in which legitimacy, finance, expertise and diplomatic pressure could be accumulated. The contrast with generic elite circulation lay in this structuring, since the same colonial ties that produced emigration also furnished the metropolitan arenas, professional credentials and legal vocabularies through which returning or diaspora elites later claimed authority at home. The evidence did not support a reading in which mobility was automatically reformist or automatically destabilising; the classification of knowledge, entrepreneurial and political elites allowed leaders, officials, professionals and business actors to be examined within one political field, yet the postcolonial record showed that each category could strengthen reform or entrench closure according to the terms of re-entry, which placed the analytical weight on institutional conditions rather than on the attributes of the migrants themselves. The direction of any resulting change depended on the institutional route through which external resources re-entered the political system.

Six transmission mechanisms emerged from the evidence. Exile preserved organisational continuity where parties, unions and civic bodies were banned, relocating domestic competition into transnational space; the logic followed the exit-and-voice distinction, since departure reduced internal pressure while generating new forms of voice abroad once emigrants retained access to host-state institutions (Hirschman, 1970; Adamson & Han, 2024). Returnee technocratic transfer appeared when emigrated or foreign-educated elites re-entered ministries, central banks, courts and electoral bodies carrying legal templates, fiscal-management models and donor-compatible reform agendas; its effect narrowed to brokerage between donors and ruling coalition's where recruitment and accountability rules were absent (Hughes, 2011). Diaspora lobbying directed external pressure at foreign ministries, parliaments and international organisations and converted domestic claims into the registers of human rights, development or minority protection, a process reinforced in postcolonial cases by colonial-era language, education and citizenship links (Adamson, 2016; Adamson & Han, 2024).

Transnational party and movement networking sustained external branches, student committees and fundraising structures that outlasted individual exile; because diaspora actors did not form a unitary bloc, such networks could widen pluralist competition or transfer factional and ethnic polarisation back into domestic politics (Koinova, 2018). The mobility of economic elites transmitted capital, market access and organisational control rather than public authority, financing parties, media and investment under conditions that could either resource reform coalitions or enable capital flight, opaque financing and regulatory capture (Solimano & Avanzini, 2010; Leblang, 2017). State institutionalisation of diaspora engagement converted dispersed communities into objects of policy through ministries, councils, citizenship regimes and consultative bodies; comparative analysis treated such institutions as techniques of state power capable of extending rights or extracting loyalty, finance and legitimacy (Gamlen, 2014; Ragazzi, 2014). Skilled emigration from the state sector cut across these mechanisms, since the permanent departure of administrators, lawyers and economists reduced institutional continuity while connected emigrants could still transmit governance norms, leaving the quality of institutional linkage as the operative variable (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). That double movement defined the mechanism, since the permanent loss of public-sector skill subtracted from continuity while the retained connection of emigrants to reform coalitions added channels for norm transfer and reputational pressure, so that the net result followed from the strength of the linkage rather than from the gross flow. The exit-and-voice duality assumed a specific postcolonial form, because departure that lowered immediate pressure on an incumbent simultaneously created externally based voice whose leverage depended on access to former metropoles and international organisations. The typology that organises these mechanisms by actor, transmission channel, conditional effect and institutional risk is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms of elite migration in postcolonial transformation

Form of elite migration	Principal elite actors	Political transmission channel	Conditional transformative effect	Principal institutional risk
Exile-based political survival	Banned party leaders, dissidents, lawyers, journalists	External advocacy and preservation of opposition organisation	Continuity of opposition under repression and preparation for transition	Externalisation of conflict and dependence on foreign sponsorship
Returnee technocratic transfer	Former exiles, foreign-educated officials, transitional leaders	Re-entry into ministries, courts, central banks and electoral bodies	Diffusion of legal templates and administrative standards	Brokerage between donors and ruling coalitions without accountability
Diaspora lobbying and advocacy	Diaspora organisations, professional and rights networks	Pressure on foreign ministries, parliaments and international bodies	Reframing of domestic claims as rights, development or protection	Selective representation tied to specific parties or communities

Table 1. Continued

Form of elite migration	Principal elite actors	Political transmission channel	Conditional transformative effect	Principal institutional risk
Transnational party networking	External party branches, student and ideological networks	Fundraising, campaign support and external communication	Expansion of organisational resources and pluralist competition	Factionalisation and transfer of homeland polarisation abroad
Economic elite mobility	Investors, financiers, media proprietors, contractors	Capital flows, party financing and control of strategic sectors	Investment-based reform coalitions and diversified influence	Capital flight, opaque financing and regulatory capture
State institutionalisation of diaspora engagement	Ministries, councils, citizenship and investment offices	Citizenship regimes, external voting and consultative bodies	Knowledge transfer, investment and symbolic inclusion	Loyalty extraction and monitoring of opposition abroad

Source: compiled by the author based on A. Hirschman (1970), A. Solimano and D. Avanzini (2010), C. Hughes (2011), F. Docquier & H. Rapoport (2012), F. Ragazzi (2014), A. Gamlen (2014), Y. Adamson (2016), D. Leblang (2017), M. Koinova (2018), F. Adamson & E. Han (2024)

The systematisation indicated that postcolonial transformation responded less to the fact of mobility than to the political route through which mobile resources were absorbed. Where parties, civil-service bodies, courts and electoral institutions could regulate and contest external resources, the same movement supported reform, policy learning and competition; where those institutions were closed, it reinforced elite bargains and external dependence. Exile and advocacy produced reformist effects when they stayed connected to domestic constituencies and formal procedures, while returnee and foreign-trained administration proved productive only when professional knowledge entered accountable institutions rather than patronage networks. Economic mobility generated the broadest dispersion of outcomes, because concentrated capital could underwrite reform or detach influential actors from domestic accountability. Each mechanism acquired its political meaning at the point of institutional re-entry. On this basis the section established elite migration as a conditional transformation mechanism that linked mobility, authority and institutional absorption, in which the conversion of external resources into domestic influence, and not the movement itself, determined whether transformation advanced or stalled.

Regional pathways across three postcolonial areas

Comparison across Africa, Latin America and South Asia showed that the six mechanisms operated through regionally distinct pathways shaped by colonial legacies, regime trajectories and the structure of diaspora-state relations. African elite migration attached to anti-colonial mobilisation, authoritarian exclusion and state reconstruction. Latin American exile bound up with the defence and rebuilding of constitutional democracy after military rupture. South Asian mobility rested on colonial education, partition, large-scale labour emigration and identity-based transnational politics. The regional evidence therefore positioned elite migration inside the political infrastructure through which postcolonial states negotiated legitimacy, opposition and external recognition, and not as a variable added to domestic politics after independence. The same six mechanisms recurred across the three areas, but their institutional meaning varied with colonial legacy, regime trajectory and the structure of relations between the state and its emigrants.

In the African cases, exile served as the principal instrument for preserving political organisation once domestic space was closed. The banning of the African National Congress (ANC) drove a prolonged external mission whose camps, security structures and foreign alliances connected the anti-apartheid struggle with diplomatic, military and ideological resources beyond South Africa (Ellis, 2013). That external arena produced leadership, discipline and international legitimacy ahead of the formal transition, yet it also generated a later reintegration problem, since cadres formed in clandestine and externally dependent structures had to be absorbed into a constitutional order resting on elections and parliamentary accountability. The lesson was not that exile produced democratisation, but that it preserved opposition capacity and international recognition whose democratic value depended on later translation into accountable domestic institutions, a translation that the constitutional settlement of the early 1990s rendered explicit. Ghana represented a contrasting administrative pathway in which the state converted diaspora relations into a governance field under a stable electoral system. Its national migration policy addressed brain drain, return and reintegration while framing the diaspora as a source of knowledge transfer and development finance (Diaspora for Development, 2020), and the Representation of the People Amendment Act of 2006 extended external voting in principle even as implementation lagged (Kandilige & Teye, 2023). The two African variants located transformation at different points: South Africa at a defined regime transition, Ghana in the incremental administration of emigrant expertise and capital. The administrative route nonetheless concentrated participation among better-connected emigrants and returnees, so that policy framed in the language of development did not automatically widen the social base of representation.

The Latin American pathway placed exile at the centre of the contest over democratic legitimacy. Across the region, banishment functioned as a structural technique of political exclusion used by varied governments rather

than as an exceptional measure (Sznajder & Roniger, 2009). After the 1973 coup in Chile, exile dispersed socialist, Christian-democratic and professional elites into European solidarity networks, including channels built with local political forces in the Netherlands (Perry, 2016), which reframed domestic repression as an international human-rights question and obliged returning actors to reconsider the relationship between democracy, party competition and rights protection. The post-transition period left memory and political belonging unsettled, so that the return or non-return of exiles continued to shape party reconstruction and the meaning of democratic restoration (Doña-Reveco, 2020). The Chilean sequence operated in two stages: during the dictatorship, exile sustained opposition and converted repression into an international human-rights question; after the transition, the differential return of exiles shaped memory politics and the reconstruction of party platforms. In Argentina and Uruguay, exile communities documented state violence and circulated human-rights claims that re-entered domestic politics after the regime openings, with educated exiles supplying the language and organisational access that converted displacement into international action. The Southern Cone thus transmitted transformation through human-rights internationalisation rather than through development policy or diaspora investment.

South Asian elite migration operated through continuous transnational circulation rather than a single moment of return. India combined foreign education, professional emigration to the United Kingdom, North America and the Gulf, diaspora philanthropy and state-led outreach into a dense external field; the World Migration Report 2024 recorded India as the leading recipient of remittances in 2022, with inflows above 111 billion United States dollars, and official registers list overseas Indians across a wide range of destinations (International Organization for Migration, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs of India, n.d.). Within that field, diaspora networks reproduced domestic ideological conflict, with nationalist actors cultivating emotional proximity to the homeland as a political resource (Tripathi, 2024), so that emigrant elites functioned at once as instruments of state diplomacy and as arenas of party contestation. The relationship between the state and its emigrants shifted over time from official suspicion of expatriate detachment toward an active strategy of outreach, investment attraction and symbolic inclusion, which positioned sections of the diaspora as intermediaries in the international representation of the country even as their influence varied across class, religion, generation and host-country status. The field combined several channels at once, since foreign education and professional emigration generated expertise and networks, diaspora philanthropy and political fundraising supplied resources, and state-led outreach extended symbolic mobilisation, so that influence ran through economic and cultural routes rather than through a single act of return. Sri Lanka presented a conflict-centred variant in which the Tamil diaspora became a durable transnational actor; its mobilisation against the government advanced advocacy, documentation and memory politics abroad while also opening avenues of political inclusion in host societies (Guyot, 2021). The mobilisation operated in two arenas at once, pressing homeland politics through advocacy, documentation and memory work while pursuing recognition inside host societies, which separated it from the state-mediated diaspora diplomacy of the Indian case and tied its effect to an unresolved relationship between homeland actors and autonomous diaspora organisations. The Indian case extended state diplomacy and economic influence, whereas the Sri Lankan case externalised an unresolved state-minority conflict into international human-rights arenas.

The cross-regional comparison indicated that the function of mobility, more than its volume, determined the pathway. Repression-driven migration, in South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Sri Lanka, sustained and internationalised opposition; education and state-led diaspora policy, in Ghana and India, channelled policy transfer, investment and symbolic inclusion; unresolved conflict and ideological polarisation, in Sri Lanka and segments of Indian diaspora politics, externalised domestic disputes. Return was not the only relevant outcome, since non-returning elites retained influence through advocacy networks, finance, expertise and host-country access. The persistence of that influence indicated that transformation could be shaped from outside the territorial state for extended periods, through control of advocacy networks, financial resources and the symbolic narratives of belonging, so that physical return marked only one of several points at which migration entered domestic politics. The volume of mobility did not predict its political weight, since a small but organised exile could exert more influence than a large but dispersed professional emigration, which located causal significance in organisation and institutional access rather than in numbers. The comparative structure of these pathways is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Regional pathways of elite migration in postcolonial transformation

Region	Dominant elite-migration pattern	Principal transformation channel	Institutional mode of re-entry	Condition of institutional absorption
Africa	Liberation exile, professional diaspora and state-led diaspora policy	Opposition survival, state reconstruction and development-oriented return	ANC external mission; Ghanaian diaspora-governance framework	Absorption of liberation legitimacy through elected and accountable office
Latin America	Authoritarian exile and post-authoritarian return	Human-rights internationalisation and party reconstruction	Post-1973 Chilean exile; Argentine and Uruguayan rights-advocacy networks	Re-entry through courts, parties and rights-protection institutions

Table 2. Continued

Region	Dominant elite-migration pattern	Principal transformation channel	Institutional mode of re-entry	Condition of institutional absorption
South Asia	Colonial education, large diasporas and identity mobilisation	Diaspora diplomacy, policy transfer and external advocacy	Indian diaspora outreach and remittance diplomacy; Sri Lankan Tamil transnational mobilisation	Linkage of diaspora mobilisation to inclusive representation
Cross-regional	Circulation of political, technocratic and economic elites	Conversion of external resources into domestic influence	Postcolonial states across the three areas	Absorption of external resources through accountable domestic institutions

Source: compiled by the author based on Ministry of External Affairs of India (n.d.), M. Sznajder & L. Roniger (2009), S. Ellis (2013), M. Perry (2016), Diaspora for Development (2020), C. Doña-Reveco (2020), L. Guyot (2021), L. Kandilige & J. Teye (2023), International Organization for Migration (2024), S. Tripathi (2024)

The comparison located the difference in the institutional channel of re-entry rather than in regional culture. The African pathway tied external organisation to discrete transition points, so that its reformist yield depended on converting liberation legitimacy into accountable office. The Latin American pathway routed exile through courts, parties and human-rights institutions, which favoured pluralisation where those bodies absorbed returning actors. The South Asian pathway, anchored in large and economically weighty diasporas, produced mixed results that turned on whether mobilisation connected to inclusive representation or to unresolved identity conflict. Across the three areas, mobility became transformative only where external resources passed through procedures open to domestic contestation.

The content analysis confirmed that the institutional effect of elite migration depended on the type of channel through which external resources entered domestic politics. Five recurrent channels were identified across the corpus: formal diaspora institutions, external voting and citizenship rules, returnee recruitment into public institutions, transnational advocacy networks, and financial or investment flows. These channels did not produce a uniform political effect. Their reform-supporting effect appeared where rights, representation, transparent recruitment or financial disclosure connected external actors to domestic accountability. Their closure-supporting effect appeared where the same channels enabled loyalty extraction, selective representation, opaque party financing or surveillance of opposition groups abroad. The coded results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Content-analysis categories and institutional effects of elite migration

Content-analysis category	Documented institutional channel	Reform-supporting effect	Closure-supporting risk
Diaspora institutionalisation	Ministries, councils, investment and citizenship offices	Knowledge transfer, symbolic inclusion, investment coordination	Loyalty extraction, selective inclusion, monitoring of opposition
External voting and citizenship	Voting-from-abroad rules, dual citizenship, emigrant rights	Extension of political community and representation	Unequal influence of better-connected emigrants
Returnee technocratic transfer	Appointment to ministries, courts, central banks and electoral bodies	Administrative learning and institutional standard-setting	Donor brokerage, technocratic insulation and weak accountability
Transnational advocacy	Human-rights lobbying, host-state access, international documentation	Visibility of repression, minority protection and accountability pressure	Externalisation of conflict and selective representation
Financial and investment flows	Remittances, diaspora investment, party finance, media ownership	Resource diversification and support for reform coalitions	Opaque financing, regulatory capture and capital flight

Source: compiled by the author based on the content analysis of Ministry of External Affairs of India (n.d.), International Organization for Migration (2024), World Bank (2024), International IDEA (2024), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025)

The institutional analysis showed that elite migration affected transformation through the absorption, contestation and regulation of transnational resources inside domestic institutions, and not through a single causal direction. The same movement strengthened or weakened political competition according to whether mobile elites entered open party systems, professional administration and accountable diaspora institutions, or closed patronage structures, externally dependent opposition networks and oligarchic coalitions. This made elite migration a conditional factor that altered the resources available to domestic actors without fixing the direction of political change, so that identical forms of mobility produced divergent institutional results across cases with different absorptive capacities.

On the side of opposition capacity, exiled and diaspora-based elites preserved organisational alternatives where domestic parties, media and civic bodies were repressed, using host-country access and international advocacy to keep political claims active (Adamson, 2016; Adamson & Han, 2024). The same dependence on foreign recognition and diaspora finance could, however, detach opposition from local constituencies, so that the outcome rested on whether external mobilisation reconnected to domestic

electoral and parliamentary procedures. Accountability moved in two opposing directions under this mechanism, since exiled elites and diaspora organisations exposed abuses, supplied external visibility to repression and drew international attention to electoral manipulation or minority exclusion, which widened the accountability field beyond constrained domestic courts, parliaments and media; the same externalisation turned selective where diaspora actors represented particular parties, communities or ideological projects, so that the expansion of voice did not translate evenly into the protection of rights for residents without transnational representation.

Administrative capacity moved in two directions. Returnee leaders and foreign-trained officials introduced legal models, fiscal rules and management standards, an effect that consolidated where merit-based recruitment and parliamentary scrutiny institutionalised expertise; the transfer of institutional norms remained conditional on the sending state's capacity to absorb skills and networks through functioning bodies (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Where such bodies were weak, returning elites narrowed into an intermediary stratum between international organisations and ruling coalitions, and policy diffusion produced technocratic insulation when reform was framed through donor benchmarks rather than public deliberation. The problem lay not in the external origin of expertise but in the availability of domestic procedures through which imported models could be debated, adapted and held to account. Formal diaspora offices reproduced the same ambiguity, facilitating knowledge transfer and investment while also serving loyalty extraction, symbolic nation-building or the monitoring of opposition abroad (Gamlen, 2014; Ragazzi, 2014).

Party competition responded to changes in leadership pools, external financing and ideological networks. Exiled leaders returned with international standing, diaspora branches supplied funds and campaign communication, and economic elites shaped competition through investment and media ownership; these resources widened contestation when they eroded incumbent monopolies and narrowed it when they entrenched dominant parties or personalised politics around externally connected figures. The direction of that effect tracked the prior concentration of political resources, widening competition where its broke incumbent control of finance and communication and narrowing it where diaspora resources accrued to parties that already dominated those channels. The extension of dual citizenship and emigrant rights served, in part, to mobilise financial and human resources from abroad (Leblang, 2017), yet weak transparency over political finance allowed the same channels to deepen opacity. The same instruments therefore widened the resource base of competition and, where disclosure rules were absent, displaced part of political financing beyond the reach of domestic regulators. Mobilisation also carried a polarising potential, since conflict-generated diasporas were neither uniformly peace-promoting nor uniformly conflict-amplifying, their effect depending on organisational context, host-country opportunity structures and relations with homeland actors (Koinova, 2018). In postcolonial states where citizenship, minority rights and historical memory remained contested, mobile elites preserved suppressed claims but could also harden positions, because actors abroad did not bear the direct costs of renewed confrontation at home. Digital coordination sharpened this outcome, since networks abroad could internationalise domestic events and frame political crises for foreign audiences faster than domestic institutions could process them, which made contested questions less negotiable when competing elites sought validation from external publics rather than from constitutional procedures at home.

A further outcome reorganised membership itself. Dual citizenship, external voting and diaspora engagement extended the political community beyond territorial residence and recognised the continuing ties of emigrants, while also creating unequal influence when wealthier and better-connected emigrants secured more attention than resident citizens (Gamlen, 2014; Leblang, 2017). For states constrained by limited domestic capacity or external debt dependence, diaspora networks compensated for weak administrative and diplomatic reach, which connected the redefinition of citizenship to questions of sovereignty. The question raised by this redefinition concerned whether external membership produced broader participation or a privileged category of transnational insiders whose influence was not matched by residence-based accountability. Diaspora institutions concentrated this tension, since the same offices that channelled investment and knowledge could also extract loyalty and finance or monitor opposition communities abroad, so that the extension of external membership advanced participation only where institutional design attached rights and representation rather than obligation alone (Ragazzi, 2014). Stability effects proved multidimensional in turn. Governance indicators distinguish voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, the rule of law and the control of corruption as separate dimensions rather than one aggregate (World Bank, 2024), and elite migration improved one dimension while depressing another: diaspora advocacy could strengthen voice and accountability yet raise political tension through polarisation, and returnee technocracy could raise government effectiveness yet reduce participation. The multidimensional reading displaced regime change as the sole measure of effect, since the same movement could register as improvement on one governance dimension and as deterioration on another within a single period. A democracy-assessment framework that separates representation, rights, the rule of law and participation registered the same divergence, since expanded external voice did not guarantee broadened participation (International IDEA, 2024).

The economic dimension reinforced the pattern. Remittances and diaspora finance reduced citizens' dependence on incumbents and could raise the likelihood of

transition in party-based regimes, while elite-controlled flows financed independent media and reform coalitions or, absent transparency rules over campaign finance and beneficial ownership, sustained clientelism and offshore accumulation. Migration analysis of advanced economies treats skills circulation as a policy resource (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024), but for postcolonial states the value of external expertise turned on the capacity to retain, regulate and adapt it to domestic public needs rather than on the number of returnees. The effect on state capacity therefore registered not in the volume of return but in whether recruitment, accountability and policy continuity inside state institutions changed, since administrations that inherited constraints from colonial extraction, uneven territorial integration and externally dependent economies could see those constraints deepened by the departure of trained personnel and partly offset by the structured return of connected emigrants. Elite-controlled financial flows differed in this respect from household remittances, because their political concentration bore directly on party systems, regulatory decisions and state-business relations, so that the presence or absence of transparency over campaign finance, procurement and beneficial ownership determined whether such flows widened competition or entrenched the position of incumbents. The section therefore established that elite migration shaped transformation through a chain of institutional outcomes whose direction rested on four conditions: the connection of mobile elites to domestic constituencies; the capacity of state institutions to absorb expertise through transparent procedures; the regulation of political finance and diaspora engagement; and the linkage of external advocacy to inclusive representation rather than factional closure. Postcolonial elite migration operated, in sum, as a form of transnational political-resource circulation whose transformative effect was set by the capacity of domestic institutions to convert mobility into accountable public authority.

DISCUSSION

The results of the article indicate that elite migration in postcolonial countries did not act as an independent cause of political transformation. Its effect depended on the institutional route through which external authority, finance, expertise and advocacy re-entered domestic politics. This interpretation corresponds with I. Schöfberger's (2025) analysis of African diaspora policies, where diaspora engagement extended beyond development rhetoric into a field of vertical and horizontal policy diffusion. The present article extends that position by showing that policy diffusion became politically transformative only where diaspora institutions were connected to domestic contestation and accountable decision-making rather than to symbolic inclusion alone. G.P. Zapata (2022), in the Colombian case, had also shown that diaspora engagement could be tied to transnational financialisation. That conclusion coincides with the article's finding that economic elite mobility carried the broadest range of outcomes, since finance could support reform coalitions or deepen opaque relations between capital, parties and the state.

The result concerning returnee technocratic transfer also aligns with studies on knowledge circulation, although the article gives this process a more conditional interpretation. A. Lam & H. Rui (2023) had treated highly skilled return migrants as agents of transnational learning, showing that returnees could transmit knowledge through organisational and institutional channels. The article supports this view but narrows it by arguing that expertise produced reform only when absorbed by recruitment rules, administrative continuity and public accountability. Z. Vathi *et al.* (2023) had placed return migration within shifting geopolitical relations that reached past personal reintegration. This corresponds with the article's regional findings, since return in Africa, Latin America and South Asia functioned through political settlement, rights institutions or diaspora diplomacy rather than through individual relocation alone. D.O. Oklikah's (2024) systematic review of extra-regional return migration to Africa had shown that return was shaped by micro, meso and macro-level factors. The article's contribution lies in specifying which political mechanisms connected those levels: exile survival, technocratic return, advocacy, party networking, economic mobility and diaspora institutionalisation.

The article's treatment of exile and diaspora advocacy partly coincides with recent work on transnational repression, but does not reduce exile politics to coercion. A. Dukalskis *et al.* (2024) had shown that authoritarian crackdowns could extend beyond borders through transnational repression. M. Michaelsen & J. Thumfart (2023) had added that digital tools allowed states to pressure political exiles while raising questions of host-state sovereignty. These findings support the article's conclusion that exile did not automatically protect opposition actors from homeland power. At the same time, the article differs from repression-centred studies by showing that exile also preserved party organisation, legal advocacy and international recognition where domestic arenas were closed. Y. Abramson (2024) had conceptualised diasporas as threats, victims and assets in securitised national projects. This threefold reading helps explain the article's finding that postcolonial states could treat emigrant elites as diplomatic resources, political risks or objects of surveillance within the same institutional field.

The generational and security dimensions of diaspora mobilisation further refine the article's regional discussion. A.F. Wackenhut & C. Orjuela (2023) had shown that authoritarian regimes attempted to engage young diasporas, which supports the article's claim that diaspora institutionalisation could extract loyalty rather than merely provide representation. M. Kandiah (2024), in the study of younger-generation Tamils in London, had challenged the automatic association between Tamil diaspora politics and terrorism. This agrees with the article's finding that the Sri Lankan pathway externalised conflict into human-rights and memory arenas, but the article places that mobilisation

within a wider comparison with Indian state-led diaspora diplomacy and African administrative engagement. The difference is analytical: M. Kandiah concentrated on one diaspora's political reconfiguration, whereas the present article compares how conflict-generated and state-mediated diaspora channels produced different institutional effects.

The article's findings on external voting and political membership are consistent with comparative research on emigrant enfranchisement, while adding a postcolonial institutional condition. E.I. Wellman (2021) had shown that domestic political calculations, beyond democratic norms, shaped emigrant inclusion in African elections. S.A. Umpierrez de Reguero *et al.* (2021) had similarly found that higher inclusion and contestation increased the probability of adopting and implementing external voting rights. These studies support the article's claim that external voting extended the political community beyond residence. However, the article does not treat external voting as inherently democratising. N. Fliess *et al.* (2025) had shown that autocracies may enfranchise citizens abroad, which confirms the article's conclusion that diaspora rights can mobilise loyalty and legitimacy as well as participation. J. Peltoniemi *et al.* (2023) had demonstrated that electoral participation among non-resident voters depended on mobilising ties, which supports the article's emphasis on organisation rather than migrant numbers. The same logic appears in I.Ö. Yener-Roderburg & E.Ö. Yetiş (2024), where Turkish diaspora organisations in Germany and the United Kingdom shaped party support abroad. That finding corresponds with the article's mechanism of transnational party networking, though the article broadens it to include postcolonial routes of exile, colonial education and identity-based mobilsation.

The economic dimension of the findings also corresponds with recent studies, but the article distinguishes household-level effects from elite-controlled finance. B. Maydom (2024) had shown that remittances in the Middle East and North Africa were connected to civic and political participation. C. Crisman-Cox & Y. Park (2024) had linked remittances with democracy and terrorism, indicating that financial flows can alter conflict and political order in opposing directions. I.B. Deinla *et al.* (2022) had found that overseas Filipino workers generated political remittances during the pandemic, which supports the article's claim that migration transmits political norms alongside financial resources. Yet the article separates these wider migrant effects from elite mobility, since investors, media owners, contractors and party financiers could shape party systems through concentrated capital. This distinction explains why economic elite migration produced a wider dispersion of outcomes than ordinary remittance reception.

Taken together, the comparison shows that the article's results coincide with recent scholarship on diaspora policy diffusion, external voting, return migration, political remittances, transnational repression and diaspora securitisation. The difference lies in the article's typological synthesis: the same studies usually examined one channel, while the article connected six mechanisms to three regional pathways and four institutional conditions. This means that elite migration should be interpreted as a circulation of political resources whose effects depended on domestic absorption. On this basis, the conclusions drawn together these correspondences and the article's connection of mechanisms, regional pathways and institutional conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of elite migration in postcolonial states established that the movement of political elites shaped political transformation as a conditional rather than an automatic factor, its effect set by the institutional route of re-entry into domestic politics. Elite migration operated through six transmission mechanisms: exile-based survival, returnee technocratic transfer, diaspora lobbying, transnational party networking, economic elite mobility and the state institutionalisation of diaspora engagement, with public-sector skilled emigration cutting across them. Each mechanism either widened pluralist competition or reinforced institutional closure, depending on whether external resources entered accountable institutions or patronage structures. Exile and advocacy proved reformist where they stayed tied to domestic constituencies, returnee administration where expertise entered accountable bodies, while economic mobility yielded the broadest range of outcomes.

The regional comparison showed that the same mechanisms followed distinct institutional routes across Africa, Latin America and South Asia. In the African cases, liberation exile and state reconstruction made the reformist yield depend on converting external legitimacy into accountable office. In the Latin American cases, authoritarian exile and human-rights internationalisation routed transformation through courts, parties and rights bodies, favouring pluralisation where those bodies absorbed returning actors. In the South Asian cases, colonial education, large diasporas and identity mobilisation produced mixed outcomes that turned on whether mobilisation connected to inclusive representation or to unresolved conflict. The function of mobility, rather than its volume, determined the pathway, and non-returning elites retained influence through advocacy, finance and expertise, so that return marked only one entry point into domestic politics.

At the institutional level, elite migration affected opposition capacity, administration, party competition, policy transfer, polarisation, citizenship and political stability in more than one direction, so that the same movement could strengthen one governance dimension while weakening another, depending on whether mobile elites stayed tied to domestic constituencies, whether expertise was absorbed through transparent procedures, whether political finance and diaspora engagement were regulated, and whether advocacy linked to inclusive representation. These results support a conception of elite migration as a cross-border circulation of political, administrative and economic resources whose effect is set by the capacity of domestic institutions to translate it into accountable public power, so that mobile elites cannot be treated as a uniform diaspora effect.

The reframing places elite migration within the institutional analysis of postcolonial political development and shows how former colonial ties shape relations between domestic and external political arenas. Further research could separate elite migrants from general migrants in case databases, trace diaspora finance entering party systems, and compare how postcolonial states regulate external voting, diaspora councils and returnee appointments over time.

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Theoretical and philosophical aspects of the construction of the state and state activity as an abstraction and a real force (dialectical analysis)

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to understand the universal principles associated with the political process and to examine the ontological status of the state as both an abstraction and a real force. The study employs the ontological method, the comparative-historical method, Imre Lakatos's method of rational reconstruction, critical discourse analysis, and the institutional and dialectical methods. In the course of the study, key ontological positions (realism and constructivism) were systematised and compared, and the transformation of conceptions of the state from an objective entity to a socially agreed mental construct was traced. Based on a rational reconstruction of the teachings of the classical thinkers over the last five centuries (N. Machiavelli, J. Bodin, J. Locke, G.W.F. Hegel, J. Bentham, K. Marx, H. Kelsen), the study highlights the process of separating public authority from the person of the ruler and the formation of the concept of sovereignty. A synthesis of opposing views (the thesis regarding the reality of the state and the antithesis regarding its illusory nature) has been carried out, and C. Hay's position of 'as if realism' has been substantiated. It has been established that the state is a conceptual abstraction which, for pragmatic reasons, should be regarded as a real entity in practical politics. It has been demonstrated that demystifying the idea of the state allows one to recognise the distortion of reality that occurs when this concept is applied, whilst retaining an understanding of its power as a dynamic institutional complex for law-making and norm-setting. The necessity of conceptually establishing a new field – 'political ontology' – designed to rethink classical political thought and expand the toolkit of discourse on the state is substantiated. The findings may be utilised by academics, political scientists, legal scholars and analysts to establish a methodological foundation for normative legal theory, to assess the legitimacy of institutions of power and to analyse public discourse; they are also suitable for use in higher education institutions when developing specialised courses in the philosophy of law, political science and ontology

Keywords: political ontology; political sociology; existential status of the state; dialectic; realism; constructivism

INTRODUCTION

In social philosophy and political sociology, scholars frequently touch upon the ultimate foundations of political groups. As a primary form of social unification, the state can be examined from this metaphysical standpoint. However, traditional social philosophy is predominantly concerned with general group dynamics rather than the specific nature of state authority. For instance, K. Ritchie (2015) analysed the metaphysics of social groups, demonstrating that

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collective entities are frequently conceptualised through linguistic constructions rather than independent objective properties. To address this limitation, literature explicitly distinguishes political ontology as a regional subfield separate from general social ontology. Y. Karagiannopoulos & E. Kondakciu (2022) delineated this boundary, questioning whether the state should be understood merely as an aggregate of individuals or as an autonomous ontological entity. Advancing this methodological distinction, B. Epstein (2025) developed a comprehensive framework for social and political ontology, differentiating between the "grounding" of social facts and the "anchoring" of statehood and institutional kinds through collective agreement. Furthermore, Y. Slade-Caffarel (2024) applied social positioning theory to demonstrate how state institutions acquire real operational power through relational positioning and collective acceptance.

Political philosophy approaches political reality more directly by investigating the dynamic relationship between individuals, society, and state authority. Scholarship emphasises that political institutions and state authority are anchored in philosophical and intersubjective foundations. L. Cremonesi *et al*. (2025) investigated the ontological status of political institutions, demonstrating that state power relies on instituting thought and common immunity frameworks rather than raw coercion. Complementing this view, M. Lehtinen (2023) explored how nation-states and political institutions are constructed and sustained through intersubjective imaginaries, showing how conceptual abstractions generate real social and political consequences through the interplay of weak and strong political ontologies. Despite these advances, political philosophy frequently embeds the state within specific ideological frameworks, conflating its ontological status with normative models of ideal governance. For example, ideological frameworks treat the nation-state as a naturalised territorial formalisation and essential "social cement" without examining its underlying metaphysical grounds, as M. Freeden *et al*. (2013) demonstrated. Conversely, in libertarian political philosophy, R. Nozick (2006) conceptualised the minimal state strictly as a mechanism restricted to preventing force and fraud, thereby presuming the operational existence of the state without seeking rational metaphysical grounds for its being.

Resolving these theoretical gaps holds profound practical and normative significance. As B. Bosanquet (2012) established, the institutional legitimacy and operational capacity of any modern state rest fundamentally on societal perceptions regarding its underlying philosophical nature and existential status as an idea. When the metaphysical foundations of state authority remain unexamined, normative legal and political theory risks operating on uncritical assumptions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the ontological construction of the state through a dialectical analysis. By bringing the metaphysical element of the political to the surface and synthesising opposing theoretical standpoints – from classical doctrines to contemporary political ontology – this research provides a comprehensive methodological foundation for understanding the state simultaneously as an analytical abstraction and a real force.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Textual corpus and source base. The material basis of this study comprises a curated corpus of primary philosophical texts and contemporary literature in social and political ontology spanning five centuries, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. To ensure analytical rigor and systematic selection, specific inclusion criteria were established. First, the corpus incorporates classical foundational works in political thought that explicitly conceptualise state authority, sovereignty, and legal abstraction. The early modern formalisation of statehood and sovereignty is represented by J. Bodin (1955), J. Locke (1988), and N. Machiavelli (Strauss, 2006). The philosophical evolution of state power through idealism, utilitarianism, and historical materialism is examined through the works of J. Bentham (1789), K. Marx (Engels, 1884), and G.W.F. Hegel (Knowles, 2002; Zizek, 2011). Finally, the pure legal doctrine of state abstraction is anchored in the foundational theory of H. Kelsen (1928).

Second, the study integrates peer-reviewed literature in social and political ontology that addresses realism, constructivism, and the metaphysics of social groups. Conceptualisations of group metaphysics, social kinds, and institutional constructs are drawn from K. Ritchie (2015), P. Bourdieu (2015), and B. Epstein (2021). Critical perspectives on state power and moderate pragmatic stances are represented by P. Abrams (1988) and C. Hay (2014). Third, the selection incorporates key methodological works that establish frameworks for rational reconstruction and discourse analysis. Methodological criteria were operationalised through the foundational frameworks of I. Lakatos (1970) and R. Wodak (2011).

Explicit exclusion criteria were enforced to maintain conceptual focus. Specialised secondary commentaries lacking direct engagement with the metaphysical or ontological foundations of state power were excluded from the primary analytical corpus. Furthermore, the corpus excludes applied policy papers, empirical case studies, and narrow legal commentaries that treat state authority merely as an unexamined operational premise.

Analytical procedure and methodological framework. The analytical workflow is structured into four distinct, sequential stages, each employing specific cognitive and philosophical methods. The first stage focuses on social ontology mapping to systematically evaluate belief systems regarding the nature of social entities. Philosophical methods of abstraction, concretisation, reduction, analysis, and synthesis were applied to delineate core ontological positions, contrasting objectivist realism against constructivist anti-realism. Within this mapping phase, the interplay between ontological assumptions and epistemological orientations in political analysis is systematically delineated.

The second stage conducts a comparative-historical analysis combined with rational reconstruction to trace the five-century evolution of the concept of the state. I. Lakatos (1970) method of rational reconstruction is employed to re-interpret classical doctrines rather than compiling a passive chronological narrative. This reconstruction enables the identification of historical inflection points, specifically the conceptual separation of public authority from the person of the ruler and the formalisation of sovereignty.

The third stage applies critical discourse analysis to scrutinise public and academic discourses surrounding state authority. Utilising the discourse-analytical approach of R. Wodak (2011), this stage deconstructs linguistic constructions, implicit assumptions, and contextual meanings embedded in key political concepts. This analysis specifically addresses conceptual abstractions such as "imagined communities", "social contract", and "well-founded illusions".

The fourth stage culminates in a dialectical synthesis to resolve the tension between opposing ontological stances. Following the dialectical framework of R. McKeon (1954), the thesis asserting the objective reality of the state is systematically confronted with the antithesis asserting its illusory or constructivist nature. This dialectical resolution substantiates the stance of "as-if realism" formulated by C. Hay (2014), which integrates philosophical pragmatism and scepticism. Concurrently, an institutional approach is applied to examine the state as a dynamic institutional complex, complemented by an axio-value approach to evaluate the societal legitimacy of state power.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When referring to political theory, a scientist cannot avoid the metaphysical element (ontology). One way or another, this fundamental element is immanently inherent in any theories of the state. The problem is that scientists rarely pay attention to it, delving into the normative part of the theory of state and law. Nevertheless, the latter is impossible without knowledge of the definition of the state and its components. Unfortunately, the terms "political ontology" and "ontology of the state" are not well-established, and the corresponding sections of the ontology are not fully formed. But a researcher in this area can use the achievements and tools of a relatively new, but quite independent branch of research called social ontology. Social ontology is the study of the nature and characteristics of the social world, as well as entities arising from social interaction (Epstein, 2021). The main question of social ontology is the question of the existence of social groups. How are they created, and do they really exist? Or are these concepts unrelated to the phenomena of the real world? What should be the criteria for entering a particular social group, as well as what are the logical problems related to group issues?

In turn, the two most common positions on this issue are group realism (belief in the existence of social groups regardless of consciousness) and group constructivism. One of the representatives of the followers of the second position is the British political scientist and sociologist B. Anderson (2006). He wrote a book called "Imaginary Communities", where he paid most attention to the in investigation of national groups and the processes of historical construction of ideas about national groups as a social group. B. Anderson (2006) divides communities into two types: real and imaginary, i.e., not implying direct communication of the participants of these groups. He also emphasises the predominance of imaginary groups and their power in the modern political world. But one can go further and ask a broader question: are there any real (in the B. Anderson`s sense) groups at all?

Some philosophers believe that groups can exist as an ontological entity, regardless of human cognition. This does not necessarily apply to all existing groups, but at least some groups can be called real. Indeed, from the standpoint of common sense, this seems an obvious assumption. However, there is another part of the researchers who claims that there are no groups as such. Admittedly, it is generally assumed that there are certain groups of people united by certain features: gender, national, professional, and other communities. But these are only linguistic constructions used for convenience when describing the surrounding reality. In truth, these language constructions can be removed from the language or replaced by other categories. But they cannot touch the outside world in any way and are not its properties (Ritchie, 2015).

The above question is not just an exercise for the mind, as it directly relates to the political world and the life realities of millions of people. One of the forms of social organisation of society can be considered the state. In a sense, it can be called an established social group, but the status of this group is very vague. For instance, the French sociologist and philosopher P. Bourdieu (2015) defines the state as follows: "The state is that which justifies the logical and moral correspondence of the social world and, thus, the fundamental consensus on the meaning of the social world." In other words, it is both a factor that unites a certain group of people, and this group itself, which exists due to the grounds for unification: "The state is a well-founded illusion; a place that exists because it is considered to exist. This is an illusory but collectively agreed upon reality. This is the place we come to when we try to return to the conditions of such things as academic diplomas, the official register of professions or the calendar… This mysterious thing exists due to its consequences and the collective belief in its existence, which serves as the basis of these consequences" (Bourdieu, 2015). Thus, P. Bourdieu does not deny the existence of the state, but in an extremely specific form – the form of a mental construction supported by a collective consensus.

However, to call the state an illusion, there had to be a history of accepting the state as a reality and strengthening faith in it. Even though the Greek word Politeia is usually translated as "State", and the history of the philosophy of the state is traced from antiquity, in its modern meaning "state" was formed only in the New Age, when the word came into

use in English, French, German. In Italian, Spanish, the words "status", "stato", "estado" were used to emphasise the status of the ruler, but then they began to relate directly to the form of politics. By the end of the 16th century, thinkers Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guciardini began to use the words "status" and "stato" to refer to a group of people and the territory connecting them (Strauss, 2006). A critical point contributing to the final formation of the concept of the state was the difference between the person holding the position and the official potential of this position. i.e., there was a process of abstraction – separation of the essential properties of the subject from the subject itself. From that moment it became clear that the state power can (and should) be disconnected from the person holding the post of ruler. These were arguably the first ideas about the state as an abstraction, as a force representing something more than a particular person or group of people (Strauss, 2006).

Later, thanks to the philosophy of Enlightenment, the famous theory of the social contract appeared in the 17th century. This is such an agreement by which people consent to empower the state in their interests, conceding some of their individual rights in the state's favour. For J. Locke (1988), the state is a social contract, under which individuals agree not to violate each other's natural rights, such as life, liberty, and private property, in exchange for protecting the "sphere of freedom" of each individual. The social contract has a dual status: it is real because the political reality where society lives thanks to this contract is real. On the other hand, the concept of a social contract is perceived as a metaphor or thought experiment justifying a democratic society.

In the 19th century, the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel saw the reason for the creation of states not so much in individual rights as in the universal human mind. He was dissatisfied with the idea of a social contract, since he considered the "idea of the absolute" to be the beginning of power and the state, which is something more than the will of individual people (Knowles, 2002). For G.W.F. Hegel, freedom is an opportunity to act, being guided by universal guidelines. Subordinating themselves to the state, the individuals can fulfil themselves. The state, in turn, is called not to serve the needs and interests of individuals, but to be the purpose, the culmination of morality, the highest law standing above society, and not originating from it (Knowles, 2002). The state is absolute, autonomous, and self-promoting. It is a dynamic institution that considers law as a certain action in the context of society, reducing each social action to total definitions of a given rational order. Clearly, the state is not just a real entity, it also has a higher objective force ruling the subjects (Zizek, 2011).

The utilitarian J. Bentham (1789), the founder of utilitarian ethics, had his own ideas about the theory of the state, which, unlike G.W.F. Hegel (Knowles, 2002; Zizek, 2011), can be called constructivist rather than realist. The universal principle and measure of human activity for utilitarians is utility and the desire to avoid suffering. The same principle is the core of the utilitarian theory of law. Accordingly, useful laws have the primary right to exist in the state. The state itself is an artificial construct created to reduce the suffering of citizens by ensuring the security and protection of private property of individuals (Rudan, 2013).

The ideas of J. Locke (1988) and J. Bentham (1789) formed the basis of the political philosophy of Karl Marx and F. Engels (1884). From their perspective, the origins of power lie in private ownership as a result of the production of excess product. In turn, the presence of private property contributes to the formation of material inequality and exploitation of some classes by others. The state in its origins is called upon to protect the interests of exploiters and to restrain and humiliate the exploited class.

The first attempt to deduce the history of the state and power was the theory of F. Engels (1884), outlined in the work "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State". F. Engels outlined three stages of the formation of the state: the division of labour and the emergence of the family, the emergence of private property, and then the emergence of classes and the state. The reason for the emergence of the state is the division into two classes: owners of the means of production and those who can only dispose of their opportunity to work, i.e., sell their labour. The state exacerbates this gap by serving the interests of the dominant class (Engels, 1884). Consequently, the reason, and at the same time the very essence of the state, is an ethical issue, the struggle of social groups. The state, like G.W.F. Hegel's, is dynamic, absolute, and has a predetermining force. However, as in J. Bentham's theory, it is rather a construction that supports the current being but is not a universal form of the political. Sovereignty is considered to be an essential feature of the state – an inviolable independent legitimate authority within the boundaries of a particular territory, consolidated in the form of a person or a state authority. The state is a special political institution in which sovereignty is embodied (Philpott, 2020).

French philosopher J. Bodin (1955) was the first European philosopher to single out this concept. His souveraineté appears as a central concept in his Six Books of the Republic, which he wrote in 1576, at a time when France was being torn apart by civil war between the Calvinist Huguenots and the Catholic Monarchy. He regarded the problem of order as central. Sovereignty, as an indivisible, permanent, and absolute power, became for him a single political organism, standing above any other. Only the supreme power in the territory could strengthen the fragmented society of J. Bodin`s time. The philosopher defined the state as the management of a set of families (which is the main political unit) carried out based on law. The state is also the product of an agreement that guarantees protection from external influences and peace within the community, which is the key to the happiness of individuals. The concept of sovereignty is central to the political philosophy of the more modern thinker H. Kelsen (1928). The sovereignty of the state determines the boundaries to which the law applies, which for H. Kelsen is synonymous with the state. Sovereignty is the

fundamental principle of international law, according to which state sovereignty is determined by the factual control over the territory/population.

Notably, the theories of the origin and functions of the state differ in their diversity. However, the positions of most philosophers regarding the existence of the state specifically stay rather outside the brackets. The key question for this study is as follows: is the state an analytical abstraction or a real entity? Proceeding from the above, it is possible to summarise the existing positions and identify two main perspectives of consideration of the state. First, a view of the state as a concept that is a reference to a non-existent reality. In other words, the state has an empty referent. Scientists of this field believe that the term "state" is a reference to an entity that does not have the status of existing and does not relate to the real world in any way. However, there really are political practices that do not necessarily lead to the idea of a state.

A similar position states that the concept of the state is based on group characteristics that are essentially unacceptable, such as unity, community, sovereignty, etc. This view correlates with the position of group antirealism in the sociology of groups. Both above-mentioned perspectives of consideration converge on the uselessness of this abstraction. Based on this, the philosopher P. Abrams (1988) noted that the very concept of the state, as a special separate entity, is not only an abstraction, but, most importantly, an abstraction that distorts the perception of reality and does not allow seeing the inevitable discrepancy between idealised conceptions about the state and the practice carried out on behalf of the state. The solution to this issue, which P. Abrams (1988) suggests, is to completely abandon the concept of the state and look directly at the practices through which this idea is manifested. This position resembles the view of P Bourdieu (2015): the state is a well-founded illusion supported by the consent of agents.

Admittedly, realists would disagree with this. For them, turning to the state means turning to a structural concept. Moreover, to the basic structural level of reality (consisting of many structural entities) supporting the surface level of visibility (consisting of things that are "relevant"). Without losing touch with realism, the position of moderate scepticism states that the state has a real referent, but cannot adequately convey it, i.e., the concept is a considerable distortion of really existing things. Like most physical phenomena, it is difficult to feel and perceive because it is inaccessible to the physical senses. The existence of the state is possible thanks to a political intuition of the agents of the political area. However, one cannot fully know what exactly the state is, the state is unattainable (Hay, 2014).

In other words, the state is an unsuccessful attempt to convey a more complex reality. In this regard, some thinkers, such as I. Adams (1999), believe that the number of distortions is too large, and therefore it is worth abandoning the concept. Others call it an acceptable number of distortions, which is sufficient and necessary for the current political practice (Hay, 2014).

The thesis of the existence of the state contains an opportunity for criticism from different sides, generally speaking – antitheses. Discussion of both sides, reinforcement of data directly related to political practices, will help to better understand the real status. This dialectical process is also a necessary background for social change (McKeon, 1954). One observes the same seemingly insoluble clash when trying to describe and understand the state. Therefore, a qualitatively new level of understanding is required.

Political scientist C. Hay (2014) offers a variant that summarises the two earlier positions: from this perspective, the state is neither an abstraction nor a real entity. It is "as if realism". He offers the following point of view: if cultural, political, social reality presupposes the existence of the state, then this does not mean the need to recognise its real existence. In other words, the question is not the existence or non-existence of the state, but how useful it is to refer to such a construct. If one can analytically prove the usefulness of a realistic position on the issue of the state, then perhaps the very question of the validity of the state should be discarded. This position has its origins in philosophical pragmatism – a doctrine that sees the value or lack of value of a philosophical construction, depending on whether it serves life practice. In other words, how useful it is (Haack, 2006). If one wants to use a certain abstraction, they need to recognise its "as if realism" status. However, one will never be able to find out if they are truly real (Hay, 2014).

Another way to the position of "as if realism" in relation to the issue of the state is scepticism. Scepticism proceeds from a logic remarkably similar to the previous one and assumes doubt about the existence of the subject of research. From this perspective, the state is an analytical technique that helps to better see the connections between discrete social practices, but there is insufficient evidence to recognise it as real. Thus, "as if realism" distinguishes a class of objects with a special ontological status of the same name, which also includes the state. This can be considered a shift rather than a solution to the ontological problem of the existence of the state – and in a sense it is (Hay, 2014).

But when one accepts such a nature of the state, they demystify its idea and give themselves an account of the distortions that occur during the postulation and use of concepts such as the state. One does not pretend that this abstraction can cover the entire complexity of real social and political practices. One recognises the partly fictitious nature of the abstraction used, taking responsibility for the inevitable distortions of reality in attempts to describe and fix it. And so, the state is neither real nor fictitious, but is a conceptual abstraction. The primary open analytical question is not about the status of the state, but about the value of this concept. The state is a dynamic institutional complex, whose unity is partial at best. However, the result of using this abstraction is full

of suggestion and begins with the unification/separation of people into groups.

B. Jessop (2016) proposes a strategic-relational approach to state theory, conceptualising the state not as an autonomous, monolithic entity or a simple illusion, but as a dynamic ensemble of structural forms and social relations that selectively privileges certain strategies over others. This perspective directly reinforces the "as-if realism" established in this study: while in this article provides the pragmatic-epistemological justification for treating the state as real, B. Jessop provides the structural-analytical account of how this abstraction operates selectively in concrete political reality. Both frameworks reject naive state realism and radical anti-realism, demonstrating that state authority exists through strategic practices and institutional institutionalisation.

In political philosophy, O. Marchart (2018) develops a post-foundational political ontology that distinguishes "the political" (as a space of radical contingency and social antagonism) from "politics" (the contingent, partial institutionalisation of order). This aligns with the dialectical resolution achieved here: O. Marchart confirms that any state construct is an inherently incomplete abstraction attempting to fix an unstable social reality. Rather than dismissing the state due to its lack of fixed foundations – the post-foundational framework demonstrates that the state functions precisely as a contingent, necessary institution for managing social conflict.

Within institutional ontology, F. Hindriks (2011) formulates a linguistic theory of social reality, arguing that political entities and state power are created through status function declarations of the form "X counts as Y in context C". F. Hindriks explains the precise mechanisms through which linguistic abstractions acquire binding deontic power (rights, duties, and authority) via collective intentionality. This complements the findings of this paper by providing the micro-foundational and linguistic mechanism for P. Bourdieu's "well-founded illusion" and C. Hay's "as-if realism", explaining how mental constructs become operational social facts.

Approaching state ontology from phenomenology, F. De Vecchi (2015) examines the eidetic social ontology of the state, demonstrating that legal acts, sovereignty, and state authority possess essential normative structures that cannot be reduced merely to empirical human behavior. While constructivist anti-realists view the state as an arbitrary linguistic construction (Ritchie, 2015), F. De Vecchi demonstrates that state abstraction holds a distinct eidetic reality with essential normative connections. This supports the dialectical synthesis of this study, showing that the state's conceptual abstraction is grounded in enduring normative structures rather than fleeting illusions.

Addressing the pragmatic application of state theory, Å. Burman (2023) advances a nonideal social ontology that investigates how social power, structural domination, and political institutions function in actual practice rather than in idealised models. Å. Burman criticises traditional political philosophy for relying on idealised assumptions like the social contract (Locke, 1988) without accounting for nonideal power dynamics. This strongly validates the principal conclusion of this study: demystifying the state through "as-if realism" allows political scientists to recognise the cognitive distortions of idealised state concepts while retaining a sharp analytical lens for examining nonideal institutional power and societal regulation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analysed the metaphysical and ontological foundations of the state by dialectically synthesising the opposing frameworks of objectivist realism and constructivist anti-realism. Historical reconstruction of classical political doctrines – spanning from early modern sovereignty to pure legal theory – demonstrates a persistent analytical trajectory toward separating public authority from the physical person of the ruler. While contemporary scholarship predominantly rejects naive realism, radical anti-realist proposals to abandon the concept of the state create severe analytical distortions and obscure concrete institutional power.

To resolve this impasse, the investigation substantiates Colin Hay's framework of "as-if realism", grounded in philosophical pragmatism and utility. Under this dialectical stance, the state is conceptualised neither as an unmediated physical entity nor as an arbitrary illusion, but as a necessary conceptual abstraction that must be treated as real for practical operational purposes. Demystifying the state in this manner acknowledges the cognitive distortions inherent in applying idealised constructs while preserving an analytical lens to evaluate the state as a dynamic institutional complex responsible for law-making, norm-setting, and societal regulation.

Furthermore, these findings establish the necessity of formally delineating "political ontology" as an autonomous subdiscipline designed to expand the conceptual toolkit of political philosophy, legal theory, and discourse analysis. By providing a coherent metaphysical foundation, this approach bridges the gap between high-level theoretical abstractions and discrete empirical practices. Future research should focus on the rational reconstruction of classical political thought through the lens of political ontology, examining how digital transformations and cross-border governance reconfigure the institutional legitimacy and existential status of the modern state.

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The rise of global megacities as independent political actors: The cases of Singapore and Seoul

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to identify the institutional patterns underlying the development of political agency in the global megacities of Singapore and Seoul. The methodological basis of the study was a comprehensive comparative political and institutional analysis, utilising qualitative and structural-functional methods for analysing documents and case studies. The analysis confirmed that megacities have acquired the characteristics of independent political actors capable of shaping the international order through institutional, network-based and diplomatic mechanisms. A comparison of the concepts of the global city, urban diplomacy, paradiplomacy, and multi-level and network governance revealed that each of these concepts explained a distinct level of cities' political activity, whilst their combination formed a comprehensive model of political agency. An analysis of Singapore demonstrated that international influence is achieved through the integration of state sovereignty, strategic planning and a unified system of political coordination. The study of Seoul revealed a different model, in which the lack of international legal personality is offset by active participation in global urban networks, the development of digital governance and the export of governance practices. A comparative analysis of international activity identified differences between the vertical diplomacy of a city-state and the horizontal network of partnerships characteristic of a municipal metropolis. A synthesis of the results revealed that the potential for international scaling was greater in the Seoul model, whilst the Singapore model retained its unique character through the combination of the functions of a sovereign state and a global city. The findings are intended for use by government bodies, municipal administrations, strategic planning centres and researchers in the field of urban governance when developing models of international integration, digital development programmes and strategies to strengthen the political agency of major cities

Keywords: global governance; economic diplomacy; climate diplomacy; international branding; international agenda; digital governance

INTRODUCTION

The global transformation of the international system is accompanied by a gradual expansion of the range of actors capable of influencing processes of global governance. Megacities have ceased to perform solely administrative, economic or social functions, taking on the characteristics of autonomous political actors that form international partnerships, develop diplomatic networks, promote their own models of governance and serve as platforms for the formulation of global policies. The intensification of urbanisation, digital transformation, environmental challenges, and international competition for investment and human capital has brought to the fore the issue of cities' political agency, the mechanisms for its institutionalisation, and models for integrating megacities into the system of multilevel governance. Comparing cities that follow different institutional trajectories in their international activities is becoming increasingly important. Singapore and Seoul are influential Asian megacities; however, their international status, legal capacities, organisation of the political cycle and mechanisms for external engagement have been shaped by different models. This distinction provides a basis for identifying the factors that determine the effectiveness of urban diplomacy, strategic planning and the international positioning of global cities.

The development of the international role of megacities was examined through the interrelationship between digital transformation, place branding and investment attractiveness. A study by R.G. Sousa *et al.* (2025) summarised the main conceptual approaches to integrating place branding with Smart City models and demonstrated that

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the competitiveness of cities is determined not by individual marketing tools, but by a combination of institutional policy, digital infrastructure, environmental sustainability and engagement with stakeholders. The authors concluded that the synergy between place branding and digital governance has created favourable conditions for attracting foreign direct investment and strengthening the international positioning of cities. The issue of adapting governance models to the specific characteristics of individual regions was further explored in the work of D. Kundu *et al.* (2026). The authors formulated a conceptual vision of urban policy for countries of the Global South and demonstrated that simply replicating models developed in developed countries does not ensure adequate effectiveness. The analysis conducted highlighted the role of institutional adaptability, financial decentralisation, community participation and local consideration of socio-economic conditions for the long-term development of cities.

The educational dimension of the political agency of megacities was explored through the concept of learning cities. Q.A. Dang (2025) systematised international experience in the development of Learning Cities and demonstrated that the South Korean model had transformed lifelong learning into one of the fundamental elements of urban governance. The author established that the integration of educational policy into strategic planning contributes to the development of human capital, the expansion of local community participation, and the strengthening of cities' competitive advantages in the global knowledge economy. The implementation of long-term development strategies for megacities was examined through an analysis of the political economy of sustainable development. B.M. Musthofa *et al.* (2025) highlighted the fundamental differences between the Jakarta and Seoul models, demonstrating how sustainable tourism policy depends on the national institutional architecture. The authors concluded that the success of urban strategies is determined not by universal standards, but by their alignment with the historical, political and economic characteristics of each state. The transformation of the state's role in the development of megacities was explained differently in the work by H.B. Shin & D.-W. Gimm (2025). The researchers justified the persistence of developmentalist governance mechanisms even amidst the spread of neoliberal reforms and demonstrated that the implementation of large-scale urban projects remains the result of interaction between state institutions, private capital and multi-level political coalitions. This interpretation explains the persistence of active state involvement in the shaping of urban space in Asian economies.

Digital governance and the international regulation of artificial intelligence have become a distinct area of urban studies. S.S. Lim & G. Chng (2024) analysed the establishment of the AI Verify Foundation in Singapore and demonstrated that this new model brought together government bodies, global technology corporations and the academic community into a single platform for testing artificial intelligence algorithms. The researchers concluded that proactive regulation of digital technologies has become one of the factors contributing to Singapore's international standing in the field of digital policy. The issue of economic sustainability in megacities was further explored in the work by Y.E. Kim *et al.* (2025). The authors found that economic growth in South Korean cities is not always accompanied by demographic recovery, and that knowledge-intensive services have become crucial for maintaining competitiveness. The calculations carried out demonstrated the interdependence of the development of innovative sectors, housing affordability and the long-term economic sustainability of urban areas. The European dimension of global city development was examined in the work by A. Vaňová *et al.* (2023). The authors demonstrated that London and Paris function as international hubs for interaction between Europe and the Indo-Pacific region due to the integration of transport, economic, scientific and institutional networks. The findings confirmed the growing role of multi-level governance, open planning and cross-sectoral coordination in the development of megacities.

Previous studies have examined in detail specific aspects of global cities' international activities; however, they have not provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of the institutional models of political agency in Singapore and Seoul as alternative mechanisms for integration into the system of global governance. The aim of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the characteristics of the formation of political agency in Singapore and Seoul as global megacities within the system of international governance. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to compare the conceptual models of urban political agency and the institutional organisation of the international activities of both megacities; to identify differences in the mechanisms by which Singapore and Seoul integrate into global political networks; and to determine the factors ensuring the effectiveness of their international interaction and the potential for scaling up the established governance models.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological framework of the study was structured as a qualitative comparative political-institutional study, based on a combination of theoretical analysis, institutional analysis, analysis of political documents, content analysis of official sources, the historical-political method, the method of conceptual comparison, structural-functional analysis and comparative case analysis. The main body of sources comprised materials published between 2020 and 2026; earlier works were used exclusively to establish the theoretical framework of the study, necessary to explain the evolution of the political agency of global cities. The study of the transformation of the role of megacities in the system of international relations was carried out using the historical-political method when analysing the development of the Westphalian system of international relations (Matviienko, 2025) and the subsequent evolution of global governance through 2026. Theoretical analysis was used

to interpret the concepts of the "Global City", multi-level governance, paradiplomacy, urban diplomacy and network governance. The source materials included the the United Nations Statistical Commission (2020), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) (OECD & UN-Habitat 2024), and the World Cities Report 2024 (UN-Habitat, 2024b).

The method of conceptual comparison was used in preparing a comparative analysis of the main concepts of political agency in global cities. The criteria for comparison were the concept, the core idea, the mechanisms of political agency, the main policy instruments, empirical evidence and international indicators. The empirical basis was provided by the works of G. Marks & L. Hooghe (2003), S. Bouteligier (2013) and the Z/Yen Group & China Development Institute (2025). Studies by R. Tavares (2016), M. Acuto *et al.* (2021) and the Global Power City Index 2024 (2024) were also analysed. In addition, publications by the OECD (2024, 2025) and a study by M. Alkanalka (2024) were utilised. The comparison was also based on works by C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), and UCLG-MEWA (n.d.). The interpretation was carried out by identifying functional differences between individual theoretical approaches and determining their role in explaining the political agency of megacities.

The study of international instruments of political influence exercised by megacities was based on a qualitative comparative analysis of case studies. Singapore and Seoul were selected as contrasting case studies due to their fundamentally different institutional statuses. Singapore combined the functions of a sovereign state and a global city, which allowed for the examination of an integrated model of political governance. Seoul represented a model of a large municipality with extensive autonomy, operating within a framework of multi-level governance without international legal personality. Spatial planning was analysed through documents from the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA, n.d.a; URA, n.d.b), in particular the long-term development plan and the Master Plan. Digital transformation and climate policy were examined on the basis of the Smart Nation 2.0 strategy (Smart Nation Singapore, 2025) and the Inter-ministerial Committee on Climate Change (National Climate Change Secretariat, 2026). The source base comprised official materials from the Prime Minister's Office, in particular the Prime Minister's speech at the launch of Smart Nation 2.0 (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2024) and information on the Strategy Group's mandate (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Strategy Group, 2026; Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office, n.d.). The legislative process was analysed using materials from the Attorney-General's Chambers (2025), whilst spatial planning was examined using documents from the URA (2025). A structural-functional analysis was applied to examine the institutional framework. The criteria were the stage of the political process, the main institutions, and practical implementation.

The study of Seoul was carried out using a similar methodological framework. The source materials were the Act of the Republic of Korea No. 4371 (1991) and Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781 (2020). Additionally, the Framework Ordinance on Informatisation SMG (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2021) and materials from the Seoul 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.a) were consulted. The analysis of advisory bodies was carried out on the basis of materials on the Smart City Committee (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.b) and studies by the M. Byun & J. Yoon (2023). The criteria of stage, institutions and practical content were used to construct the institutional diagram. A comparison of the international activities of Singapore and Seoul was carried out using the comparative case study method. The criteria were: city, area of international activity, main instruments, and indicators of the city's international activity. The material basis consisted of official documents from the Seoul Metropolitan Government (2019) regarding the WeGO (World Smart Sustainable Cities Organisation) Mayors' Conference – ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the report by the Centre for Liveable Cities on the 2024 World Cities Summit (2024). In addition, analytical materials from the Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore (2025) on integrated planning and information on WeGO's (2024; 2026) activities were utilised. In the field of digital diplomacy, data from the Singapore Cooperation Programme (2025) and materials from GovTech Singapore (2026) on international cooperation were utilised.

Dubai, London and Barcelona were included in the analysis as additional illustrative examples of various mechanisms of international political engagement. Dubai was selected due to its role as one of the world's leading financial centres, where economic diplomacy was integrated with global financial flows through the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC, 2025). London was used as an example of digital governance owing to the development of digital public services. Barcelona was chosen due to its long-standing use of international branding as a tool for political positioning, as confirmed by the Barcelona City Council (2024, 2026). The analysis of climate diplomacy was based on materials from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (n.d.) and C40 Cities (2024a; 2024b). To assess the activities of international networks, data from UCLG-MEWA (n.d.) and Metropolis (n.d.) were utilised. The interpretation was based on a comparison of the functional purposes of economic diplomacy, climate diplomacy, digital governance, international branding and network interaction. The final comparison of political agency was carried out using the method of multi-criteria comparative analysis. The assessment was conducted according to the following criteria: the source of international political legitimacy, type of international political influence, mechanism for building international authority, political stability of the international model, geography of international influence, resources for political influence, capacity to export policies, extent of integration

into global governance, vulnerability of the model of political agency, and potential for other cities to scale up the model. The materials for the comparative analysis comprised works examining the theoretical foundations of global cities (Sassen, 2001; Kamiński & Matiaszczyk, 2023; Joo, 2023). In addition, studies analysing Singapore's sovereign strategies (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024), the impact of the pandemic on smart city policies (Woods *et al.*, 2025) and Seoul's foreign policy priorities (Lee, 2025) were utilised. The prospects for strengthening the role of these megacities in global governance were identified by extrapolating the identified trends in the areas of climate diplomacy, digital governance and knowledge diplomacy, using materials from international organisations (COP29 Declaration…, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2024a; European Commission, 2024). On this basis, risks associated with institutional and legal constraints on the political agency of Singapore and Seoul had been identified.

RESULTS

The transformation of global megacities into independent political actors within the international system

The formation of a system of global governance was accompanied by a re-examination of the classical model of international relations, within which states were regarded as the sole, fully-fledged holders of political power. The Westphalian system, which took shape following the conclusion of the peace treaties of 1648, enshrined the principles of territorial sovereignty, the legal equality of states and non-interference in internal affairs (Matviienko, 2025). It was at the state level that political decision-making and international interaction primarily took place. Globalisation, digitalisation, the rapid growth of transnational economic ties and the concentration of human capital in large urban agglomerations had gradually transformed the architecture of political power. Decision-making centres extended beyond the confines of national governments, whilst cities were becoming independent actors in international politics, capable of formulating their own foreign policies, participating in international networks and influencing the development of global norms. Such a transformation did not imply a weakening of state sovereignty. It involved a redistribution of functions between different levels of governance. Multi-level governance entailed the simultaneous functioning of local, regional, national and supranational levels of decision-making, between which robust coordination mechanisms emerged (Panke & Stapel, 2024). It was cities that were being granted powers in the areas of transport policy, digital transformation, climate governance, economic development, international cooperation and attracting investment. The OECD & UN-Habitat (2024) had shown that over 80% of the 78 countries studied already had national urban policies that provided for the expansion of the role of local authorities in the implementation of state development strategies and the integration of cities into international governance mechanisms.

This rethinking of the role of cities had resulted not only from institutional reforms but also from fundamental changes in the global economy. Production was no longer dependent on the geographical location of natural resources and was concentrated around financial centres, innovation ecosystems, universities, a highly skilled workforce and digital infrastructure. Such conditions had fostered the emergence of a new type of urbanised space, functioning as hubs for global flows of capital, information, technology and human resources. The political weight of these centres was determined not by their administrative status, but by their ability to integrate into international networks and influence decision-making beyond the borders of their own state. A conceptual explanation of this phenomenon was proposed by S. Sassen (2001) in her theory of global cities. In contrast to the traditional understanding of large cities as administrative or industrial centres, the Global City concept viewed them as strategic nodes of global economic governance, where the headquarters of transnational corporations, financial institutions, legal firms, consultancy networks, digital platforms and international decision-making centres were concentrated. The evolution of this concept demonstrated a shift in emphasis from economic concentration towards the political functionality of cities as political actors capable of shaping the international order through climate diplomacy, digital standards, migration policy and participation in transnational coalitions (Acuto *et al.*, 2021).

The growing political significance of cities was closely linked to changes in the nature of urbanisation. According to OECD estimates, the urban population more than doubled between 1975 and 2015 – from 1.5 to 3.5 billion people (OECD & UN-Habitat, 2024). New international standards for the classification of urban areas, adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission (2020), had made it possible to consider functional urban agglomerations as distinct socio-economic systems, regardless of administrative boundaries. This method, known as the "Degree of Urbanisation", classified a country's territory into three categories – cities, towns and semi-urban areas, and rural areas – and added a suburban zone around each city to create a Functional Urban Area, enabling international statistical comparisons regardless of national definitions. Urbanisation had also altered the structure of political powers. City administrations were being given their own tools for regulatory policy, the management of innovation clusters, the development of transport infrastructure, the implementation of climate programmes and international economic cooperation. National governments performed a strategic coordination role, whilst the operational management of complex urbanised systems was concentrated at the level of megacities. A similar trend could be observed in many countries, regardless of their form of government, as it was cities that respond more quickly to technological change, migration processes and the challenges of sustainable development. The World Cities Report 2024 (UN-Habitat, 2024b) highlighted the dual nature of

megacities: they concentrated a proportion of economic activity and innovative potential, whilst remaining vulnerable to global crises.

The formation of international urban networks had become one of the most notable manifestations of this trend. Such networks developed common standards, coordinated policies and represented the interests of megacities in international negotiations. A prime example was C40 Cities (n.d.), which brought together 96 of the world's largest cities. The organisation represented the interests of mayors at UN climate conferences, G20 summits and other international forums, promoting mechanisms for funding urban climate programmes and reforming international environmental policy. In effect, a new form of diplomacy was emerging, in which city governments were given the opportunity to influence international negotiations alongside nation states. The political autonomisation of cities did not signify the emergence of an alternative system of international relations. Rather, it marked the emergence of a polycentric model of governance, where political influence was distributed across several interconnected levels. States remained the bearers of international legal personality; however, megacities set the agenda in areas requiring rapid adaptation to global changes.

The emergence of megacities as independent actors in international politics was accompanied by the development of a distinct theoretical framework that explained the mechanisms through which they influenced global political processes. This approach had emerged at the intersection of international relations theory, political geography, urban studies and public administration. The development of theoretical models of urban policy reflected the evolution of the very nature of global governance. Each of the concepts set out in Table 1 described a distinct mechanism through which megacities exercised their political agency. Taken together, these approaches formed the theoretical basis for analysing global megacities as a new category of political actors.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of the main concepts of the political agency of global cities

Concept	Core idea	Mechanisms of political agency	Main political instruments	Empirical evidence and international indicators
Global City	Global cities concentrated economic, financial, informational and political resources, enabling them to influence the international agenda independently of state mechanisms.	Concentration of TNC headquarters, international financial centres, international organisations, universities and innovation clusters.	Financial diplomacy, international business forums, regulatory influence, and the development of international standards.	The Global Financial Centres Index 37 (2025) assessed 119 financial centres worldwide; the Global Power City Index 2024 evaluated 48 leading cities across six functional areas (economy, research, cultural interaction, liveability, environment and accessibility).
City Diplomacy	Cities engaged in international political representation through their own diplomatic channels without concluding intergovernmental agreements.	Bilateral agreements between cities, international offices, mayors' diplomacy, participation in global forums.	Political declarations, memoranda, international summits, municipal diplomatic missions, and thematic coalitions.	Urban20 (U20) was an official platform for interaction between cities and the G20. The network comprised the largest megacities of G20 countries, which prepare joint policy recommendations for the leaders of member states.
Paradiplomacy	Subnational governments engaged in international cooperation within areas under their jurisdiction without acquiring international legal personality.	Investment diplomacy, trade cooperation, cross-border projects, technological partnerships and academic cooperation.	Economic missions, international innovation programmes, cooperation agreements, and participation in international grant-funded projects.	Regional and local authorities were responsible for transport, spatial development, environmental policy, housing and some digital services, creating the institutional foundations for the development of paradiplomacy.
Multi-level Governance	Political decisions were shaped through interaction between local, regional, national and international levels of governance.	Coordination of competences, integration of local policies into international programmes, and multi-level funding.	Joint programmes, intergovernmental committees, international funds, and co-financing mechanisms.	The OECD identified multilevel governance as a fundamental principle for implementing sustainable development policies; the OECD regional policy toolkit provided a comprehensive system of indicators for assessing interaction between different levels of government.

Table 1. Continued

Concept	Core idea	Mechanisms of political agency	Main political instruments	Empirical evidence and international indicators
Network Governance	Governance was carried out through horizontal networks of cooperation between autonomous actors without a rigid hierarchy.	International city networks, expert platforms, policy exchange and the development of common standards.	Coordination of climate policy, digital governance and crisis management, and the exchange of governance practices.	As of 2025, C40 Cities brought together 96 cities representing 920 million people and 23% of the global economy. ICLEI comprised more than 2,500 local and regional governments from over 125 countries, while UCLG represented more than 240,000 local governments through its associations.

Note*:* TNCs – transnational corporations

Source: compiled by the author based on C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), UCLG-MEWA (n.d.), S. Sassen (2001), G. Marks & L. Hooghe (2003), S. Bouteligier (2013), R. Tavares (2016), M. Acuto *et al.* (2021), Global Power City Index 2024 (2024), M. Alkanalka (2024), OECD (2024; 2025), Z/Yen Group & China Development Institute (2025)

A comparative analysis had shown that these concepts did not compete with one another, but rather explained different levels of a single political process. The Global City concept identified the structural prerequisites for the emergence of international influence by megacities through the concentration of economic resources and global functions. Paradiplomacy and city diplomacy characterised the foreign-policy mechanisms through which this potential was exercised. The theory of multilevel governance revealed the institutional distribution of competences between the state and the city, while network governance explained the coordination of activities without the dominance of a single decision-making centre. Their combination reflected a model of international politics in which megacities functioned as economic centres, diplomatic platforms, coordinators of international networks and generators of new policy practices. It was precisely the synergy of these mechanisms that created the foundations for the development of cities' political autonomy in a globalised environment and explained their growing influence on global governance.

The international political influence of megacities was shaped through a combination of tools that integrated economic, diplomatic, technological and reputational mechanisms. Their effectiveness was determined not by the formal powers of city authorities, but by their ability to integrate local policies into global processes. Unlike state diplomacy, which relied on international law and intergovernmental agreements, megacities utilised the functional advantages of their own economies, innovation ecosystems, transport hubs, financial markets and digital infrastructure. Political influence in this model arose as a result of the concentration of resources and the city's capacity to propose solutions to global problems (Egyed *et al.*, 2024). This was precisely why the international activity of cities was assessed not by the number of agreements concluded, but by the scale of their contribution to the development of international standards, the formation of coalitions and the dissemination of successful governance practices. Economic diplomacy had emerged as one of the most effective mechanisms (Côté *et al.*, 2020). Its scope extended beyond the traditional attraction of foreign investment. Cities competed to host the headquarters of multinational corporations, high-tech manufacturing facilities, international exhibitions, research centres and financial institutions. Economic diplomacy was integrated with innovation policy and the development of human capital. A prime example was Dubai, which between 2015 and 2025 developed its own model of international positioning through the DIFC. According to official DIFC (2025) data, in 2024 the centre's ecosystem comprised 6,920 active companies, including 27 of the 29 global systemically important banks (G-SIBs), 8 of the world's 10 largest asset managers, over 410 capital management firms and 125 insurance companies, transforming the city into one of the financial hubs linking Europe, Asia and Africa. Such a concentration of international business strengthened the city's political influence, as it established a permanent channel of interaction with governments, international financial organisations and global investors.

Alongside economic mechanisms, climate diplomacy was developing. It had become one of the areas of international activity for megacities following the Paris Climate Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d.). Local governments took part in international negotiations, put forward their own climate programmes and promoted the interests of cities at global forums. The distinctive feature of this instrument lay in the practical nature of the policy. Cities presented concrete project outcomes rather than declarations, which enhanced their legitimacy in the international political arena. In 2024, the C40 network coordinated the mayors' participation in the Urban 20 summit and the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29), advocating for cities' direct access to climate finance, the development of multi-level governance, and the integration of urban climate strategies into global policy. During the G20 summit, the Urban 20 communiqué was officially presented to the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as the consolidated position of the world's largest cities, demonstrating the institutionalisation of urban diplomacy within the global political process (C40 Cities, 2024a). At the U20 in Rio de Janeiro, mayors called on national governments and development banks to provide at least USD 800 billion annually until 2030 to fund

urban climate actions, whilst at COP29 in Baku, they advocated for direct funding for cities and a greater role for them in national climate plans (C40 Cities, 2024b).

Digital governance had become another instrument of international political influence. Its significance was linked to the transition from the digitalisation of administrative procedures to the development of global standards for the use of data, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital services. In practice, megacities served as testing grounds for technological models that were subsequently adapted by other cities. An example was London, where, as part of the "Data for London" programme, the "Data for London Library" platform was established, providing access to more than 5,100 datasets and serving as a foundation for the development of artificial intelligence and digital public services (Greater London Authority, 2025). The political significance of digital governance lay in the fact that technological standards were gradually becoming an instrument of international normative influence. Cities that were the first to test new models of digital governance effectively shaped the subsequent direction of municipal policy development in other countries.

The expansion of international influence was facilitated by participation in transnational city networks. Their role had long gone beyond the exchange of experience. These networks functioned as political coalitions, expert platforms and mechanisms for formulating international recommendations. The largest of these remained C40 Cities (n.d.), ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.), UCLG-MEWA (n.d.), Eurocities (n.d.) and Metropolis (n.d.). Their activities encompassed the preparation of joint positions for UN conferences, the coordination of climate policy, digital transformation, the development of sustainable mobility and urban financing. According to B. Riedemann (2025), as of 2024 the network brought together over 2,500 local and regional authorities worldwide, making it the largest global platform for municipal cooperation in the field of sustainable development. The final report of the Daring Cities 2024 forum (Riedemann, 2025) emphasised that it was precisely these city networks that served as one of the mechanisms for promoting the principles of multi-level governance during preparations for COP29.

The political influence of cities also depended on the effectiveness of international branding. In political economy, a city's brand was regarded as a strategic resource that built trust among international partners, enhanced investment attractiveness and strengthened its position in global competition (Anttiroiko, 2014). This was not merely a matter of tourist appeal, but of the city's reputation as a reliable hub for innovation, science, international business and the implementation of global initiatives. One successful example was Barcelona, which, following the Olympic Games, developed a long-term international branding strategy and, in the 2020s, integrated it with policies for the development of the digital economy, creative industries and technological entrepreneurship (Barcelona City Council, 2024). Hosting the Mobile World Congress secured the city's status as one of the world's centres for digital technology, creating a sustainable channel for engagement with international corporations, governments and technology organisations (Barcelona City Council, 2026). In this model, reputational capital became a tool for political influence, as the city gained the ability to shape the international agenda in areas related to the digital economy and innovation policy.

The combination of these tools demonstrated a qualitative transformation in the international role of megacities. Economic diplomacy ensured the concentration of global capital and institutions. Climate diplomacy integrated cities into the development of international environmental solutions. Digital governance shaped new technological standards for public administration. Transnational urban networks created channels of political coordination that operated in parallel with intergovernmental mechanisms. International branding converted economic and innovative competitiveness into political authority. The combination of these instruments explained why megacities were viewed not as administrative units of states, but as independent centres of global policy-making, capable of influencing international rules, financial flows and the development of transnational governance.

The political autonomisation of Singapore and Seoul in the global arena

Singapore's political agency was shaped by a unique institutional structure that had virtually no parallel amongst the world's major cities. Unlike most cities worldwide, where the municipal level operated within a system of multi-level governance, Singapore was simultaneously a sovereign state, a capital city and a single urban entity (Schenk, 2017). This model eliminated the traditional division between central and municipal authorities, thereby reducing institutional costs in policy-making. All strategic decisions were integrated into a single system of public administration, where ministries, government agencies and the Prime Minister's Office operated as interconnected elements of a single policy cycle. It was this feature that explained Singapore's ability to implement large-scale transformations more quickly than most other megacities, where decisions had to be coordinated across several levels of government. The work of the Strategy Group within the Prime Minister's Office was specifically focused on cross-sectoral strategic foresight and policy coordination in the areas of demography, climate, economic transformation and public administration, ensuring a unified approach to long-term decision-making (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2026).

A distinctive feature of the Singaporean model was the primacy of strategic planning over reactive management (Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore, 2025). Spatial development was governed by a framework of documents drawn up by the URA. The Long-Term Plan (formerly the Concept Plan) set out the spatial development framework for approximately half a century ahead (URA, n.d.a), whilst the Master Plan was reviewed every five years and detailed land

use, the development of transport infrastructure, housing stock and economic zones (URA, n.d.b). In 2025-2026, the URA was conducting a new cycle of the Long-Term Plan Review with broad involvement from the public, the business community and the expert community, demonstrating a combination of centralised governance with mechanisms of consultative democracy. Policy-making relied on digital coordination. Following the establishment of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office and the transfer of GovTech to the coordination of the Prime Minister's Office, digital tools had become an integral part of virtually every stage of public administration. In October 2024, the government presented the Smart Nation 2.0 programme, which shifted the focus of digital policy (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2024). Whilst the first strategy was geared towards the digitalisation of public services, the new model concentrated on three areas: Trust, Growth and Community. The political significance of this transformation lay in the fact that digital technologies were no longer viewed as a separate sector of public policy. They were integrated into the decision-making process regarding economic development, healthcare, transport infrastructure, security and urban planning. The strategic decision-making process in Singapore was outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Institutional framework for strategic political decision-making in Singapore

Stage of the policy process	Key institutions	Practical implementation
Identification of strategic challenges	Prime Minister's Office, Strategy Group	Analysis of demographic trends, geopolitical risks, climate change and the digital economy, together with long-term forecasting of the country's development.
Setting the political agenda	Cabinet; MND; MTI; MOT; MDDI	Determination of national priorities, preparation of cross-sectoral development programmes, and allocation of responsibilities among ministries.
Policy formulation	URA, HDB, LTA, EDB, GovTech	Scenario modelling, analysis of economic impacts, digital mapping, transport modelling, and forecasting of land-use patterns.
Inter-departmental coordination	Cabinet Committees; Prime Minister's Office	Coordination of legislative, financial and institutional decisions across ministries prior to the approval of government policy.
Strategic approval	Cabinet	Approval of the Long-Term Plan, Master Plan, Smart Nation 2.0, and national digital and economic strategies.
Implementation	Statutory boards (URA, HDB, LTA, GovTech, EDB)	Implementation of infrastructure projects, housing programmes, digital platforms, transport reforms and investment policy.
Monitoring and adjustment	GovTech; Strategy Group; line ministries	Use of digital analytics, assessment of programme performance, and updating of strategic documents and budgetary priorities.

Note: MND – Ministry of National Development, MTI – Ministry of Trade and Industry, MOT – Ministry of Transport, MDDI – Ministry of Digital Development and Information, HDB – Housing and Development Board, LTA – Land Transport Authority, EDB – Economic Development Board

Source: compiled by the author based on Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office (n.d.), Prime Minister's Office Singapore (2024), URA (2025), Smart Nation Singapore (2025), Attorney-General's Chambers (2025), National Climate Change Secretariat (2026), Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Strategy Group (2026)

The institutional diagram had shown that the political cycle in Singapore was distinctly integrated in nature. The coordinating centre was not a separate local authority, but the Prime Minister's Office, which combined strategic forecasting, inter-departmental coordination and oversight of the implementation of government policy. Sectoral agencies were granted administrative autonomy in the implementation of programmes, yet strategic priorities remained uniform across the entire system. It was precisely this combination of centralised political leadership, functional specialisation of agencies, digital governance and long-term planning that had created a model enabling Singapore to maintain a stable political course regardless of changes to individual government programmes, whilst ensuring that urban development adapted rapidly to global economic and technological transformations.

Seoul's institutional model was based on a combination of administrative autonomy, enshrined in the legislation of the Republic of Korea, and a high level of coordination with the central government (Act of the Republic of Korea No. 4371, 1991). The city had the status of a Special City, which granted it broader powers compared with other municipalities in the country. Executive power was exercised by the SMG, headed by a mayor elected by direct vote for a four-year term, whilst representative and oversight functions were carried out by the Seoul Metropolitan Council. Unlike the classical municipal model, most strategic decisions in Seoul underwent several stages of institutional consultation, which included administrative, expert and representative assessment (Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781, 2020). It was precisely this structure that allowed local political autonomy to be reconciled with national strategic objectives. Spatial planning was carried out through the Seoul 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Seoul Metropolitan Government, n.d.a) – a document that set out the city's development over a twenty-year period. The plan envisaged six structural transformations, including the move away from traditional functional zoning (Beyond Zoning), the creation of a network of 61 waterfront public spaces, the development of a polycentric urban structure centred on three functional cores, the integration of new transport hubs for autonomous transport and Urban Air Mobility, and the removal of the

strict 35-storey height restriction on buildings. These decisions were not standalone urban planning projects. They were approved as elements of a unified policy for the spatial, economic and social development of the metropolis.

Digital governance was integrated into the policy-making process rather than functioning as a separate administrative function. The Framework Ordinance on Informatisation placed the responsibility on the mayor to approve the Master Plan for digital development and to draw up an annual Implementation Plan, which set out specific measures, funding, performance indicators and the officials responsible for implementation. In effect, every major management decision went through a cycle of "long-term plan – annual implementation plan – performance evaluation – policy adjustment", which ensured the continuity of strategic management regardless of the political climate (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2021). The decision-making process in Seoul was illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Institutional framework of strategic political decision-making in Seoul

Stage	Institutions	Practical content
Strategic identification of issues	Mayor of Seoul; Planning & Coordination Office; Seoul Institute	Analysis of demographic trends, transport flows, the housing market, climate risks and the digital economy; preparation of forecasting models for the city's development.
Policy development	Urban Planning Bureau; Digital Policy Office; Climate & Environment Headquarters; Transport Bureau	Development of programme proposals, economic calculations, regulatory analysis, budget proposals and performance indicators.
Expert consultation	Smart City Committee; Seoul Institute; universities; the private sector	Evaluation of the Master Plan, assessment of project feasibility, and verification of compliance with the Smart City Act. In 2024, the Smart City Committee consisted of 22 members.
Political approval	Seoul Metropolitan Council	Review of regulations, approval of the budget, oversight of the executive authorities, and introduction of amendments to development programmes.
Implementation	Seoul Metropolitan Government; 25 district offices (Gu Offices)	Implementation of infrastructure, transport, digital, social and environmental programmes through the sectoral departments of the municipal administration.
Monitoring and review	Mayor; Smart City Committee; Seoul Metropolitan Government	Annual preparation of the Implementation Plan, evaluation of policy implementation, review of the Master Plan and adjustment of development priorities.

Source: compiled by the author based on Seoul Metropolitan Government (n.d.b), Ordinance of the Republic of Korea No. 7781 (2020), Seoul Metropolitan Government (2021), M. Byun & J. Yoon (2023)

Seoul's institutional cycle was characterised by a high degree of procedural formalisation. Strategic decisions were not concentrated solely within the mayor's office, but underwent successive stages of analytical preparation, expert assessment, political approval and regulatory oversight. A distinctive feature of the model was the mandatory link between long-term development documents and annual implementation plans, which was enshrined in municipal legislation. This structure minimised the fragmentation of urban policy, ensured the stability of the strategic direction and created the conditions for the integration of digital technologies into all stages of policy-making, rather than merely into the provision of administrative services.

The international activities of megacities had gone beyond symbolic cooperation between municipalities. The practical value of international networks lay not only in the exchange of experience, but in the formation of alternative channels of global influence through which cities promoted their own political agendas. Singapore and Seoul demonstrated different strategies for such engagement: the former emphasised the export of governance models and institutional leadership through global forums, whilst the latter focused on coordinating international networks and replicating digital solutions. At the same time, both megacities used international engagement not as a supplement to domestic policy, but as a tool for enhancing their own agency in global governance. The map of the international political links of Singapore and Seoul was presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Map of the international political links of Singapore and Seoul

City	Area of international activity	Main instruments	Indicators of the city's international activity
Singapore	Global urban governance	World Cities Summit, World Cities Summit Mayors Forum, Centre for Liveable Cities	Since 2008, Singapore had regularly hosted the World Cities Summit. During this period, representatives from more than 250 cities worldwide had participated in the events. In 2022, the forum brought together more than 2,500 delegates from 56 countries and territories, including 72 mayors, ministers and city leaders.

Table 4. Continued

City	Area of international activity	Main instruments	Indicators of the city's international activity
Singapore	Digital diplomacy	Smart Nation, GovTech Singapore, AI Verify Foundation	Singapore became the first country to introduce the internationally oriented AI Verify testing framework. Through the Digital Government Exchange and GovTech, it cooperated with governments and digital agencies in dozens of countries on the implementation of digital public services.
	Regional integration	ASEAN Smart Cities Network	Singapore coordinated a number of joint projects under the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), which encompassed 26 pilot cities across ten ASEAN countries, using the network to scale Smart City and digital governance models.
	Export of governance practices	Centre for Liveable Cities, Singapore Cooperation Programme	The programmes of the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and the Singapore Cooperation Programme had been used to train public officials and urban managers from more than 170 countries and territories, making the city one of the leading centres for international policy transfer.
Seoul	Network diplomacy	WeGO, CityNet, Metropolis, UCLG	The WeGO Secretariat was based in Seoul. As of 2024, the organisation brought together 167 cities, institutions and corporate members, of which 142 were cities. This provided the city with a permanent coordinating role within the international digital governance network.
	Smart Governance	Seoul Smart City Prize, Smart Life Week	The Seoul Smart City Prize attracted dozens of municipalities from different countries each year. Smart Life Week had become an international platform for showcasing municipal AI solutions, digital mobility, open data and urban innovations, with the participation of governments, businesses and international organisations.
	Climate diplomacy	C40 Cities, Urban20	Through its participation in C40 and Urban20, Seoul contributed to the preparation of recommendations for G20 summits on urban climate policy, transport decarbonisation and achieving carbon neutrality, promoting municipal solutions at the global level.
	Inter-municipal cooperation	WeGO Academy, Seoul Digital Foundation, international partnerships	Through WeGO, Seoul coordinated training programmes, technical missions and digital projects for cities in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, using its own digital solutions as models for the international transfer of urban policy.

Source: compiled by the author based on Seoul Metropolitan Government (2019), K. Goode *et al.* (2023), T. Kamiński & N. Matiaszczyk (2023), World Cities Summit (2024), WeGO (2024; 2026), Centre for Liveable Cities Singapore (2025), Singapore Cooperation Programme (2025), GovTech Singapore (2026)

The map of international relations presented here illustrated various models for exercising political agency. Singapore utilised international networks as a tool for disseminating its own governance models and shaping global standards for urban development through the World Cities Summit and the Smart Nation initiative. Seoul emphasised institutional leadership within international organisations, serving as the headquarters of WeGO and as a member of the C40. A common feature of both megacities was the shift from traditional inter-municipal cooperation to ongoing participation in the formulation of international policy. Under these conditions, international city networks functioned as alternative centres of global governance, through which megacities advanced their own interests, formed transnational coalitions and influenced international decisions in the areas of climate, digitalisation and innovative development.

The political agency of megacities was not determined by formal constitutional status. It depended on their ability to integrate into the mechanisms of global governance. Unlike classical diplomacy, which was based on inter-state interaction, cities influenced the international political order by developing governance standards, participating in transnational networks, drafting joint political declarations and promoting their own models of governance. Singapore and Seoul were among the few Asian megacities that had developed their own models of international political leadership. However, the nature of this leadership differed. Singapore capitalised on the advantages of being a city-state by integrating urban governance, foreign policy and economic diplomacy into a single system. Seoul developed political agency through institutional networking, digital governance and international organisations, compensating for its lack of state sovereignty with high levels of engagement in transnational coalitions of cities. In the academic literature, this model was characterised as a transition from "policy transfer" to "policy leadership", whereby a city not only adopted governance decisions but also became an international exporter of them (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024). The political agency of Singapore and Seoul was compared in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparative assessment of the political agency of Singapore and Seoul according to key global governance criteria

Assessment criterion	Singapore	Seoul	Analytical conclusion
Source of international political legitimacy	State sovereignty, legal personality under international law, membership of the UN and ASEAN.	International recognition through the prestige of municipal governance, global networks of cities and digital leadership.	Singapore relied on classical state sovereignty, whilst Seoul relied on functional legitimacy derived from the effectiveness of urban policy.
Type of international political influence	Vertical – through state diplomacy, international law, and financial and security mechanisms.	Horizontal – through network diplomacy, Smart Governance standards and inter-municipal cooperation.	Two alternative models of political influence were emerging: the state-centred model and the network model.
Mechanism for building international authority	High institutional efficiency, macroeconomic stability, a global financial role, and predictable government policy.	Innovation in urban governance, digitalisation, open data, and the international dissemination of municipal practices.	The sources of international authority differ, but both models were based on the proven effectiveness of institutions.
Political stability of the international model	Virtually unaffected by changes in municipal leadership due to the integration of state and municipal institutions.	Partly depended on the mayor's priorities and government policy on local self-government.	The centralised model provided greater institutional stability, whilst the network-based model offered greater adaptability.
Geographical scope of international influence	A global financial centre with a concentration of links in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and North America.	A global network of municipal cooperation with a focus on countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa through international city organisations.	Singapore concentrated its influence around economic diplomacy, whilst Seoul focused on the transfer of urban policy.
Resources for political influence	The financial sector, international arbitration, a transport and logistics hub, and state diplomacy.	Digital technologies, Smart City initiatives, e-governance and international professional networks.	Political agency was shaped by different resources: economic and technological.
Policy transfer capacity	High. Models of integrated urban planning, the digital state, water management and public administration were exported.	High. Practices relating to Smart Cities, digital democracy, open data, AI solutions and municipal governance were becoming widespread.	Both cities had become global centres for the transfer of public policy, but in different sectors.
Scale of integration into global governance	A combination of participation in intergovernmental organisations and international city networks.	Predominant participation in specialised city networks and international professional platforms.	Singapore was integrated into two levels of global governance simultaneously, whilst Seoul was primarily integrated at the urban level.
Vulnerability of the model of political agency	High dependence on global economic conditions, international trade and geopolitical stability in the Asia-Pacific region.	Constitutional limits on municipal powers, dependence on national policy and budgetary mechanisms.	The constraints were of a different nature: foreign economic for Singapore and institutional and legal for Seoul.
Potential for other cities to scale up the model	Limited due to the city-state's unique status and the concentration of sovereign powers.	High, as most Smart Governance tools could be adapted by other megacities without changing the state system.	It was the Seoul model that had greater potential for international replication, whilst the Singapore model remained more of a unique institutional exception.

Source: compiled by the author based on S. Sassen (2001), T. Kamiński & N. Matiaszczyk (2023), Y.-M. Joo (2023), R. Martinez & T. Bunnell (2024), O. Woods *et al.* (2025), M.-G. Lee (2025)

A comparative analysis had shown that international political influence no longer correlated directly with a territory's formal legal status. Seoul, whilst lacking international legal personality, participated in global policy-making through international coalitions, where cities were able to collectively influence the agendas of the G20, COP and other international forums. C40 Cities defined Urban20 as an official mechanism for representing the position of metropolitan areas to the G20 countries. Urban recommendations were taken into account in the development of climate policies, financial adaptation mechanisms and decarbonisation programmes. This meant that a metropolis's political influence was shaped by its ability to integrate local solutions into global negotiation processes rather than through conventional diplomatic channels.

The factors behind the success of the Singapore and Seoul models shared a common institutional foundation, although they were implemented in different ways. The first factor lay in long-term strategic consistency. Both megacities implementeded policy through development documents designed to span decades, which minimised dependence on electoral cycles. The second factor related to the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus. Policy-making relied on think tanks, digital monitoring

systems and quantitative performance assessment, rather than solely on political decisions. The third factor was institutional openness to international exchange. Both cities went beyond merely participating in global forums; they established their own cooperation platforms through which governance practices were scaled up.

Another factor contributing to their success was the digitalisation of the policy-making process. In both cities, digital technologies were integrated not only into the sphere of administrative services but also into the system of strategic management. The OECD (2023) characterised Seoul's model as an example of the transition to data-driven governance, where the mayor's decisions were supported by an integrated analytical platform that aggregated information from hundreds of government systems in real time. This approach transformed the very mechanism of political governance: management decisions were based on forecasting, scenario modelling and the analysis of large datasets. Singapore was implementing a similar approach through its Smart Nation ecosystem (Smart Nation Singapore, 2025), integrating digital services, artificial intelligence and government information platforms into the strategic planning process. It was precisely this combination of institutional stability, technological maturity, international openness and the ability to export their own governance models that had secured both megacities the status of influential centres of global governance.

Despite the intensive development of urban diplomacy, the political autonomy of these megacities remained constrained by the institutional architecture of the international system. The main reason was the lack of international legal personality. None of the leading city networks – C40 Cities, UCLG, ICLEI, WeGO or U20 – had the right to conclude international treaties or participate in intergovernmental rule-making. They produced policy recommendations, expert opinions and joint declarations; however, the legal force of these documents depended on the decisions of national governments. This was precisely why cities' influence was exercised through "soft governance" mechanisms rather than through the traditional instruments of international law (Swiney, 2020). This model enhanced the political weight of megacities but did not replace state diplomacy. A second systemic constraint was vertical dependence on multi-level governance. Even megacities with a high degree of self-governance could not independently determine foreign policy, sanctions policy, defence cooperation or international financial obligations. The implementation of cities' climate policies was hampered by an inadequate division of powers between central and local authorities, as well as by municipalities' limited access to international funding. Even in countries with advanced decentralisation, the state remained the primary negotiator with international financial organisations and donors.

Financial autonomy also had clear limitations. The implementation of digital platforms, climate programmes, transport modernisation and Smart City projects required investment that exceeded the capacity of most municipal budgets. This meant that even technologically advanced megacities could not sustain digital transformation using their own resources alone. Digital sovereignty was another limiting factor. Most urban management systems operated on the basis of big data, artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure and digital identification. However, regulation in these areas was primarily carried out at national or supranational level (OECD, 2023). Cities faced challenges relating to the interoperability of digital platforms, the protection of personal data, cybersecurity, inter-agency information sharing, and the alignment of local digital policies with national legislation. Thus, even advanced models of Smart Governance could not function in isolation from national digital policy.

The political influence of cities also depended on their position within global networks. Real access to international policy-making was predominantly held by megacities with a high concentration of financial capital, an innovative economy, research centres and international organisations. Smaller cities, even as members of C40 or UCLG, did not set the agenda for these organisations. As a result, a new hierarchy of urban diplomacy was emerging, where political influence was concentrated around a limited circle of global centres. The geopolitical fragmentation of the international system posed a particular challenge. After 2022, issues of technological security, strategic supply chains, control of critical infrastructure and artificial intelligence became the subject of inter-state competition. Under such conditions, the scope for cities to engage in independent international activity was narrowing, as some strategic decisions were being integrated into national security strategies. This was particularly evident in the digital sphere, where municipal initiatives were coordinated with national cybersecurity and data regulation policies (Fernández de Losada, 2022).

Despite these constraints, trends indicated a further strengthening of the role of megacities in global governance. It was cities that were becoming the main arena for the implementation of international climate policy, whilst multilevel governance was identified as a necessary condition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This signified a shift in focus from intergovernmental coordination to joint policy-making across different levels of government. Climate diplomacy by cities was developing most dynamically. At COP29, the MAP Declaration – Multisectoral Actions Pathways for Resilient and Healthy Cities (COP29 Declaration…, 2024) – was adopted and signed by over 150 stakeholders, including 52 national governments. This document integrated urban health into the climate agenda for the first time and covered issues such as disaster resilience, urban afforestation, green skills and climate finance. Immediately afterwards, the Baku Continuity Coalition was established, bringing together the four COP presidencies (Egypt – COP27, UAE – COP28, Azerbaijan – COP29, Brazil – COP30) together with UN-Habitat to ensure continuity of the urban climate agenda between summits (UN-Habitat, 2024a). Cities were developing common standards for decarbonisation, climate change adaptation,

green infrastructure funding and urban resilience, which served as a benchmark during international negotiations.

The next stage was expected to be digital diplomacy. The growing role of artificial intelligence, digital twins of cities, open data and platforms supporting management decisions was transforming the nature of international cooperation. Competition between megacities was shifting from infrastructure to digital governance standards, as evidenced by the creation of the European consortium CitiVerse EDIC (European Digital Infrastructure Consortium), which 14 EU Member States had already joined to jointly develop technologies for local digital twins (European Commission, 2024). Knowledge diplomacy was also expected to expand. Megacities were exporting not individual technological solutions, but ready-made governance models. Centres of excellence, international academies of urban governance, professional training programmes for municipal officials and joint research platforms were becoming instruments for shaping global governance standards. Since 2008, the Seoul Human Resources Development Centre had been running international training programmes for civil servants from foreign cities, and in 2024 it organised a series of online and face-to-face training sessions for officials from various regions of the world in collaboration with ICLEI, Metropolis and other international networks (ICLEI East Asia, 2024). This format of cooperation ensured a longer-lasting political impact than traditional city-to-city partnership agreements.

The analysis carried out had shown that a megacity ceased to be merely an administrative and territorial unit and acted as an independent political intermediary between the local, national and global levels of governance. Despite the persistence of constitutional and international legal constraints, the political influence of megacities was growing thanks to their ability to generate governance innovations, shape international standards in the fields of digital governance, climate policy and sustainable development, and coordinate the activities of transnational urban coalitions. It was precisely these factors that were shaping the new architecture of global urban diplomacy, in which megacities were gradually becoming influential actors in international politics, not replacing the state but expanding the possibilities of multi-level global governance.

DISCUSSION

This study has shown that the political agency of megacities is shaped not only by their economic concentration or the scale of urbanisation, but primarily by their ability to integrate their own institutional mechanisms into a multi-level system of global governance. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of M. Acuto *et al.* (2024), who demonstrated the decisive role of international city networks in the development of climate diplomacy. At the same time, this study has expanded upon this approach. Whilst the aforementioned authors focused primarily on the functioning of horizontal mechanisms of interaction between cities, the analysis has revealed the existence of various models combining horizontal and vertical diplomatic channels. Singapore utilised an intergovernmental format for international cooperation, drawing on its sovereign status and traditional diplomatic instruments, whilst Seoul exerted political influence through the network architecture of WeGO and C40. It is precisely this differentiation that demonstrated that horizontal diplomacy does not serve as a universal model for the development of all global cities.

A similar pattern of comparison was also observed during the analysis of the work by D.M. Liando *et al.* (2026). The authors established that the effectiveness of the Smart City 2.0 concept is determined not by technological solutions as such, but by the quality of the institutional organisation of governance. The study confirmed this pattern using the examples of Singapore and Seoul. The analysis demonstrated that digitalisation is not a self-sufficient factor in political leadership. Mechanisms of inter-agency coordination, strategic planning and institutional policy continuity were found to be of paramount importance. In Singapore, this role is fulfilled by the Strategy Group at the Prime Minister's Office, the Long-Term Plan and the Master Plan, whilst in Seoul a multi-level system of expert assessment, approval and political implementation of decisions is in place. Whilst D.M. Liando *et al.* emphasised the digital transformation of governance, the analysis has shown that digital tools have emerged as a derivative of stable institutional models. This finding correlates with the conclusions of the aforementioned authors, although it shifts the emphasis from technological innovation to the political architecture of governance.

Comparison with the findings of S. Baek (2026) revealed another level of interrelationship. The author proposed the concept of topological urban identity, linking long-term planning with the formation of a new spatial image of Seoul. This study confirmed the importance of strategic planning, but examined it through the lens of the city's political agency in the international environment. It was established that long-term development documents perform not only an urban planning function but also create institutional predictability for the metropolis's external activities. The Master Plan and other policy documents ensured the continuity of the political course regardless of changes in political leadership. Unlike the author, who focused on the transformation of urban identity, the analysis demonstrated the political dimension of strategic planning as an instrument of international competitiveness.

The findings of H.-Y. Cha (2025) were also corroborated by this study. The author established that Seoul's participation in international urban networks is selective in nature and depends on the alignment of platforms with the city's strategic interests. The analysis revealed a similar pattern, although it interpreted it more broadly. It was found that institutional constraints on international legal personality did not diminish Seoul's political activity, but rather stimulated the concentration of resources in those networks where the city could achieve the maximum political impact. Coordination of activities through WeGO has

formed a long-term instrument of international influence, whilst participation in global climate networks has provided additional legitimacy to the city's diplomacy. This finding correlates with H.-Y. Cha's conclusions regarding the selectivity of international engagement, although this study linked such selectivity to compensating for the lack of international legal personality.

The work of H.-C. Lee (2025) provided another dimension for comparison. The author proposed the concept of city-driven regionalism as an alternative to state-centric models of regional integration. This study confirmed the strengthening of the role of cities in the global political sphere, but found that this transformation occurs differently depending on the institutional status of the metropolis. Singapore integrated the functions of the state and the city, eliminating conflicts of competence between the national and municipal levels. Seoul followed a different model, combining administrative autonomy with strategic coordination by the central government. This distinction made it possible to demonstrate the existence of two alternative trajectories for the development of cities' political agency. A comparison with the findings of C. Wong *et al.* (2022) revealed a high degree of conceptual consistency. The authors demonstrated that the success of city-states is determined by their ability to act as hubs for global flows of capital, knowledge and technology. This study confirmed this pattern using the example of Singapore, whilst also highlighting its political dimension. It was found that the intermediary function extends not only to economic processes but also to the development of international governance standards, the professional training of officials and the institutional export of public governance models. The Singapore Cooperation Programme and the Centre for Liveable Cities have facilitated the transfer of governance practices to over 170 countries, extending beyond the sphere of economic intermediation.

Comparison with the conclusions of Y. Boquet (2024) revealed a different logic of interrelationship. The author demonstrated the advantages of the Singaporean model of sustainable urbanisation compared with Manila, attributing them to the quality of public administration and long-term planning. The study confirmed the crucial importance of strategic planning, but shifted the focus from environmental policy to the megacity's international political activities. The analysis showed that sustainable development ensures not only environmental efficiency but also the institutional stability of diplomatic strategies, international positioning and long-term political forecasting. The consistency of its political course has enabled Singapore to maintain a stable presence in global governance regardless of changes in external conditions. The final section of the comparison concerned the work by R. Xiao *et al.* (2024), which focused on the spatial evolution of East Asian megacities. The authors found that Seoul had transitioned to a compact polycentric development model following the completion of a phase of intensive territorial expansion. Whilst the study did not analyse the city's spatial morphology as a separate subject, the results confirmed the institutional consequences of such a transformation. The compactness of the administrative structure, the procedural formalisation of the political cycle and the concentration of administrative functions created favourable conditions for the rapid implementation of Smart Governance models and the international dissemination of digital governance practices. The city's spatial maturity was coupled with the maturity of its political institutions. A synthesis of the comparative findings demonstrated that the study not only confirmed most of the tenets of global city theory but also expanded its explanatory power by comparing two fundamentally different models of international political integration among megacities. The findings demonstrated that the effectiveness of global political activity is not determined by individual digital technologies, economic resources or the scale of international contacts. Of decisive importance are the institutional governance architecture, long-term strategic consistency, the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus and the ability to integrate local decision-making mechanisms into the system of global governance. It is precisely this pattern that explains why two different models of political organisation – Singapore's sovereign model and Seoul's network model – achieve comparable levels of international influence, whilst utilising different institutional instruments to achieve global political agency.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has demonstrated the transformation of global megacities into independent political actors within the international system. A theoretical analysis of five conceptual approaches – Global City, City Diplomacy, Paradiplomacy, Multi-level Governance and Network Governance – has revealed how they complement one another in explaining the various levels of cities' political agency. The synergy of these mechanisms lays the foundation for the political autonomy of cities in a globalised environment. An empirical comparison of Singapore and Seoul confirmed the existence of two alternative models of integration into global governance. Singapore utilises the advantages of state sovereignty and legal personality under international law, acting through vertical diplomatic channels. The institutional model of this city-state integrates the national and municipal levels of governance into a single system, where the Strategy Group at the Prime Minister's Office ensures cross-sectoral policy coordination. The dominance of strategic planning through the Long-Term Plan and the Master Plan ensures the stability of the political course for decades. The political cycle in Singapore is integrated in nature, with the Prime Minister's Office acting as the coordination hub, combining strategic forecasting with oversight of policy implementation. Seoul, whilst lacking international legal personality, compensates for this through institutional leadership within the international networks WeGO and C40 and by exporting Smart Governance models. Seoul's institutional cycle is formalised procedurally: strategic decisions undergo analytical preparation, expert assessment, political approval and regulatory oversight.

Through the World Cities Summit, Singapore has attracted representatives from over 250 cities; in 2022, the forum brought together more than 2,500 delegates from 56 countries, including 72 mayors, ministers and city leaders, whilst the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Singapore Cooperation Programme have trained administrators from over 170 countries and territories. Seoul, as the host of the WeGO secretariat, coordinated 167 cities, institutions and corporate members as of 2024, of which 142 were cities. Singapore is integrated into intergovernmental organisations and city networks, whilst Seoul operates primarily at the city level. Singapore's vulnerability lies in its dependence on global economic conditions, whilst Seoul's lies in the constitutional limits on its powers and its dependence on government policy. The potential for scaling up the Seoul model is greater, as Smart Governance tools can be adapted by other megacities without changing the state structure, whilst the Singapore model remains a unique institutional exception. Common factors contributing to success have been identified as long-term strategic consistency, the professionalisation of the administrative apparatus, institutional openness and the digitalisation of the policy-making process. Risks relate to institutional and legal constraints on the political agency of both megacities. The limitations of the study stem from the use of qualitative comparative analysis of two case studies, which makes it difficult to statistically generalise the results to the entire population of global megacities. A promising direction for further research is the quantitative verification of the identified institutional patterns using an expanded sample of cities with different political systems and levels of economic development.

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The green transition as a catalyst for policy reform: The impact of the European Green Deal on trade policy in MERCOSUR countries

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Abstract. This study aimed to identify the specific features of the institutional and regulatory changes that took place in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay as a response to the European Union's greening of its market-access conditions, considering the countries' own adaptation mechanisms, the interregional agreements and the multilateral trade-law context. The study used structural-functional analysis, comparative analysis, documentary analysis, comparative-legal analysis and formal-legal analysis. Its findings indicate that the European Green Deal has extended its environmental and climate requirements to the conditions governing access to the European Union market, since deforestation requirements connect market access with traceability and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism does the same in relation to emissions accounting and verification. In Argentina, traceability and certification are being introduced to meet the demands of deforestation; in Brazil, agricultural data is being integrated; in Paraguay, digital traceability is being implemented, and in Uruguay, product verification is being carried out. Nevertheless, national carbon-policy mechanisms are being developed as well, even though no direct documented link has been found between these mechanisms and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. In Argentina and Brazil, debate centres on the trade consequences of the requirements, the costs of complying with them, and the recognition of national control systems. The negotiations carried out between 2023 and 2024, along with the legal formalisation of the agreements in 2026, clarified the climate provisions, the commitments relating to deforestation, and the position taken with regard to the Paris Agreement. The treaty obligations, the European Union's autonomous rules and the rules of multilateral trade law together constitute a multi-layered trade-law architecture. The greater the structure of exports, the more important traceability becomes, whereas alternative markets reduce the uniformity of the regulatory impact. It is therefore concluded that the European Green Deal functions as an external regulatory stimulus causing institutional adaptation, and the way this adaptation is manifested at the national level should be examined in view of the institutional and sectoral context, the export structure and the role of the European market. The importance of the findings is that they can be made use of by public authorities and participants in foreign trade in the European Union partner countries when improving the mechanisms, they have for meeting the environmental and carbon requirements of the European market and for drawing up their negotiating stances on market-access conditions

Keywords: market access; embedded emissions; carbon regulation; political settlement; evolution of the treaty framework; trade-law architecture; sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal has linked the EU's climate objectives to trade measures which apply environmental standards to products and production processes outside of the Union. For the countries which make up the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR; Spanish: Mercado Común del Sur), the effect of the introduction of the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), together with the update of the EU-MERCOSUR treaty framework, is to result in altered conditions for access to the EU market. At the same time, the MERCOSUR countries are modifying their domestic mechanisms in order to meet the EU's new

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requirements, while still maintaining their own regulatory policies, economic interests and views on the allowable level of external influence. There is therefore a need to examine the impact of the EU's green transition on changes in the trade policies of these states and to find out under what conditions external regulatory requirements result in domestic political and institutional change.

The discussion among scholars regarding EU-MERCOSUR has been concentrated on the environmental effects of trade liberalisation. A.F. Trevizan *et al.* (2025) looked into the interaction between the EUDR and Brazil's domestic regulatory environment in detail. The fact that EU requirements have an impact on trade, on the activities of market participants and on the conditions for access to the European market, especially via certification, bureaucratic procedures and extra costs. This means that the "Brussels effect" should be seen not as an automatic application of EU law but as a type of regulatory influence which is mediated by market-access conditions and domestic adaptation. The impact of new traceability requirements on Argentine agricultural exports was examined in a study by M.V. Barzola (2025). Using soy, beef and timber as examples, the study showed that requirements concerning the legality of production, geographical traceability and proof of deforestation-free production are changing the conditions for Argentine products to access the EU market. Existing national control systems, in turn, provide a basis for exporters to adapt to the new trade and environmental requirements.

The environmental consequences of trade liberalisation between the EU and MERCOSUR were modelled by J.A. Mercado Cordova & Y. Koo (2023) in terms of changes in land use and greenhouse gas emissions. For Paraguay, the results link the potential expansion of agricultural production to changes in land use and the associated emissions. This points to the need to take the structure of the agricultural sector into account when assessing the trade and environmental implications for individual MERCOSUR countries. Unlike in the case of external trade requirements, the introduction of carbon taxation in Argentina and Uruguay was driven by domestic factors. A comparative study carried out by M. Rabbia (2023) found that in Argentina the measure emerged as part of a wider fiscal reform, while in Uruguay it was connected with the formalisation of an already existing implicit carbon price. This result allows the domestic development of carbon policy to be separated from the direct effect of European regulation. Domestic differences among MERCOSUR countries in their attitudes towards environmental requirements and trade priorities were examined by R. Palmieri *et al.* (2024). The authors traced the positions of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay in the context of negotiations with the EU and showed that issues concerning deforestation, pesticide use and sustainability standards intersect with differences in the countries' foreign-trade interests of the MERCOSUR states. The scope of the analysis of the EU's regulatory influence is extended from the individual national adaptation measures to the political and trade disagreements existing within MERCOSUR. According to K. Shyrokykh & O. Melen-Zabramna (2025), the Europeanisation of Ukraine's environmental and climate policy involves both the fulfilment of existing obligations and anticipatory adaptation to Green Deal standards. It is thus possible to identify the way in which external EU requirements interact with domestic policy, although the Ukraine-specific logic of future integration cannot be directly applied to the MERCOSUR countries.

It is still not clear how Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay have adapted normatively and institutionally differently in response to the EU's new trade and environmental requirements, and to what extent these changes can be linked to the EUDR and CBAM. At the same time, a separate comparison is also required between the countries' adaptation mechanisms and the development of the EU-MERCOSUR treaty framework, the multilateral trade-law environment, and the interaction between EU regulatory influence and other export markets. Therefore, the study aimed to determine the specific features of the restructuring of national regulatory mechanisms in the four countries under the influence of the new environmental conditions governing access to the European market.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was theoretical and analytical in nature and was based on the synthesis and comparison of legal, institutional, economic and scholarly approaches to the external regulatory influence of the European Green Deal on MERCOSUR countries. The body of legal and regulatory sources was divided into four groups. The first group comprised EU legislative acts and strategic documents concerning the green transition, trade policy and sustainable development (European Commission, 2021; 2022). The EUDR and CBAM were analysed as regulatory mechanisms governing access to the EU market: Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council No. 2023/1115 "On the Making Available on the Union market and the Export from the Union of Certain Commodities and Products Associated with Deforestation and Forest Degradation and Repealing Regulation (EU) No 995/2010" (2023), and Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council No. 2023/956 "Establishing a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism" (2023). The second group comprised national legislative and official sources from the MERCOSUR countries. For Argentina, the sources included F. Cossio (2023), Resolution of the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries of Argentina No. 50/2024 "Directory of Agro-Industrial Differentiation Schemes – Establishment. Official Gazette of the Argentine Republic" (2024), and Office of the President of Argentina (2024). The carbon-regulation context in Argentina and Brazil was characterised using Resolution of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Argentina No. 385/2023 "National Strategy for the Use of Carbon Markets" (2023), Law of Brazil No. 15,042 "Establishing the Brazilian Greenhouse

Gas Emissions Trading System (SBCE) and amending Laws No. 12,187 of December 29, 2009, No. 12,651 of May 25, 2012, No. 6,385 of December 7, 1976, and No. 6,015 of December 31, 1973" (2024), and the Ministry of Finance of Brazil (2024). For Brazil, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock of Brazil (2025) was also used. For Paraguay, the sources included Resolution of Ministry of Industry and Commerce of Paraguay No. 368/2024 "Establishing the Steering Group for the Implementation and Evaluation of Socio-Environmental Traceability Systems to Guarantee the Competitiveness and Full Access of Paraguayan Goods and Products to International Markets, and Repealing Resolutions No. 344/2024 and No. 363/2024" (2024) and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Paraguay (2024). The legal regulation of carbon credits in Paraguay was examined on the basis of Law of Paraguay No. 7190 "On Carbon Credits" (2023). For Uruguay, the sources included Law of Uruguay No. 19,996 "Approval of the Accountability Report and Budget Execution Balance for Fiscal Year 2020" (2021), Resolution of the General Forestry Directorate No. 733/024 "Removal of Property Designation due to Deforestation" (2024), and Resolution of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries of Uruguay No. 182/025 "Requirements for Segregation and Traceability of Bovine Meat, Meat Products, and By-Products Exported to the European Union in Compliance with Deforestation and Forest Degradation Regulations" (2025). The third group comprised international trade agreements and official notifications of the World Trade Organization (1994a), the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, and the official notification concerning the discussion of the EUDR at the World Trade Organization (1994b; 2023). The fourth group consisted of the Joint Declaration of the MERCOSUR… (2024). For the analytical context, additional scholarly studies on the EU's external regulatory influence and sustainable development were included (Krämer, 2021; Harrison & Paulini, 2024; Lima *et al.*, 2026). Institutional and sectoral aspects of adaptation were further specified using the studies by S.E Cesar de Oliveira *et al.* (2024), S. Perdana *et al.* (2024), and J. Dürr *et al.* (2026). The negotiating context was supplemented by the study of N. Pose-Ferraro (2026) and the analytical study by J. Hagemejer *et al.* (2025). The economic and trade context was characterised using official Eurostat (2025).

Methods and criteria of analysis. Structural-functional analysis was used to establish the relationship between the strategic orientations of the European Green Deal and trade and regulatory mechanisms. Comparative and comparative-legal analysis was employed to compare the EUDR/CBAM requirements with the national mechanisms of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, as well as to compare the EU-MERCOSUR treaty framework in 2019, 2023-2024 and 2026. Documentary analysis was used to identify forms of political and negotiating responses, while formal-legal analysis was applied to determine the multilateral trade-law context. Bolivia was not included in the interstate comparison because it is not a party to the EU-MERCOSUR agreements under consideration, concluded by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The analysis was conducted according to the following criteria: the scope of regulatory influence, the type of national instrument or response, the adaptation mechanism, the level of political response, the treaty and legal status, and the nature of the link with EU requirements. A "direct documented link" was the only case in which an official source had explicitly mentioned the EUDR, CBAM or the need to comply with the market-access conditions connected with the EU market. When no such confirmation was available, national measures were regarded as examples of indirect contextual influence and were not seen as reforms resulting from the EUDR or CBAM. The economic conditions underlying adaptation were described using statistical indicators rather than being used to determine a causal relationship. The study has limitations due to the selective nature of the documentary corpus, the fact that official sources predominate, the use of overall MERCOSUR statistics, and the early stage at which the new rules have been implemented.

RESULTS

External regulatory influence and national adaptation in MERCOSUR countries

The European Green Deal should be viewed not only as an internal EU decarbonisation programme but also as a strategic framework that has gradually acquired an external economic dimension. The European Green Deal (2019) document links climate neutrality with economic modernisation, changes in production and consumption patterns, and increased resource efficiency. Given the EU's integration into global production chains, the pursuit of these objectives is connected not only with internal regulation but also with the characteristics of goods, raw materials and production processes outside the Union. As a result, the green transition has gradually become one of the factors shaping the EU's external regulatory environment. In this study, the transformation of trade policy is understood in a functional rather than purely tariff-related sense, namely as a change in the governmental rules, institutions and administrative mechanisms that determine the conditions under which exported goods gain access to foreign markets. Such changes include the development of traceability and certification systems, export-chain controls and emissions verification, insofar as these are linked to market-access conditions. The concept of political reform is used here to denote reforms of public policy and its institutional mechanisms in the field of foreign trade, rather than reforms of the political regime or constitutional system of MERCOSUR countries.

The external dimension of this transformation does not consist in the formal transposition of EU legislation into the legal systems of third countries, but in changing the conditions of interaction with the European market. Compliance with environmental and climate requirements is increasingly taken into account alongside traditional

parameters of trade policy, such as tariffs, quotas and rules of origin. The EU establishes the rules governing the operation of its own market, while states and producers outside the Union determine domestic means of ensuring compliance with these conditions. Therefore, the external regulatory effect of the Green Deal is best understood as an effect mediated by market access rather than as the direct implementation of EU law in the legal systems of MERCOSUR countries (Harrison & Paulini, 2024; Lima *et al.* 2026).

The institutional integration of the green transformation with the EU's trade strategy was progressively consolidated in Trade Policy Review: An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy (European Commission, 2021) and The Power of Trade Partnerships: Together for Green and Just Economic Growth (European Commission, 2022). The former document incorporated sustainable development into the objectives of the EU's updated trade policy alongside openness, competitiveness and the protection of the Union's economic interests. In The Power of Trade Partnerships: Together for Green and Just Economic Growth, further attention was devoted to the implementation of trade and sustainable development commitments, as well as to mechanisms for monitoring compliance with them. In the EU–MERCOSUR relationship, this implied a growing role for environmental and climate provisions in the negotiating and institutional context of the trade agreement, preliminary assessments of which pointed to the limited nature of the mechanisms for enforcing its environmental provisions (Krämer, 2021).

In 2023, the external regulatory dimension of the European Green Deal received concrete regulatory form through two EU mechanisms. The first was Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council No. 2023/1115 (2023). The EUDR establishes requirements for placing specified commodities and products associated with deforestation and forest degradation on the EU market and links access to the market for such products to requirements concerning the legality of production, geolocation, traceability and due diligence. The second was Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council No. 2023/956 (2023). The CBAM links the economic conditions of trade in specified sectors to the carbon intensity of production and to the need to measure and verify embedded emissions. Thus, the EUDR and CBAM incorporate characteristics of the production process into the conditions governing the interaction of external suppliers with the EU market, but create different types of adaptation requirements.

One can see a gradual strengthening of the connection between EU climate and trade policy from 2019 to 2023. The European Green Deal set out the strategic framework for the green transformation, the review of EU trade policy included sustainable development among its external economic priorities, and the later revision of the approach to trade agreements resulted in greater attention being paid to compliance with environmental and climate commitments. The introduction of the EUDR and CBAM changed this relationship so that it moved from one of strategic objectives to that of specific regulatory measures capable of influencing the conditions governing product access to the EU market. Consequently, the external impact of the European Green Deal is seen in the alteration of market-access conditions, which in turn provide new incentives for producers and partner countries to modify their domestic procedures and institutions. The European Green Deal should be considered as one of the external regulatory factors in the wider context of adaptation, just as export structure, the features of individual sectors, national institutions and the economic significance of the EU market.

In this study, the catalytic role of the European Green Deal does not lie in carrying out reforms from nothing, but in altering the external incentives and the functional direction of institutional adaptation. The EUDR makes this mechanism especially clear in that the requirement to produce documentary evidence showing that products meet the deforestation requirements turns traceability, the interoperability of information systems and the verification of origin from desirable features of supply-chain management into practical necessities if access is to be maintained to the EU market. Research into the supply chains of Brazilian beef and soy is described as involving the cross-border linkage of governance systems, the result of which depends, together with other factors, on combining private adaptation with public policy and institutional support (Dürr *et al.*, 2026). A similar analysis of the readiness of Brazilian commodity supply chains to meet deforestation requirements indicates that in order to retain market access it will be necessary not only for exporters to take action but also for domestic policies, regulations and technical infrastructure to be aligned (Cesar de Oliveira *et al.*, 2024). Hence, the term "catalyst" in this context refers to the effect of changes in external market-access conditions in speeding up and redirecting institutional adaptation, not to the idea that the various changes would not have taken place at all in the absence of the European Green Deal.

When the EUDR and CBAM systems are compared, it becomes clear that the way in which they might affect regulatory changes within the MERCOSUR countries is different. With regard to the EUDR, the connection is more direct since access to the EU market for certain products is conditional on verifying their origin and geolocation, as well as their traceability and compliance with due diligence requirements. There is therefore a requirement for procedures relating to the collection and exchange of data, as well as for certification and control measures which enable documentary proof to be given that the established requirements have been met. With regard to CBAM, however, the nature of its impact is more indirect. Its operation is connected to the carbon intensity of production and to the necessity of accounting for and verifying the embedded emissions in certain sectors. At the same time, the fact that national emissions accounting systems or other carbon-regulation measures have been developed does not prove that the relevant changes were due to the CBAM, since such systems might also be based on domestic climate,

industrial and economic factors. The EUDR and the CBAM therefore provide different kinds of incentives for domestic adaptation. In the case of the EUDR, a direct documented connection with particular procedures can be made if official documents clearly state that they are intended for the purpose of implementing the requirements of the EUDR or the market-access conditions linked to the EU market. With regard to the CBAM, a direct documented link with a specific domestic reform also demands that there be corresponding evidence in official sources. A comparison of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay reveals different forms of domestic responses to EU regulatory requirements. The differences concern not only the sectors involved and the instruments used, but also the nature of the direct documented link between an external requirement and a domestic change (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of direct adaptation to the EUDR and the broader national context of carbon regulation in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay

Direct adaptation to EUDR requirements				
Country	**Scope of influence**	**National instrument/ response**	**Adaptation mechanism**	**Nature of the documented link with EU requirements**
Argentina	Agribusiness exports	VISEC; Resolution 50/2024; official response to the EUDR	Traceability and certification of deforestation-free products; institutionalisation of schemes for differentiating agribusiness products	The link between VISEC and the EUDR is explicitly stated; Resolution 50/2024 takes the EUDR into account among external requirements but has a broader purpose
Brazil	Agricultural supply chains	Agro Brasil+Sustentável	Integration of data and verification of compliance of agricultural products	The link with the EUDR is explicitly stated, although the instrument has broader functions
Paraguay	Agricultural exports	Environmental Traceability Platform; socio-environmental traceability system; Resolution No. 368/2024	Digitalisation of traceability, integration of government data, and institutionalisation of mechanisms for verifying the characteristics of exported products	The link between the traceability system and EUDR compliance is documented; Resolution No. 368/2024 formalises the institutional basis for developing the respective systems
Uruguay	Exports of beef and products of animal origin; deforestation control	Resolution No. 182/025; Resolution No. 733/024	Segregation, identification, traceability and official verification of products; development of administrative procedures for deforestation control	The link between Resolution No. 182/025 and compliance with EUDR requirements is explicitly established; Resolution No. 733/024 complements the national regulatory framework for deforestation control
Broader national regulatory context of carbon policy				
Country	**Regulatory area**	**National instrument**	**Regulatory mechanism**	**Nature of the documented link with CBAM**
Argentina	Carbon markets and climate policy	Resolution 385/2023 – National Strategy for the Use of Carbon Markets	Establishment of a strategic framework for the use of carbon markets	No direct documented link with CBAM has been established
Brazil	Emissions-intensive sectors and carbon regulation	Law No. 15,042/2024; Ecological Transformation Plan	Development of an emissions trading system and broader carbon-regulation instruments	No direct documented link between the respective reforms and CBAM has been established
Paraguay	Carbon markets	Law No. 7190/2023 on Carbon Credits	Legal regulation of carbon credits and establishment of the corresponding institutional framework	No direct documented link with CBAM has been established
Uruguay	Carbon pricing	Law No. 19,996, Article 326	Taxation related to CO_2 emissions	The instrument was introduced in 2021, before the adoption of CBAM; no direct documented link with CBAM has been established

Note*:* the first block covers national instruments and procedures for which official sources document a direct link with EUDR compliance or with related EU market-access requirements. The second block covers broader national carbon and climate policy instruments relevant to analysing the regulatory environment in which CBAM operates. In the absence of an explicit reference in official documents, these instruments are not interpreted as reforms caused by CBAM

Source: compiled by the authors based on Law of Uruguay No. 19,996 (2021), F. Cossio (2023), Law of Paraguay No. 7190 (2023), Resolution of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Argentina No. 385/2023 (2023), Resolution of the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries of Argentina No. 50/2024 (2024), Office of the President of Argentina (2024), S. Perdana *et al.* (2024), Law of Brazil No. 15,042 (2024), Ministry of Finance of Brazil (2024), Resolution of Ministry of Industry and Commerce of Paraguay No. 368/2024 (2024), Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Paraguay (2024), Resolution of the General Forestry Directorate No. 733/024 (2024), Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock of Brazil (2025), Resolution of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries of Uruguay No. 182/025 (2025)

The comparison showed different levels of directness in the external regulatory influence. This is most apparent in the case of the EUDR, since in all four countries the development of traceability systems, certification, data integration or administrative controls is connected with the requirement to show that the products exported comply with the new conditions relating to access to the European market. At the same time, each country has its own trajectory of carbon regulation: Argentina is developing a strategic framework for the use of carbon markets; Brazil is developing an emissions trading system and broader instruments of ecological transformation; Paraguay is establishing a legal framework for carbon credits; and Uruguay has adopted a CO_2 emissions taxation instrument. The available documents, however, do not provide sufficient grounds for automatically interpreting these broader mechanisms as national reforms caused by CBAM.

It thus enables the division of national instruments into two categories for analysis. The first group consists of specialised mechanisms which are directly related to meeting the external requirements applicable to particular export supply chains, such as traceability, certification, geolocation, verification of origin and the integration of information systems. A direct documented link with the EUDR can be created in each instance if the pertinent evidence is given in official sources. The second group includes more general climate and carbon-policy measures, such as emissions trading systems, carbon markets, carbon credits and tax mechanisms. Here, the CBAM is part of the external regulatory environment, while at the same time the domestic changes are influenced by the countries' own climate, industrial, fiscal and institutional priorities.

When Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay are compared, there is no single model of adaptation. In Argentina, the various instruments used for distinguishing and certifying agribusiness products exist alongside a strategic development of carbon markets; in Brazil, the information infrastructure of the agricultural supply chains is combined with a more institutionalised carbonregulation system; in Paraguay, the development of socio-environmental traceability systems is supplemented by a legal framework for carbon credits; and in Uruguay, specialised procedures for controlling exported products function together with the carbon taxation which was introduced earlier. The European Green Deal does not act as a general source of uniform reforms but rather serves as an external regulatory influence that interacts with the existing national institutions and the current trajectories of climate policy. The most clearly documented example of its catalytic effect is to be found in the areas of traceability, certification and control regarding compliance with the EUDR requirements on deforestation and the protection of access to the EU market. On the other hand, the wider carbon regulatory systems in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay form a separate regulatory environment; yet the study has not established any direct documented link between the introduction of these systems and CBAM.

Political, negotiating, legal and economic dimensions of EU-MERCOSUR interaction

National adaptation to EU regulatory requirements does not imply automatic political agreement with their substance or manner of application. Documentary evidence of this distinction is available for Argentina and Brazil. In 2023, Argentina joined the common position of a group of Global South countries concerning the EUDR, which raised issues related to the trade implications of the new requirements, the costs of compliance, and the recognition of national regulatory systems (Cossio, 2023). In September of the same year, Brazil, on behalf of a group of 17 developing countries, raised the issue of the EUDR in the World Trade Organization's Committee on Agriculture. The discussion concerned the potentially discriminatory effects of the new requirements, additional costs for producers, and the need to take into account the economic and institutional circumstances of developing countries (World Trade Organization, 2023). What the objections reveal is that political contestation involves not only the environmental aim of the regulation but, more specifically, the manner in which that aim is achieved by means of the conditions for access to the EU market. The need to keep records, verify the origin of products and ensure due diligence leads to extra data being collected, ongoing monitoring and documentary proof of compliance taking place in the countries where the products are produced. Consequently, some of the administrative and financial costs connected with complying with EU rules occur outside the Union.

This means that the regulatory interaction has a distributive aspect to it. The EU sets the conditions for access to its own market, and producers and public institutions in the other countries have to share some of the costs associated with proving compliance with those conditions. The political debate therefore involves not just the environmental requirements themselves, but also the way the costs of adaptation are distributed, the acknowledgement of the present national control systems, and the extent of the parties' regulatory autonomy. In the case of relations between the EU–MERCOSUR, this issue is also connected with the asymmetry of economic and regulatory capacities in the North-South relationship (Harrison & Paulini, 2024; Herten-Crabb, 2026). The fact that the EUDR issue has been transferred to the institutions of the World Trade Organization shows that the way in which the EU deals with external regulation can go beyond national adjustments and bilateral relationships. When countries from the Global South coordinate their positions, the matter becomes the subject of a multilateral trade discussion in which the effects of European rules on producers in third countries and the extent to which these rules are in line with the principles of international trade are disputed.

In this situation, practical adaptation and political contestation are by no means opposite reactions. A state can set up the traceability, certification or control systems necessary to ensure that its products retain access to the EU market while at the same time challenging specific

elements of the relevant regulation, its costs or the procedure by which it was developed, as shown by the positions taken by Argentina and Brazil on the EUDR (Cossio, 2023; World Trade Organization, 2023). It cannot be considered proof of political support for those rules simply because a country has adapted to EU rules. This shows the limitations of EU regulatory influence, since the economic significance of the European market may lead countries to make procedural and institutional adjustments outside the Union, but it does not guarantee that their political positions will converge automatically. Regulatory convergence at the practice level can therefore exist alongside political controversy regarding the substance, the costs and the way in which European requirements are applied. The impact of the European Green Deal shows itself not only as a prompt for domestic adaptation but also as the cause of new political and multilateral disagreements about the conditions for international trade.

Alongside the national level of adaptation and the multilateral contestation of individual EU measures, a distinct interregional negotiating level should also be identified. The Joint Declaration of the MERCOSUR… (2024) state that after the agreements reached in 2019, the parties restarted an intensive round of negotiations in 2023 with the aim of adapting the agreement to the new challenges at the national, regional and global levels. The reaction to changes in the external regulatory environment was not merely the result of individual decisions made by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, but also involved a collective negotiating arrangement in which the MERCOSUR countries dealt with the EU on the merits of the future interregional agreement. This does not mean that there is a single supranational model of domestic adaptation among the MERCOSUR countries: the national measures still differ from one another in respect of their content, extent and the way they are documented in relation to EU requirements. At the same time, the negotiating format introduces a particular degree of political interaction into the analysis by bringing together the issues of market access, sustainable development, and the industrial and regulatory autonomy of the various parties. In this respect, MERCOSUR is not simply a collection of states adjusting their own procedures, but rather an interregional negotiating platform on which responses to new trade and environmental conditions become incorporated into the wider process of restructuring relations with the EU (Pena *et al*., 2023; Pose-Ferraro, 2026).

The interregional negotiating process, however, cannot be reduced to MERCOSUR's response to the EU's environmental requirements. The revival of negotiating momentum in 2023-2024 took place amid the simultaneous influence of geopolitical incentives and domestic political and economic factors. In particular, growing EU geopolitical interest after 2022 and changes in the configuration of domestic opposition to the agreement contributed to renewed momentum towards concluding the negotiations (Pose-Ferraro, 2026). Thus, the greening of the trade framework interacted with the EU's broader geo-economic objectives rather than replacing them. Meanwhile, the trade aspect is included within a more extensive interregional framework which also involves political dialogue and cooperation (Malamud, 2022). It therefore follows that the impact of the European Green Deal on relations between the EU-MERCOSUR should be seen as just one element of a wider negotiating process in which the EU's regulatory power comes into play alongside geopolitical interests, marketaccess aims, and the various efforts made by the parties to keep open room for independent economic policy.

The changes identified at the national level are complemented by the transformation of the treaty framework governing EU-MERCOSUR relations. This transformation does not consist in the introduction of environmental and climate provisions after 2019, but rather in their further specification and strengthening. The change can be traced through three stages: the outcome of the 2019 negotiations, the revision of the arrangements in 2023-2024, and their legal formalisation in 2026 (Table 2).

Table 2. Evolution of the EU-MERCOSUR treaty framework, 2019-2026

Parameter	2019	2023-2024	2026
Negotiating and legal status	Negotiations on the trade part of the agreement were concluded	Negotiations resumed in 2023; on 6 December 2024, their conclusion and agreement on an updated outcome were announced	The EU-MERCOSUR Partnership Agreement and the Interim Trade Agreement were signed on 17 January 2026; from 1 May 2026, the Interim Trade Agreement has been provisionally applied between the EU and Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay
Trade and sustainable development	A separate chapter on trade and sustainable development already contained environmental, climate and labour commitments	Additional and more specific provisions on sustainable development were agreed	In the final trade framework, the relevant provisions are set out in Chapter 18 and Annex 18-A
Paris Agreement	An obligation to effectively implement it was envisaged	Its legal status within the treaty framework was strengthened	The Paris Agreement is established as an essential element of the partnership
Deforestation	Forest and environmental protection were already covered by the commitments, but these were less specific	More specific commitments to combat deforestation were agreed	Strengthened deforestation provisions were incorporated into the final treaty framework

Table 2. Continued

Parameter	2019	2023-2024	2026
Mechanism for implementing sustainable development commitments	Intergovernmental consultations and the possibility of convening a panel of experts were provided for; the special procedure was not based on sanctions	The strengthening concerned primarily the substance and specificity of the commitments rather than replacing the special procedure with a sanctions-based mechanism	The special procedure for consultations and review by a panel of experts has been retained; a subsequent review of the effectiveness of the implementation mechanism is envisaged
Relationship with the EU's autonomous regulation	The EUDR and CBAM had not yet been adopted	The negotiations took place after the adoption of the EUDR and CBAM, which had established a separate regulatory context for access to the EU market	Treaty provisions and the EU's autonomous rules operate in parallel; in particular, the EUDR continues to apply to products imported under the agreement

Source: compiled by the authors based on L. Krämer (2021), J. Harrison & S. Paulini (2024), MERCOSUR Signatory States and the Joint Declaration of the MERCOSUR… (2024), J. Hagemejer *et al.* (2025), European Commission (2026)

The environmental aspect was not introduced for the first time as a result of the legal change in 2019. Provisions relating to trade and sustainable development, climate commitments and a special dispute-settlement procedure had already been included in the 2019 agreement. In the period 2023-2024, the specificity of some of the substantive commitments was increased, especially those relating to climate change and deforestation; in 2026, these provisions were then included in a legally binding treaty framework. The enhanced status of the Paris Agreement is of particular importance. The fact that effective implementation had already been incorporated into the earlier framework of commitments was nonetheless reinforced by the updated outcome, which served to confirm the Paris Agreement as a key component of the partnership. Meanwhile, the commitments regarding the fight against deforestation became more specific. The change consists not in moving from there being no such provisions to there being ones, but rather in the increased legal certainty and greater substantive specificity of the existing relationship between trade, climate and environmental protection.

At the same time, the fact that environmental and climate commitments have been strengthened as a result of the agreement does not mean that the EU's own regulatory measures are being replaced. The EUDR still applies to products which enter the European market pursuant to the agreement, and CBAM keeps its position as a separate EU legal instrument for the sectors falling within its scope. Hence, in the context of EU-MERCOSUR relations, the treaty obligations agreed by the parties and the EU's own internal market rules function side by side. This complements the findings of the national comparison. At the level of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, national adaptation encompasses changes to procedures, information systems and control instruments, whereas at the interregional level, changes can be observed in the substance of the treaty obligations between the EU and MERCOSUR. National adaptation and changes to the treaty framework therefore constitute distinct but interrelated manifestations of regulatory interaction.

Regulatory interaction is not limited to the national and interregional levels, as the fact that the EUDR was discussed within the World Trade Organization (1994a; 1994b; 2023) demonstrates that the implications of EU environmental regulation have become the subject of multilateral trade debate. The arguments put forward focused on the possible trade consequences, the extra costs this would involve for producers, and the necessity of considering the economic and regulatory situations in developing countries. The legal framework within which these discussions take place is provided by multilateral trade law. The World Trade Organization (1994a) lays down the general rules for trade and, subject to certain conditions, includes exceptions relating, among other things, to the protection of life and health and to the conservation of natural resources. The Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement) lays down rules for the application of technical requirements and for conformity assessment procedures. However, this study does not assess the legal compatibility of the EUDR or CBAM with the various provisions of these agreements, since reaching such a conclusion would call for a separate legal analysis.

The study thus shows that it is not the case of a hierarchical spread of EU rules, but rather the emergence of a multi-layered trade-law structure within the present international framework. In this structure, the mutually agreed EU-MERCOSUR provisions on trade and sustainable development coexist with the EU's own internal market rules, while World Trade Organization law offers a multilateral framework within which the effects of such measures can become the subject of discussion between states. This system also extends the range of trade regulation to include, in addition to tariffs, quotas, and the origin of goods, the characteristics of production processes, traceability, due diligence and emissions verification. At the same time, the fact that both treaty-based and autonomous measures are used leads to questions about how the responsibilities and the costs of environmental modernisation should be shared among the various parties (Harrison & Paulini, 2024; Dykha *et al.*, 2024), and the fact that sustainable development is incorporated into trade governance does not by

itself remove the structural imbalance in North-South relations (Herten-Crabb, 2026).

The fact that the European Green Deal exercises external regulatory pressure is due not only to the EU's right to set the conditions for the functioning of its own market but also to the economic significance of that market for the MERCOSUR countries. The extent and organisation of mutual trade led to situations in which alterations to the EU's market-access conditions may encourage producers and public institutions to make adjustments. In 2024 the EU acquired goods worth 56.0 billion EUR from the four original MERCOSUR countries, its exports to these countries being 55.2 billion EUR. EU imports from the region rose by 50.3% compared with those in 2014, and its exports went up by 25.1% (Eurostat, 2025). The size of these trade flows implies that changes in the conditions for access to the European market could lead to strong economic incentives for exporters to adjust to the new regulatory requirements.

The extent to which trade flows are structured also affects the nature of this influence. In 2024, primary commodities made up 81.3% of the EU's imports from MERCOSUR, and 86.6% of the EU's exports to that region were manufactured goods (Eurostat, 2025). The major types of goods imported by the EU were petroleum products, animal feed, coffee, cocoa, ores and oilseeds. Moreover, agricultural products made up 46.2% of MERCOSUR's exports to the EU in 2024. It should be noted, however, that not all agricultural or primary products are automatically covered by the EUDR, since the rule applies only to a specific list of commodities and derived products. At the same time, the nature of this trade system makes traceability, geolocation, verification of origin and due diligence more important for the sectors concerned by the regulation. In this regard, the traceability, certification, data integration and product verification mechanisms noted in the national cases have a particular economic role since they enable companies to show that they are meeting the requirements of external markets in those sectors where compliance with those requirements has an effect on export capacity. Although the significance of the EU market by itself is not enough to allow a causal link to be established between its regulations and changes in domestic institutions, it can be seen as one of the external incentives leading to adaptation.

With regard to CBAM, the scope is more limited when looking at individual sectors. It is not possible solely on the basis of the overall export structure of MERCOSUR to assess the extent of its impact, as the mechanism applies only to certain categories of products. Hence, in this study the impact of CBAM is mainly examined in relation to certain emissions-intensive sectors in Brazil. Its importance is determined by the structure of the particular production activities, by the carbon intensity of the products and by the position of the EU market for that sector. Model estimates for Brazil indicate that, since its energy-intensive industries have a relatively low carbon intensity, this could even lead to an improvement in their trade balance under the CBAM, and thus the effects of the mechanism should be seen as varying from sector to sector rather than as uniformly restrictive (Perdana *et al*., 2024). The European market has still been of great economic importance since the new green regulatory measures were introduced. In 2025, the four MERCOSUR countries exported a total of EUR 56.1 billion to the EU, whereas EU exports to MERCOSUR were EUR 53.3 billion. The EU is still the second-largest trading partner of MERCOSUR in terms of goods after China. Chinese demand provides an alternative destination for certain export supply chains, which may reduce the uniformity of the EU's regulatory influence. In the case of Brazilian soybean exports, differences have been identified between export exposure to EU and Chinese markets: greater exposure to European demand was associated with lower deforestation, whereas greater exposure to Chinese demand was associated with higher levels of deforestation; at the same time, the orientation of some trade flows towards the Chinese market expands opportunities for their redirection beyond the regulatory reach of the EU (Oliveira *et al*., 2025). Taken together with the collective contestation of certain EUDR requirements by Global South countries discussed above and the transfer of the relevant debate to World Trade Organization institutions, this indicates that EU regulatory power operates in a context characterised by competition from alternative markets and multilateral political contestation. Thus, the availability of alternative demand may limit the spread of adaptation incentives beyond supply chains directly oriented towards the EU market.

Thus, the economic context of the EU's external regulatory influence is determined by the scale of trade relations, export structure, the sectoral scope of the EUDR and CBAM, and the availability of alternative markets. The aggregate indicators of EU-MERCOSUR trade presented above make it possible to characterise the general economic conditions underlying this influence, but not to establish differences in its intensity among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. At the sectoral level, regulatory incentives vary depending on whether the products concerned fall within the scope of a specific EU instrument, the role of the European market in their sale, and the compliance requirements applicable to them. Against this economic background, the national responses of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay can be compared in terms of the nature of the instruments introduced, the mechanisms of adaptation and the degree of their documented links with EU regulatory requirements, but not in terms of the intensity of regulatory influence.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical synthesis and comparative analysis show that the external regulatory influence of the European Green Deal on MERCOSUR countries should be understood not as the direct transposition of EU rules, but as the adaptation of domestic procedures to the conditions of access to the European market. At the same time, the

comparison of national approaches provides grounds for viewing such adaptation as differentiated. The differences identified may be interpreted as being associated with the characteristics of national institutions and the organisation of the respective export sectors. This agrees with the study by J. Grabs (2025), since that study found that adherence to the EUDR in global coffee supply chains is linked to the establishment of producer databases and traceability systems, and that the exact way in which compliance is organised depends on the way functions are distributed between public authorities and participants in the supply chain. A similar kind of dependence is seen in the results of this study: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay make use of different institutional mechanisms to ensure compliance with the EUDR requirements. The study by J. Solar *et al.* (2025) also found that the implementation of the EUDR in Peru's coffee and cocoa sectors is linked to geolocation, the assignment of regulatory responsibilities, compliance costs, and the coordination between public and private actors. This finding is in keeping with the relationship established in the current study between the requirements of the EU market and the development not only of technical traceability tools but also of the administrative and information mechanisms necessary to support them. At the same time, R. Muradian *et al.* (2025) pointed out the limitations of the EUDR's regulatory impact, stressing that ensuring compliance with its requirements along individual commodity chains is not in itself enough to get rid of the wider factors which cause deforestation. This therefore puts the results of the current study into perspective: the observed changes in traceability, certification and control can be seen as a response to the conditions for accessing the EU market, but this does not mean that such a response can be regarded as equivalent to a thorough transformation of a country's environmental policy. The present study goes beyond the results of these authors by means of a comparison across countries in South America, focusing on Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The situation thus makes it possible to demonstrate how the same external regulatory requirements take on different institutional forms and to identify the procedures that are directly connected with the EUDR from those relating to broader areas of national environmental and climate policy.

In this study, the external impact of the European Green Deal is seen as being mediated by the market, since the EU alters the conditions that govern access to its own market and the MERCOSUR countries develop their own domestic methods of adapting. The way in which the various forms of adaptation differ can be understood by referring to the export structure, the particular features of each sector and the national institutions. M.G. Bastos Lima & A. Schilling-Vacaflor (2024) investigated the extent of this influence and found that the distribution of supply chains among different markets may prevent European requirements from being applied beyond those exports aimed at the EU. This agrees with the results of the current study on the conditional, not automatic, character of EU regulatory influence. The reasoning behind this is developed in J. Harrison (2023) study, which examines various methods of incorporating sustainability requirements into the regulation of global value chains. His approach matches the understanding of trade-policy transformation used in the present study; that is, it involves changes in procedures, institutions and compliance mechanisms rather than just changes in tariff conditions. L. Eicke *et al.* (2021) added another level of differentiation by connecting the effects of CBAM on third countries to trade dependence, carbon intensity and adaptive capacity. The current study builds on these methods by comparing the cases of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, thereby allowing an examination of how the same external regulatory environment interacts with different kinds of domestic adaptation. It thus enables the interpretation of the catalytic effect of the European Green Deal as a change in the external incentives for adaptation rather than as the simple transposition of European rules.

The comparison of the national cases made it possible to distinguish the nature of the influence of the EUDR and CBAM on domestic regulatory changes. In the case of the EUDR, the link with specific compliance procedures is more direct, whereas the development of carbon-regulation instruments in itself does not provide sufficient grounds for establishing a causal link with CBAM. T. Beaufils *et al.* (2023), in analysing different CBAM design options, identified variation in its impact on EU trading partners depending on trade structure and the degree of exposure to the European market. This is consistent with the findings of the present study regarding the sectoral and country-level differentiation of regulatory influence, but does not provide grounds for extending this relationship into a causal explanation of specific national reforms. This line of analysis was further developed by Z.-Y. Chen *et al.* (2025), who modelled the effects of CBAM in China and identified a combination of effects on the risk of carbon leakage and the redistribution of part of the costs of decarbonisation. This is consistent with the distinction adopted in the present study between the external regulatory incentive and domestic decisions that may be shaped by several factors simultaneously. C. Böhringer *et al.* (2022) proposed a broader framework for interpreting these findings by systematising the potential effects of carbon border adjustment mechanisms in terms of carbon leakage risk, competitiveness, economic efficiency, fairness and international cooperation. Unlike model-based assessments of particular CBAM configurations, the authors also considered the practical and legal constraints of such mechanisms. Taken together, the studies of these authors support the cautious interpretation adopted in the present study: the existence of an economic or regulatory impact of CBAM does not in itself mean that a specific domestic reform was caused by CBAM. Unlike studies focusing primarily on the economic, sectoral and regulatory effects of CBAM, the present study explicitly distinguishes between the broader regulatory context of CBAM and cases

involving a direct documented link with specific national instruments in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. No such direct documented link with CBAM was established for broader national reforms in the field of carbon regulation, whereas it was documented in official sources for certain procedures adapting to the EUDR.

The comparison also makes it possible to distinguish practical adaptation to EU regulatory requirements from political attitudes towards them. In Argentina and Brazil, documentary evidence shows that the adaptation of procedures to EUDR requirements has coexisted with objections to particular aspects of the regulation, the costs of compliance, and the recognition of national control systems. This is consistent with the study by H.E. Nesadurai (2026), which examined Malaysia's and Indonesia's contestation of the EUDR as a dispute over regulatory authority and sovereignty. At the same time, the analysis shows that political contestation of the EUDR may coexist with the strengthening of national regulatory frameworks, which operate alongside EU requirements and may contribute to their implementation. In this respect, the findings of H.E. Nesadurai correspond to the distinction identified in the present study between practical adaptation to European requirements and political acceptance of them. Whereas H.E. Nesadurai focuses on contestation over regulatory authority, H. da Silva Hyldmo *et al.* (2024) broadened the discussion by analysing the external distributive effects of the European Green Deal. The authors identified a tension between the stated commitment to a just transition and the insufficient consideration in EU policy of the social and environmental consequences arising beyond the Union. This broadens the context of the distributive dimension of EU external regulation identified in the present study, but does not directly substantiate the findings concerning the costs of EUDR compliance in MERCOSUR countries. B. Lin & H. Zhao (2024) further specified the economic dimension of this issue. Their modelling showed that the effects of CBAM are distributed unevenly: for non-OECD countries, reductions in production volumes and increases in production costs are greater than for OECD countries. These results do not establish the causes of political contestation of European regulation, but they are consistent with the distributive aspect identified in the present study, relating to the costs of adapting to new trading conditions. In the context of EU-MERCOSUR relations, the present study complements the approaches discussed above by comparing regulatory adaptation and political contestation within a single analytical framework. This makes it possible to specify their relationship in the MERCOSUR countries and to distinguish between the practical implementation of procedures required to maintain access to the EU market and political attitudes towards the substance, costs and manner of application of the relevant regulatory requirements.

Comparing the national, interregional and multilateral levels leads to the conclusion that the transformation of EU-MERCOSUR relations should be seen not as a simple application of European rules, but as an interaction among various regulatory mechanisms. The EU's own autonomous instruments operate alongside its commitments in the area of sustainable development, and at the same time the application and effects of these commitments are included in the multilateral trade relations. One aspect of this change was examined by C. Bertram & H. Van Coppenolle (2024), who studied the way in which commitments to implement the Paris Agreement have been incorporated into EU preferential trade agreements. There is a step-by-step transition from collective declarations of intent to legally binding clauses in the more recent agreements. This aligns with the results of the current study showing that the climate commitments within the EU-MERCOSUR treaty framework are more specific, but it does not mean that all the mechanisms for ensuring their implementation have been uniformly strengthened. This point is made clearer by the research of D. van 't Wout (2022). When the trade and sustainable development chapters of the EU agreements with South Korea, Canada and Japan were compared, no improvement in the mechanisms for ensuring compliance with the respective commitments was found at the stage under review. The greater legal force of some of the climate provisions identified by the author cannot be regarded as automatically implying a strengthening of the procedures for their implementation. The fact that this distinction is in line with the results of the current study lies in the fact that the greater specificity of the environmental and climate provisions of the EU-MERCOSUR agreement is set apart from the question of the nature of the special mechanism for implementing them. M. Garcia (2025) study changed the focus of the debate from the formal structure of agreements to the practical way in which joint committees on trade and sustainable development function. The author pointed out the committees' informationsharing, cooperation and monitoring roles, the first two of which were more prominent, while implementation requirements were more often seen in cases where there was a clear asymmetry between the parties. Meanwhile, these committees can offer a means of interaction between the treaty mechanisms and the EU's independent trade and environmental measures. This is in line with the simultaneous operation of the EU-MERCOSUR treaty obligations and the autonomous EUDR and CBAM measures mentioned in the current study. This study adds to the approaches mentioned above by examining the interrelationship between these mechanisms in the case of EU-MERCOSUR relations at a number of levels – namely, through national adaptation, the development of treaty commitments, and engagement with EU autonomous regulation and the multilateral trade framework. It thus allows the catalytic effect of the European Green Deal to be described as a change in the regulatory environment and in the incentives for adaptation rather than as the simple application of European rules to the policies of the MERCOSUR countries. The conclusions therefore indicate that EU external regulatory influence on the MERCOSUR countries should be seen as being both

economically and sectorally differentiated, taking into account the significance of the European market, the range of products covered by the EUDR or CBAM, the adaptation costs and the availability of other markets.

CONCLUSIONS

The study suggests that the European Green Deal can be regarded as an external regulatory influence on trade policy by altering the conditions for access to the European market. Its catalytic role does not lie in introducing new reforms but rather in modifying the incentives and the direction in which institutions adapt. The impact is most clearly seen in the requirements concerning deforestation, which connect market access with traceability, geolocation, verification of origin and due diligence. The carbon border regulation, on the other hand, acts in a more selective and indirect way; it therefore cannot be assumed that general national carbon regulation mechanisms are the result of it without having direct documentary evidence. When Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay were compared, it was found that there is no single model of adaptation to European environmental requirements. In Argentina, the traceability and certification of agribusiness products are combined with the development of carbon markets. In Brazil, the integration of agricultural supply-chain data exists alongside more institutionalised carbon regulation and emissions trading. In Paraguay, the digitalisation of socio-environmental traceability is supported by legal regulations concerning carbon credits. In Uruguay, specialised procedures for the control of exported products function together with the carbon tax, which was introduced earlier on. The fact that these arrangements differ proves that external requirements do not lead to the standardisation of national systems but rather interact with the existing institutional and climate policy paths. The fact that adjustment to European rules can go hand in hand with political debate regarding their costs, the way they are applied and the recognition of national control systems – as has been the case in Argentina and Brazil – means that regulatory interaction has a distributive aspect, since some of the administrative and financial costs involved in showing compliance are shouldered by producers and public institutions outside the EU.

Practical adaptation to market requirements is not equivalent to political support for the regulation concerned, and some of the resulting tensions are transferred to the multilateral level of international trade. The process of negotiating between different regions supports national adaptation by providing a form of cooperation in which issues such as market access, sustainable development, regulatory autonomy and geopolitical interests are all addressed. After 2019, the development of the treaty framework mainly involved specifying the existing commitments relating to climate and the environment, especially those regarding deforestation and the position of the Paris Agreement, not introducing these commitments for the first time. The parallel existence of treaty commitments, autonomous European market rules and multilateral trade law forms a multi-layered trade-law architecture, while the identified differences in regulatory influence can be interpreted in light of the sectoral coverage of the EUDR and CBAM, the role of the European market and the availability of alternative trade destinations. Overall, the catalytic influence of the European Green Deal is most clearly documented in traceability, certification and control procedures related to EUDR compliance. Broader national carbon-regulation mechanisms constitute a parallel regulatory context; however, no direct documented link between their introduction and CBAM was established within the study. Future research should focus on assessing the persistence of the identified adaptation models after the new environmental and carbon requirements have become fully applicable, and on determining their impact on the further transformation of trade policy in MERCOSUR countries.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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