

Nuclear Powers' Client States: Global Dependency Networks in 2025

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary dependency networks maintained by the nine nuclear-armed states as of 2025. The research reveals substantial variation in how nuclear powers project influence, ranging from the United States' globe-spanning military and economic architecture to North Korea's complete absence of client relationships. The study employs a broad definition of dependency encompassing formal territorial control, military protectorates, economic leverage through aid and debt, and political subordination. Findings demonstrate that nuclear weapons capability correlates with but does not determine international influence networks. The established colonial powers - United States, United Kingdom, and France - maintain territorial remnants from imperial eras while facing gradual dissolution through decolonization pressure. China has developed economic dependencies through Belt and Road Initiative lending across 150 countries without extensive territorial control. Regional powers India and Pakistan demonstrate limited spheres confined to immediate neighbors, while Israel maintains minimal client networks despite advanced nuclear capabilities. The research concludes that contemporary vassal relationships emerge primarily through economic mechanisms rather than territorial conquest, with formal dependencies declining as nationalism strengthens and alternative powers offer competitive economic options.

The paper ends with "The End"

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1 Introduction

The relationship between nuclear weapons possession and international influence networks represents a fundamental question in contemporary geopolitics. Nine states currently maintain confirmed nuclear arsenals: the United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. These nations demonstrate vastly different capacities for establishing and maintaining client state relationships, raising questions about whether nuclear capability translates directly into spheres of influence or whether other factors - economic strength, military reach, historical relationships, and institutional frameworks - prove more determinant.

This study examines current dependency relationships employing a comprehensive definition of client states that includes formal dependencies and protectorates, countries with significant political subordination, states dependent on military protection, and nations facing substantial economic leverage through aid, debt, or trade asymmetries. The analysis encompasses both voluntary arrangements such as defense treaties and coercive relationships including military occupation. Data collection occurred between January and October 2025, drawing from official government sources, international organization databases, academic research, and credible journalism.

The contemporary landscape reveals patterns substantially different from Cold War bipolarity. While the United States maintains the most extensive dependency network with formal sovereignty over seventeen territories and military presence across forty-nine countries, its relative influence faces challenge from Chinese economic power and questions about alliance reliability under transactional leadership. Russia's sphere has contracted dramatically following its Ukraine invasion, with client states in Africa and even traditional allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization reassessing their relationships. France experienced perhaps the most dramatic collapse, withdrawing from ten African countries between 2022 and 2025 as nationalist movements expelled French forces. China's Belt and Road Initiative created economic dependencies across 150 nations through infrastructure lending, demonstrating that contemporary influence increasingly flows through financial rather than military channels.

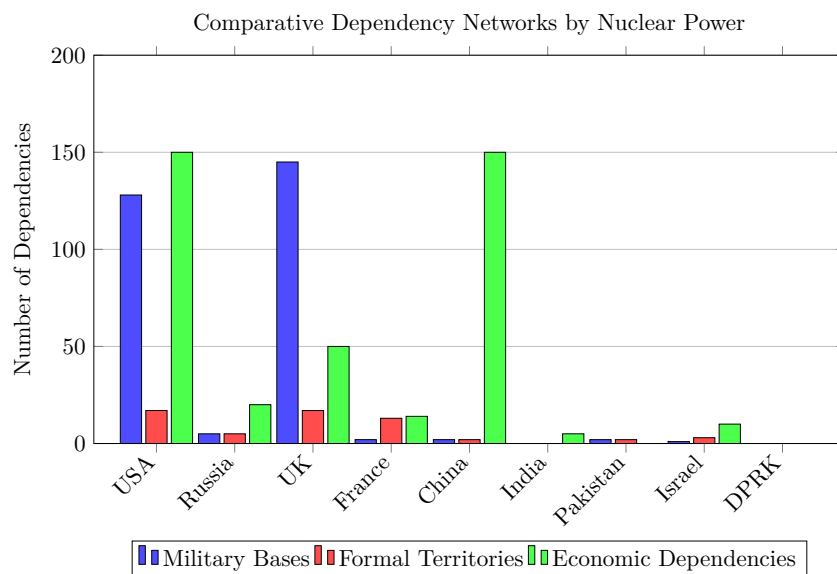


Figure 1: Quantitative comparison of dependency types across nuclear powers.

Military bases include permanent installations abroad. Formal territories encompass constitutional dependencies. Economic dependencies represent countries receiving substantial aid or facing significant debt obligations.

2 The United States: Global Hegemonic Architecture

The United States operates the world's most comprehensive dependency system through overlapping military, economic, and political mechanisms spanning every inhabited continent. This architecture rests on three foundations: formal territorial control over seventeen dependencies, military basing agreements across forty-nine countries hosting over 190,000 troops, and economic leverage through \$58 billion in annual foreign assistance creating strategic dependencies. [19]

2.1 Formal Territorial Dependencies

American constitutional territories divide into two categories with distinct legal frameworks. Five inhabited territories - Puerto Rico, Guam, United States Virgin Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa - maintain populations totaling 3.2 million residents who hold United States citizenship but cannot vote in presidential elections despite full taxation obligations. These territories possess elected local governments but remain subject to congressional plenary power under the Territorial Clause, with federal courts maintaining ultimate jurisdiction. Puerto Rico represents the largest territory with 3.2 million residents, possessing commonwealth status since 1952 yet facing ongoing fiscal crisis and receiving \$90 billion in federal transfers annually. [18]

Three Freely Associated States - Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau - represent semi-sovereign entities maintaining compacts that delegate defense and foreign policy authority to Washington in exchange for \$5.7 billion over twenty years. These arrangements grant citizens visa-free residence and work authorization throughout the United States while permitting military service in American armed forces. Economic dependence reaches extreme levels, with United States grants constituting 48 percent of government revenue in Micronesia. The strategic value centers on denial of territory to potential adversaries, particularly China, with Pacific islands providing crucial military access including Kwajalein Missile Range facilities essential to ballistic missile defense testing. [103]

2.2 Military Dependencies and Alliance Networks

American military presence spans 128 major bases across forty-nine countries, creating dependencies through extended deterrence guarantees and force protection. Japan hosts 53,000 American troops across fourteen installations under the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, making it the most militarized bilateral alliance. The mutual defense commitment guarantees that an armed attack against either nation "would be dangerous to its own peace and safety" and requires action "to meet the common danger." Extended nuclear deterrence - the American nuclear umbrella - provides Japan security against North Korean and Chinese threats while precluding independent nuclear weapons development. Survey data from 2025 indicates that 52.2 percent of South Koreans believe the United States would employ nuclear weapons if North Korea attacks, demonstrating credibility despite recent questions about alliance reliability. [79] [67]

South Korea maintains similar dependence through the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, with Camp Humphreys serving as the largest overseas American military installation globally. The presence of 28,500 United States troops provides tripwire deterrence against North Korean aggression while integrating Korean and American forces under combined command structures. The nuclear umbrella remains explicit, with 2025 bilateral declarations reaffirming extended deterrence commitments. Economic integration through free trade agreements and technology transfers creates additional leverage, though Seoul pursues increasingly independent foreign policy toward China and North Korea. [101]

Middle Eastern deployments concentrate 40,000 to 50,000 personnel across multiple countries, with Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar serving as Central Command forward headquarters and Bahrain hosting the Fifth Fleet. These installations enable power projection throughout the region while creating dependencies where host nations rely on American security guarantees against Iranian threats. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates receive advanced weapons systems and intelligence cooperation contingent on continued basing access. The Abraham Accords signed in 2020 expanded American influence to include normalized relations between Israel and Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and nominally Sudan, though Gaza conflict strains tested these arrangements in 2024-2025. [6]

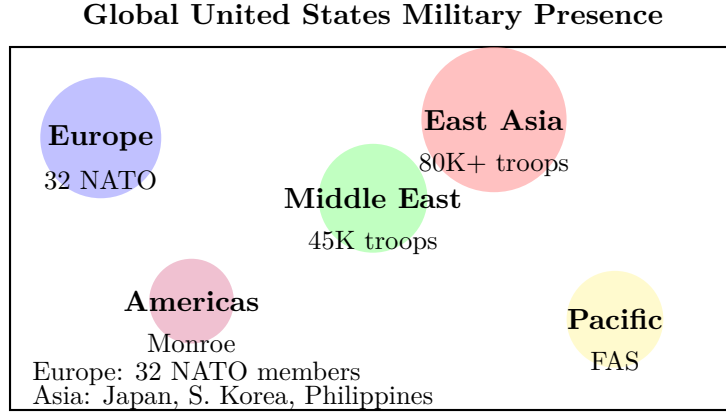


Figure 2: Schematic representation of United States global military presence.

Shows regional concentration of forces and alliance structures. Circle size indicates relative troop deployment and strategic significance.

2.3 Economic Client States Through Aid Dependencies

American foreign assistance creates dependencies where recipient governments require continued transfers for budget stability and political survival. Ukraine became the top recipient in 2022-2025 with \$66.9 billion in military aid following Russian invasion, plus \$20 billion in loans from frozen Russian assets. The Trump administration's January 2025 freeze followed by conditional release demonstrated the leverage such dependence creates, with Ukrainian defense industrial capacity and military operations directly contingent on American support flows. [68]

Israel represents the most enduring economic client, receiving \$3.3 billion annually under memoranda running through 2028. Since 1948, total American assistance to Israel has reached \$310 billion - 99.7 percent military aid - with additional \$12.5 billion provided since October 7, 2023 conflict initiation. This aid constitutes approximately 15 percent of Israel's defense budget, providing advanced weapons systems including F-35 aircraft, precision-guided munitions, and Iron Dome interceptors. The relationship transcends normal client dynamics given shared strategic interests and domestic political factors, yet the economic dependence remains substantial. [17]

Egypt receives \$1.4 billion annually under arrangements dating to the 1979 Camp David Accords, purchasing strategic control of the Suez Canal and maintaining peace with Israel. Jordan's \$1.72 billion yearly assistance serves buffer state functions, absorbing Palestinian refugees and providing intelligence cooperation. The economic leverage proves explicit, with 2025 Trump administration threats to reduce aid producing immediate policy adjustments from both Cairo and Amman. [1]

Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria each receive \$900 million to \$1.2 billion in combined military and economic aid, creating dependencies that shape foreign policy alignment despite limited American strategic interests. The aid flows particularly concentrate in fragile states where governance depends substantially on external financing. [77] [24]

2.4 Hemispheric Control Under Monroe Doctrine

Latin America represents America's oldest sphere of influence, with the Monroe Doctrine declared in 1823 warning European powers against Western Hemisphere intervention. The Trump administration explicitly revived Monroe Doctrine language in 2025, asserting special American interests across thirty-three regional countries. Economic integration through trade dependencies and remittance flows creates leverage particularly over Central American nations and Caribbean islands. Colombia maintains closest South American military partnership with Plan Colombia successor programs continuing counternarcotics cooperation. Venezuela's adversarial stance demonstrates limits to American control even within its historical sphere, though economic sanctions create substantial pressure. [13] [31]

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments across Latin America created the first serious challenge to American hemispheric dominance since the Cold War. Multiple countries joined Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and BRICS+ as alternatives to United States-dominated

institutions. The Panama Canal Zone’s 1999 return to Panama preceded Chinese shipping company acquisition of port facilities on both canal entrances, demonstrating commercial penetration of strategic infrastructure. Nicaragua maintains close relations with both China and Russia, hosting potential canal construction plans and providing diplomatic recognition to Beijing over Taipei. [37]

The 2025 landscape shows American influence simultaneously reinforcing and weakening across different regions. Japan and Philippines deepen military integration with increased United States force presence and expanded basing access. Poland hosts enhanced forward NATO presence with permanent American brigade combat team deployment. India’s Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partnership strengthens against Chinese expansion. Yet Trump administration foreign aid freeze, transactional alliance approach demanding burden-sharing increases, and questions about extended deterrence reliability create unprecedented uncertainty. Latin American drift toward multipolarity, African preference for Chinese infrastructure financing, and even traditional allies like Turkey asserting independence suggest American client networks face structural challenges despite overwhelming military superiority. [79] [48] [20]

3 Russia: Post-Soviet Sphere Collapse

Russia maintains complete control over five territories through military occupation and economic dependency, representing the contracted core of Soviet-era influence networks. The dramatic reduction from Cold War client states spanning four continents to this minimal sphere reflects economic weakness, military limitations exposed by Ukraine invasion, and unreliability demonstrated through failure to defend allies. The 2022-2025 period witnessed perhaps the most rapid client state network collapse experienced by any nuclear power since decolonization. [98]

3.1 Occupied Ukrainian Territories

Approximately twenty percent of Ukraine - including Crimea, most of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and portions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson - remains under illegal Russian military occupation following September 2022 annexation referendums rejected by the United Nations General Assembly. The occupied territories face systematic Russification including forced passportization where residents must accept Russian citizenship or face discrimination and expulsion. Suppression of Ukrainian language in education, arbitrary detention of civic activists, and documented torture create conditions international monitors characterize as ethnic cleansing. Russian military administration replaced elected Ukrainian governance with appointed officials, while ruble imposition eliminated hryvnia currency. Population transfers including forced deportation of children to Russia and settlement of Russian citizens into occupied zones violate Geneva Conventions. [39]

The occupied territories function as complete Russian vassals with no autonomy, sustained purely through military force against fierce Ukrainian resistance. The February 2025 battlefield situation remained stalemated along 600-mile front lines, with Ukraine controlling approximately eighty percent of pre-invasion territory but unable to liberate occupied zones without substantially increased Western military support. Russian military losses exceeded 700,000 casualties by October 2025 according to Ukrainian General Staff estimates, demonstrating the costs of maintaining territorial control against hostile populations. [98]

3.2 Caucasus Dependencies: Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Abkhazia and South Ossetia emerged from 1990s conflicts as breakaway regions of Georgia, gaining Russian recognition following the 2008 war when Russia invaded Georgia proper. Only four states recognize these territories’ independence: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru, with Syria’s recognition withdrawn after Assad regime collapse in December 2024. The regions depend entirely on Russian military protection through 5,000-troop garrisons and budget support covering fifty percent of state spending. Moscow maintains control through integration treaties signed in 2014-2015 that establish joint defense, coordination of foreign policy, and gradual economic integration approaching annexation. [87]

Abkhazia's 245,000 population demonstrates demographics altered through ethnic cleansing, with 250,000 ethnic Georgians expelled during 1990s conflicts. The territory possesses Black Sea coastline and formerly prosperous tourism industry now economically devastated. South Ossetia's 53,000 residents occupy strategic Roki Tunnel providing Russian military access into Georgia proper. Both territories face international isolation with no United Nations membership, extremely limited diplomatic relations, and economic embargo creating total Russian dependence. The relationship represents classical vassalage where nominal sovereignty masks complete subordination to Moscow's strategic interests. [65]

3.3 Transnistria and Moldova

Transnistria maintains Russian military garrison of 1,500 troops sustaining a frozen conflict since 1992 that prevents Moldova's westward integration. The unrecognized republic depends on Russian subsidies and preferences for economic survival, particularly energy imports. January 2025 termination of Russian gas transit through Ukraine prompted acute energy crisis, with Transnistrian authorities calling for Russian "protection" and potential annexation. Moldova's pro-European government led by President Maia Sandu pursues reintegration of Transnistria through peaceful means while facing Russian pressure including election interference and energy cutoffs. [36]

3.4 Collective Security Treaty Organization

The Collective Security Treaty Organization theoretically binds six post-Soviet states - Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - in mutual defense through Article IV collective security provisions. Security analysts characterize CSTO as a "zombie" alliance and "lifeless, shambling" organization due to inability to respond to member state security crises and unwillingness to support Russian aggression. The organization failed to defend Armenia against Azerbaijani attacks in 2020 and 2023 that resulted in loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and ethnic cleansing of 100,000 Armenians. Kazakhstan refused Russian requests for military assistance and declined to recognize Russian-annexed Ukrainian territories. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan border conflicts proceeded without CSTO intervention. [41] [12]

Armenia suspended CSTO participation in June 2025 and appears certain to withdraw formally, representing catastrophic failure of Russia's primary multilateral security framework. The suspension followed years of Russian abandonment, with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stating that "the CSTO did nothing" when Armenia needed support. Yerevan now pursues security partnerships with India, France, and the United States while reducing dependence on Russian weapons supplies. The collapse sends unmistakable signals to remaining CSTO members that Russian security guarantees lack value, accelerating their strategic hedging and diversification. [87]

3.5 Belarus: The Sole Reliable Client

Belarus represents Russia's only genuinely reliable vassal among former Soviet republics due to President Alexander Lukashenko's complete dependence on Russian support following 2020 protest suppression. December 2024 mutual security guarantees ratified in early 2025 establish that any attack on Belarus constitutes an attack on Russia, formalizing integration deeper than NATO Article V commitments. The Union State framework established in 1999 calls for near-complete integration of military structures, economic coordination, and eventual political union, though implementation remains partial. [102]

Russian military forces operate from Belarusian territory including staging grounds used during Ukraine invasion. The Belarusian defense industry produces vehicles and electronics for Russian military use, while Minsk provides diplomatic support in international forums. Economic integration includes common customs space, free movement, and substantial Russian subsidies. Lukashenko's regime survives only through Russian backing, making Belarus perhaps the most complete modern vassal state where nominal sovereignty masks actual Russian control over security, economic, and political policy. The relationship demonstrates that successful client state maintenance requires mutual dependence: Belarus needs Russia for regime survival while Russia needs Belarus for strategic depth against NATO. [102]

3.6 Collapse in Africa and Middle East

Russian presence in Africa collapsed between 2022 and 2025 following French military withdrawal that Russia initially appeared positioned to exploit. Wagner Group mercenaries operating in Central African Republic and Mali transitioned to Africa Corps following Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in August 2023, with reduced effectiveness demonstrated by July 2024 ambush killing eighty-four fighters in single engagement. Russia withdrew forces completely from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad as military juntas that initially welcomed Russian support found it inadequate. Only Sudan maintains naval base agreement at Port Sudan on paper, though civil war makes implementation impossible. [63] [66] [49]

Syria represented Russia's only military presence outside former Soviet space through Khmeimim Air Base and Tartus Naval Facility providing Mediterranean access. Assad regime collapse in December 2024 left these bases' future uncertain as Russia negotiates with new Syrian authorities. The fall eliminated Russia's most reliable Middle Eastern ally and demonstrated inability to sustain client states under pressure. Russia maintains diplomatic silence on Assad's fall, suggesting recognition that the relationship cannot be salvaged. [5] [60] [74]

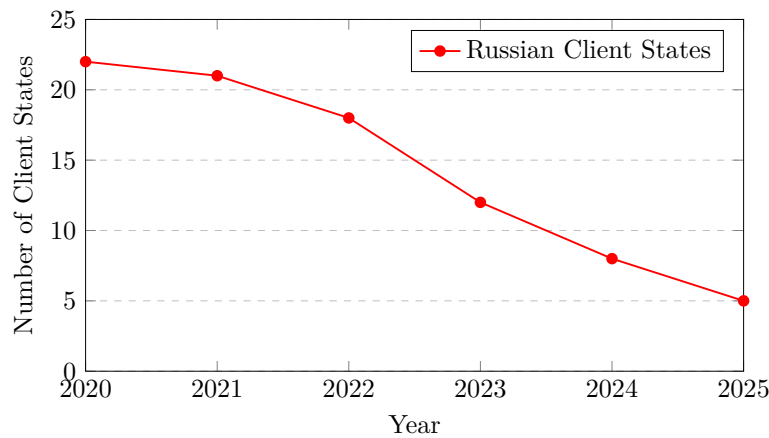


Figure 3: Decline in Russian client state relationships 2020-2025.

The trajectory shows accelerating collapse following Ukraine invasion (2022) and culminating in Armenian CSTO suspension and African withdrawals (2024-2025).

3.7 Energy Leverage as Remaining Influence

Energy dependence creates Russia's most significant remaining leverage outside military occupation. Hungary imported more Russian fossil fuels than any other European nation in July 2025, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán serving as Moscow's strongest European Union advocate despite sanctions. Slovakia follows as second-largest importer after Robert Fico's pro-Russian government took power. The broader European Union imported 21.9 billion in Russian fossil fuels during 2024 - exceeding the 18.7 billion European Union aid to Ukraine - though this represents decline from forty-five percent to fourteen percent of total gas consumption since 2021. Russian liquefied natural gas imports actually increased to record 16.5 million metric tons in 2024 as pipeline gas decreased. [32]

China and India now serve as Russia's largest fossil fuel buyers at \$78 billion and \$49 billion respectively, providing economic lifeline despite Western sanctions. The purchases occur at substantial discounts creating Russian dependence on Asian markets rather than Asian dependence on Russian supplies. This inverts traditional client state dynamics where Russia increasingly functions as resource appendage to Chinese and Indian economies rather than maintaining leverage over them. [32]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine fundamentally undermined its client state system by diverting resources, exposing military limitations, and destroying credibility. The abandonment of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, failure to prevent Assad's fall, and withdrawal from Africa demonstrate that Russian security guarantees have become worthless. Belarus remains loyal only because Lukashenko has no alternative. The shift from net lender to net debt collector with negative \$34 billion flow in 2024 means Russia now extracts resources from supposed clients rather than supporting them, accelerating dissolution of its influence sphere. [52]

4 France: Françafrique's Terminal Collapse

France experienced perhaps the most dramatic client state network collapse of any nuclear power between 2022 and 2025, withdrawing military forces from ten African countries and losing political influence accumulated over sixty years of post-colonial relationships. The CFA franc monetary system affecting 210 million people across fourteen nations remains the primary French control mechanism, though its legitimacy rapidly erodes as African nations pursue monetary sovereignty. [96] [26]

4.1 Military Withdrawal from Africa

French military presence in Africa contracted from permanent bases in ten countries to only two - Djibouti and Gabon - between 2022 and 2025. Senegal expelled French forces with final withdrawal completed July 2025, ending sixty-five year military presence. Chad terminated defense cooperation in November 2024, ordering immediate departure of French forces. Ivory Coast demanded withdrawal by January 2025. Niger expelled forces in 2023 following military coup. Mali ordered departure in 2022 after junta took power. Burkina Faso similarly ejected French troops following 2022 coup. [4] [38] [35]

The pattern reveals coordinated rejection of French military presence by Francophone African states pursuing sovereignty and diversifying security partnerships toward Russia, China, Turkey, and pan-African solutions. Anti-French sentiment intensified following perceived failures to address jihadist violence in Sahel despite decade-long Operation Barkhane deployment. Military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed Alliance of Sahel States explicitly excluding France while inviting Russian Wagner Group forces. Public opinion surveys showed overwhelming majorities supporting French military departure, viewing continued presence as neo-colonial. [71] [30]

Djibouti maintains 1,500 French troops at bases shared with American, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish forces, reflecting the country's strategy of hosting multiple powers to maximize aid and sovereignty protection. The small nation of one million population hosts over 10,000 foreign troops generating substantial revenue. Gabon's continued acceptance of French presence following democratic transition remains uncertain, with opposition politicians calling for withdrawal. France now operates in Africa primarily through temporary deployments and security cooperation rather than permanent bases, marking definitive end to Françafrique military architecture. [91]

4.2 CFA Franc Monetary Control

The CFA franc system remains France's primary post-colonial control mechanism affecting fourteen African nations with combined 210 million population. Two separate CFA franc currencies operate in eight West African Economic and Monetary Union nations (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo) using XOF and six Central African Economic and Monetary Community states (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo) using XAF. Both currencies peg to the euro at fixed rate with French Treasury guarantees ensuring convertibility. [85] [28]

West African nations implemented 2019 reforms ending requirement to deposit fifty percent of reserves with French Treasury, with France withdrawing from governance bodies of West African Central Bank while maintaining convertibility guarantees. The planned "Eco" currency to replace CFA has been repeatedly delayed from 2003 target, most recently postponed to 2027 due to macroeconomic convergence criteria failures. Central African nations still must deposit fifty percent of reserves with France's Treasury, maintaining direct French monetary control through Bank of Central African States where France holds minority representation in governance. [8] [47]

Growing rejection of CFA system spans political spectrum in Francophone Africa. Senegalese Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko stated in May 2025 that the CFA franc poses a "symbolic and economic problem" requiring resolution. November 2024 surveys showed ninety-five percent of West Africans want to leave the CFA franc zone entirely. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's Alliance of Sahel States actively considers exit, with monetary sovereignty viewed as prerequisite for complete independence. Critics argue that CFA franc overvaluation damages export competitiveness, reserve requirements in Paris drain capital needed for development, and French influence over monetary policy prevents independent economic management. [7] [58]

4.3 Overseas Territories

France maintains direct sovereignty over thirteen overseas territories with 2.7 million residents possessing full French citizenship and European Union membership. Five overseas departments (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, Réunion, Mayotte) integrate fully into French state with same status as metropolitan departments. Four overseas collectivities (French Polynesia, Saint Barthélemy, Saint Martin, Wallis and Futuna) possess greater autonomy with local legislative powers. New Caledonia maintains unique status under Nouméa Accord with referendums on independence occurring in 2018, 2020, and 2021 - all rejecting independence though with increasing pro-independence votes. French Southern and Antarctic Lands possess no permanent population. [96]

These territories provide France with world's second-largest exclusive economic zone covering 11.7 million square kilometers and strategic military positions across Indian Ocean, Pacific, Caribbean, and Atlantic. Military installations in overseas territories enable power projection and surveillance capabilities globally. The populations demonstrate mixed sentiments, with independence movements strongest in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Martinique, while smaller islands prefer continued French sovereignty providing economic support and European Union membership benefits. [96]

The contrast between France's maintained overseas territorial control and collapsed African client networks reveals different dynamics: formal constitutional integration with citizen rights proves more durable than neo-colonial military arrangements without sovereignty transfer. Yet even overseas territories face independence pressures, particularly New Caledonia where Kanak indigenous population seeks decolonization despite referendum defeats. [96]

5 United Kingdom: Post-Imperial Dependencies

The United Kingdom maintains constitutional relationships with more territories than any nuclear power except the United States, representing British Empire remnants gradually dissolving through decolonization and nationalist pressure. Fourteen British Overseas Territories, three Crown Dependencies, and fifteen Commonwealth realms demonstrate varying dependency relationships, with only territories constituting formal British control while realms maintain purely symbolic voluntary connections. [99]

5.1 British Overseas Territories

Fourteen British Overseas Territories span from Caribbean (Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, Turks and Caicos) to South Atlantic (Falklands, South Georgia, Saint Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha) to Mediterranean (Gibraltar) to Indian Ocean (British Indian Ocean Territory with Diego Garcia) to Pacific (Pitcairn) to Antarctic (British Antarctic Territory). King Charles III serves as head of state for all territories represented by appointed governors, with United Kingdom maintaining ultimate authority over defense, foreign relations, and internal security. Total population across inhabited territories reaches approximately 350,000. [62]

Three Crown Dependencies (Jersey, Guernsey, Isle of Man) function differently as self-governing possessions of the Crown rather than United Kingdom territory proper, with combined population of 254,000 and per capita GDP exceeding \$80,000. These Channel Islands and Irish Sea territories maintain independent tax systems functioning as offshore financial centers, along with legislative assemblies and judicial systems, but depend on United Kingdom for defense and international relations representation. [62]

Six major financial centers - Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, Gibraltar, Jersey, Guernsey - generate significant economic activity as tax havens while facing United Kingdom pressure to implement beneficial ownership transparency. The territories provide United Kingdom with strategic positioning including Gibraltar controlling Mediterranean access, Falklands asserting South Atlantic presence, and Diego Garcia hosting American military base crucial to Indian Ocean operations. British Antarctic Territory claims face international non-recognition under Antarctic Treaty System but provide territorial assertion. [62] [50]

5.2 Commonwealth Realms

Fifteen Commonwealth realms including fourteen beyond the United Kingdom recognize King Charles III as head of state while maintaining complete independence. Canada with 39 million population, Australia with 26 million, and New Zealand with 5 million represent major economies where no United Kingdom authority over their affairs exists whatsoever. The relationship remains purely symbolic and voluntary, with governor-generals representing the Crown but appointed on advice of local prime ministers without United Kingdom input. [99]

Several realms announced intentions to transition to republics. Jamaica, Bahamas, and Antigua and Barbuda stated plans to hold republican referendums. Barbados completed transition in November 2021, removing Queen Elizabeth II as head of state and reducing realms from sixteen to fifteen. Papua New Guinea celebrated fifty years of independence in 2025 with discussions about constitutional review potentially including republican status. Saint Kitts and Nevis considers similar changes. Canada updated King's title in January 2025 to remove references to "United Kingdom" and "Defender of the Faith," emphasizing separate Canadian identity of monarchy. [99]

The Commonwealth realms demonstrate that symbolic constitutional connections without sovereignty transfer or economic dependence do not constitute client state relationships. These nations maintain independent foreign policies, including Canada's leadership in anti-landmine campaigns conflicting with United Kingdom positions, Australia's AUKUS nuclear submarine program, and New Zealand's nuclear-free policy. The voluntary nature and easy exit process make realm status fundamentally different from territorial dependencies or economic client relationships. [50]

5.3 Global Military Presence

Britain's military footprint extends to 145 sites across forty-two countries, second only to America globally. Cyprus hosts seventeen facilities with 2,290 personnel across Sovereign Base Areas including Royal Air Force Akrotiri and Government Communications Headquarters signals intelligence stations. Gibraltar maintains four sites with 670 troops guarding Mediterranean access. Falklands stations six facilities including Royal Air Force Mount Pleasant following 1982 war, with permanent garrison maintaining sovereignty against Argentine claims. Oman hosts sixteen United Kingdom locations including joint support facility at Duqm opened 2018 supporting aircraft carriers, with €23.8 million expansion announced 2024. [100] [25]

Brunei stations Royal Gurkha Regiment providing premier jungle warfare training. Bahrain's United Kingdom Naval Support Facility opened 2018 as Britain's main Persian Gulf naval base. Kenya, Germany, Belize, and Canada host significant training detachments. The network enables global reach projection despite force reductions, with forward presence in Middle East, Asia-Pacific, and Euro-Atlantic theaters. AUKUS treaty with Australia and United States signed July 2025 represents Britain's most significant recent military commitment, providing nuclear submarine technology through fifty-year arrangement supporting over 21,000 United Kingdom jobs with up to €20 billion exports. [44]

The Five Power Defence Arrangements established 1971 bind United Kingdom with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore in consultative defense requiring "immediate" consultation if Malaysia or Singapore face attack. Regular joint exercises and United Kingdom personnel stationed at Integrated Air Defence System Headquarters in Malaysia maintain this Cold War-era commitment. Britain's Extended Tether concept announced under Labour government aims to maintain global military reach through strategic partnerships and forward deployments, though defence review outcomes remain pending as of October 2025. [90]

5.4 Special Relationships and Strategic Partnerships

The United States-United Kingdom Mutual Defence Agreement extended indefinitely in November 2024 remains America's most comprehensive nuclear cooperation, essential to Britain's Trident deterrent using American technology. The arrangement permits exchange of classified information on nuclear weapons design, testing, and development, making British nuclear forces technically dependent on American support despite operational independence. Neither country functions as client to the other

given mutual benefits, but the arrangement demonstrates how even nuclear powers face dependencies in specific technological domains. [69] [61]

Declining United Kingdom influence appears in relative rather than absolute terms. While Britain maintains more overseas territories and global bases than most nations, its capacity declines compared to Cold War capabilities when "East of Suez" presence spanned extensive Asian holdings. Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China marked major territorial loss, while ongoing negotiations for Chagos Islands transfer to Mauritius (maintaining Diego Garcia lease) continue decolonization trajectory. The May 2025 treaty agreement awaits ratification with concerns about Chinese influence in Mauritius creating security implications for Diego Garcia facilities. [50]

6 China: Belt and Road Economic Dependencies

China operates through economic leverage rather than territorial control, creating dependencies fundamentally different from Western nuclear powers' colonial legacies. The Belt and Road Initiative enrolled 150 countries representing seventy-five percent of global population in China's economic orbit through infrastructure lending totaling \$1.308 trillion since 2013. This approach builds influence without territorial annexation or extensive military presence, demonstrating contemporary power projection methods emphasizing financial rather than military instruments. [84] [45]

6.1 Minimal Territorial Control

China's direct sovereignty encompasses only two Special Administrative Regions. Hong Kong and Macau maintain "One Country, Two Systems" frameworks until 2047 and 2049 respectively, granting limited autonomy that Beijing increasingly curtails through national security legislation imposed June 2020. Hong Kong's freedoms contracted substantially following pro-democracy protests and COVID-19 pandemic, with electoral reforms ensuring only "patriots" can hold office and arrest of opposition figures under national security law. Macau's casino economy provides revenue but limited strategic significance beyond economic ties. [96]

Taiwan remains claimed but not controlled, representing China's most significant territorial objective despite functioning as de facto independent state with own government, military, currency, and diplomatic relations with thirteen nations. Beijing maintains One China Policy requiring diplomatic partners to acknowledge its Taiwan claims while declining to recognize Republic of China government. The Taiwan situation creates ongoing military tensions with potential for armed conflict, but Taiwan's actual independence means it cannot be classified as Chinese vassal despite Beijing's sovereignty claims. [96]

China's absence of colonial legacy means it builds influence through economic integration rather than inherited dependencies, fundamentally differentiating its approach from United States, United Kingdom, and France. Where Western powers maintain territories acquired through imperial conquest, China develops relationships through contemporary economic arrangements, avoiding historical colonial baggage while creating new forms of dependency through debt and infrastructure control. [96]

6.2 Belt and Road Initiative Scope

The Belt and Road Initiative reached 150 countries by 2025 across every inhabited continent. Cumulative investment achieved \$1.308 trillion since 2013, with record \$124 billion in first half of 2025 including \$66.2 billion in construction and \$57.1 billion in direct investment. Middle East topped 2024-2025 engagement at \$39 billion as China deepens Persian Gulf presence. Africa participates through fifty-three countries, Europe through twenty-nine nations including seventeen European Union members, Latin America via twenty-two states, and Pacific through twelve island nations. Italy's December 2023 exit and Panama's February 2025 withdrawal represent rare departures, but network continues expanding with Colombia joining May 2025. [46] [45]

Projects span transportation infrastructure including railways, highways, ports, and airports; energy facilities encompassing power plants and transmission lines; telecommunications networks with fiber optic cables and 5G systems; and industrial parks promoting manufacturing investment. The scope

creates comprehensive economic integration where participant nations depend on Chinese financing, technology, and expertise for development projects central to economic growth strategies. Critics characterize arrangement as debt trap diplomacy creating dependencies through unsustainable lending, while supporters argue it provides essential infrastructure financing unavailable from Western sources on comparable terms. [84]

Belt and Road Initiative Investment Distribution 2024-2025

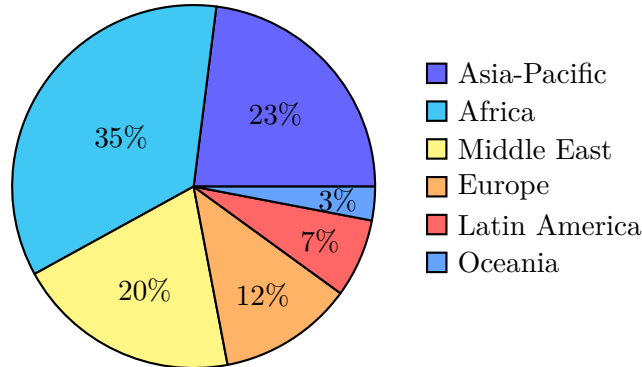


Figure 4: Regional distribution of Belt and Road Initiative investments.

Shows concentration in Asia-Pacific and Africa with growing Middle Eastern engagement. Percentages represent share of total BRI funding.

6.3 Military Basing Remains Minimal

Chinese military presence abroad remains minimal despite economic reach. Djibouti hosts China's first acknowledged overseas base since 2017 with 1,000 to 2,000 People's Liberation Army personnel stationed three miles from American Camp Lemonnier. The facility cost \$590 million and features 400-meter runway plus 1,120-foot pier capable of accommodating aircraft carriers. Its location provides access to Red Sea shipping lanes and supports anti-piracy operations while enabling power projection into Middle East and Africa. [89] [9]

Cambodia's Ream Naval Base became operational in 2024 as China's second overseas facility, with Chinese warships docked continuously since July 2024 despite Cambodian denials of exclusive access. Pentagon 2024 assessments identify eighteen countries where China may establish bases within two to five years, including Pakistan's Gwadar Port, Sri Lanka's Hambantota, Myanmar ports, and potential facilities in Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania, Seychelles, Kenya, Mozambique, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. The focus centers on securing Sea Lines of Communication across Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean against potential American interdiction during crisis. [9]

The contrast between two confirmed military bases and 150 Belt and Road countries demonstrates China's strategic choice to emphasize economic over military instruments. Where United States maintains 128 overseas bases ensuring global military reach, China achieves influence through infrastructure financing creating economic dependencies. This approach avoids nationalist resistance triggered by foreign military presence while building comprehensive economic integration making recipient countries dependent on Chinese capital, technology, and market access. [9]

6.4 Debt Dependencies

Chinese lending creates controversial dependencies where recipient nations face substantial obligations. Pakistan owes between \$22.6 billion and \$68.91 billion to China depending on accounting methods - approximately twenty-two percent of total external debt - through the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor flagship project. Gwadar Port operates under lease running until 2059, over 30,000 Chinese nationals work on CPEC projects, and Chinese security personnel deployed in 2024 to protect infrastructure following attacks. Pakistan's economy cannot function without Chinese support following

International Monetary Fund bailouts and Saudi Arabian assistance, making it dependent despite technically remaining sovereign. [72] [86]

Cambodia receives thirty-five percent of all foreign direct investment from China with ninety percent of garment factories accounting for forty percent of GDP owned by Chinese companies. Prime Minister Hun Sen called Cambodia China's "most trustworthy friend" while President Xi Jinping termed it an "ironclad" ally. The economic integration creates comprehensive dependence where Cambodia's development strategy centers on Chinese investment, trade, and tourism. Ream Naval Base's Chinese presence demonstrates how economic dependence enables military access. [29]

Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port represents the archetypal debt trap example, leased to China for ninety-nine years following 2017 default on Chinese loans. The strategic Indian Ocean port operates under Chinese control, validating concerns about debt-for-equity swaps despite their rarity in Belt and Road projects. Djibouti's debt reached eighty percent of GDP in 2016-2017 before military base agreement. Kyrgyzstan owes \$4 billion to China equaling forty percent of GDP. Tajikistan's \$1.65 billion Chinese debt represents twenty-seven percent of GDP. Zambia defaulted in 2020 with \$5.9 billion owed to China. [16] [88]

Lowy Institute research found that debt repayments to China now exceed those owed to Paris Club countries across developing world. In 2012, China created net drain on eighteen countries' finances; by 2023, this rose to sixty countries as Beijing shifted from net lender to net collector, extracting \$34 billion more than it provided. The transition raises questions about Belt and Road sustainability and whether China maintains investments for geopolitical influence or shifts toward profit extraction following initial relationship establishment. [52]

6.5 Pacific and Central Asian Influence

Pacific island nations demonstrate China's expansion into traditionally Western spheres. Solomon Islands switched recognition from Taiwan in 2019 and signed 2022 security cooperation agreement alarming Australia and United States. Kiribati followed in 2019, while Nauru made most recent switch in January 2024 reportedly after offers of \$100 million annually. Cook Islands signed multifaceted agreement in late 2024 that worried New Zealand. Fiji receives massive Chinese aid with ninety percent of clothing factories Chinese-owned. May 2025 China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting saw all Pacific Island Forum members except Australia, New Zealand, and three Taiwan-recognizing nations attend, where China announced 100 "small but beautiful" climate projects and police capacity building initiatives. [22] [23]

Central Asian republics face particular vulnerability due to geography and economic dependence. Kazakhstan owes \$9.2 billion representing 3.5 percent of GDP - the most manageable regional debt - but serves as crucial Belt and Road corridor for New Eurasian Land Bridge. Uzbekistan's \$3.775 billion debt represents thirteen percent of external obligations. All five Central Asian states participate in Belt and Road infrastructure while maintaining relationships with Russia, China, and increasingly Turkey and West, attempting to avoid exclusive alignment with any single power. Chinese infrastructure connects regional economies eastward to Chinese markets while rail and road projects improve connectivity reducing isolation. [15]

7 Regional Nuclear Powers: Limited Spheres

India, Pakistan, and Israel demonstrate how regional nuclear powers maintain substantially more limited client networks than major powers despite nuclear capabilities. Geographic constraints, economic limitations, and regional competition restrict their influence to immediate neighbors or specific partnerships rather than global reach. North Korea's extreme isolation eliminates any meaningful sphere of influence whatsoever. [70]

7.1 India's South Asian Dominance

India operates as South Asia's dominant power without formal colonies, exercising influence through security partnerships and economic leverage. Bhutan represents the closest approximation to vassal

state, with India providing one hundred percent of its first three Five-Year Plans and ninety percent of the fourth, plus 61.60 billion in 2015-2016 aid exceeding assistance to any other country. The 1949 Treaty of Friendship revised 2007 removed formal requirements for Indian guidance on foreign policy, but Bhutan maintains diplomatic relations with only fifty-six United Nations members and none of the Permanent Five Security Council members except India. Indian Military Training Team permanently stations in Bhutan with all military equipment coming from India and defence plans formulated by Indian experts. [82]

India declared in 1959 that "any aggression against Bhutan would be seen as aggression against India," effectively guaranteeing defence while maintaining no formal treaty. Hydropower projects totalling 2,136 megawatts completed with Indian funding and 10,000 megawatt import commitments create energy dependence. Two-thirds of trade flows through India using Indian rupee alongside Bhutanese ngultrum. Bhutanese citizens serve in Indian armed forces with no visa requirements for travel. The comprehensive integration across security, economic, and political domains makes Bhutan functionally dependent despite sovereign status. [83] [43]

Maldives demonstrates contested client relationship with significant fluctuations. India provides seventy percent of Maldives National Defence Force training for over 1,400 personnel, supplies helicopters and patrol vessels, maintains coastal surveillance radars, and conducts joint maritime security operations. The \$500 million Greater Malé Connectivity Project, \$400 million currency swap, and \$565 million credit line announced July 2025 create economic dependencies. President Mohamed Muizzu's 2024 "India Out" campaign forced withdrawal of approximately seventy-five Indian military personnel operating aircraft, but relations dramatically improved by late 2024 with October adoption of Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership. [59] [76]

Nepal's economy depends overwhelmingly on India despite political tensions. India accounts for sixty-four percent of Nepal's \$8.5 billion total trade, provides one hundred percent of petroleum through Motihari-Amlekhganj pipeline delivering two million tons yearly, and supplies 600 megawatts of electricity while planning 10,000 megawatt imports over next decade. Remittances from Nepalese working in India total \$1.2 billion annually, and 32,000 Gorkha soldiers serve in Indian Army. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship allows free movement across open borders. Nepal's landlocked status means all third-country trade transits India, creating chokepoint leverage demonstrated by devastating 1989-1990 economic blockade that crashed GDP growth from 9.7 percent to 1.5 percent. [94] [53]

Bangladesh represented India's closest South Asian security partner under Sheikh Hasina administration from 2009 to 2024 due to cooperation against northeastern insurgents and counter-terrorism collaboration. Hasina's August 2024 ouster and replacement by Muhammad Yunus's interim government produced sharp pivot toward China, with Bangladesh participating in first China-Pakistan-Bangladesh trilateral summit in Kunming June 2025 raising major Indian concerns. Border killings by Indian Border Security Force, unresolved Teesta River water disputes, and major trade imbalances favouring India create ongoing tensions. [54] [34]

Sri Lanka's 2022 default on \$25 billion foreign debt made it temporarily an economic client through crisis dependence. India provided \$4 billion in financial assistance - the largest support package from any single country - including currency swaps, credit lines for fuel and food, and bridging finance during International Monetary Fund negotiations. Yet China remains largest bilateral creditor with \$4.2 billion in restructuring, and 2017 Hambantota Port lease to China for ninety-nine years demonstrates Chinese leverage. Sri Lanka maintains careful balancing between India, China, and Western interests. [21] [2]

Indian Ocean island bases expand India's maritime reach. Mauritius hosts major Indian military facilities on Agalega Island inaugurated February 2024, including 3,000-meter airstrip capable of hosting P-8I Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and deep-water jetty for naval vessels costing over \$87 million. Eight coastal surveillance radar stations operated by India throughout Mauritius create maritime domain awareness. Madagascar hosts India's first foreign intelligence listening post monitoring Mozambique Channel maritime communications. This "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy counters China's "String of Pearls" base network. [33] [51] [27]

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7.2 Pakistan's Collapsed Client Networks

Pakistan maintains only two administered territories that could qualify as vassals. Azad Kashmir functions as "nominally self-governing entity" with Pakistan controlling defence, foreign affairs, security, and judiciary through federal oversight despite constitutional provisions for President, Prime Minister, and Legislative Assembly. The 1974 Interim Constitution explicitly prohibits dissent against ideology of accession to Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan receives even less autonomy through 2009 Self-Governance Order, with Pakistani-appointed governor holding real power over chief minister. [81] [40]

Pakistan's relationship with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan completely collapsed between 2022 and 2025 despite decades of Inter-Services Intelligence support creating and sustaining the movement. The ISI provided sanctuary, training, weapons, advisers, and diplomatic recognition from 1996 to 2001, with 80,000 to 100,000 Pakistanis fighting alongside Taliban from 1994 to 1999. As of 2025, Taliban now harbours Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan conducting attacks that killed nearly 1,000 in Pakistan during 2024 - a seventy percent increase to 521 attacks. December 2024 Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan prompted Afghan retaliation, followed by active border clashes January through March 2025. [14] [73] [78]

Pakistan's economic crisis eliminates capacity for client states. With forty-five percent poverty rate, extreme poverty rising from 4.9 percent to 16.5 percent, and twenty-five International Monetary Fund arrangements since 1950 with SDR 6,745.25 million outstanding as of June 2025, Pakistan functions as aid recipient rather than donor. The \$67 billion in United States aid received from 1951 to 2011, dependence on \$35 billion annual remittances, and chronic balance-of-payments crises demonstrate vulnerability. Multiple 2025 analyses describe Pakistan's "deepening dependence on China" with Pakistan increasingly appearing as "client state rather than sovereign actor" in alignment with Beijing. [97] [105] [42]

7.3 Israel's Limited Dependencies

Israel maintains very limited client state relationships despite extensive military cooperation worldwide. South Sudan represents closest approximation, with President Salva Kiir stating in 2011 "Without you, we would not have arisen" following Israeli support to independence fighters since 1960s. Israel provides continuous weapons sales including small arms and military training to presidential guards and special forces. South Sudan offers consistent United Nations voting support and is described as Israel's most reliable African ally. [3] [93] [55]

Israeli security cooperation spans African nations but represents transactional arms sales rather than dependencies. Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Zambia, Angola, Malawi, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and others receive Israeli military training in krav maga, urban combat, hostage rescue, and presidential guard protection. Israel's \$14.8 billion in defence exports during 2024 - fourth consecutive record year - went primarily to Europe at fifty-four percent, Asia-Pacific at twenty-three percent, and North America at nine percent, representing commercial relationships with sovereign nations rather than client states. [10] [75]

Abraham Accords normalized relations with United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and nominally Sudan but created peer partnerships not dependencies. None of these wealthy Gulf states or middle powers depend on Israel; instead, these represent strategic partnerships against shared Iranian threats and economic-technological cooperation opportunities. Occupied Palestinian territories constitute formal dependencies under Israeli military control since 1967, with West Bank hosting over 450,000 Israeli settlers and Gaza remaining under blockade. These territories under military occupation represent dependencies by force rather than voluntary client relationships. [80] [11]

7.4 North Korea: Complete Isolation

North Korea has no vassal or client states as of 2025, confirming that extreme isolation and economic weakness eliminate capacity for dependencies. The country controls no territories beyond its borders and maintains diplomatic relations with only 160 United Nations member states after closing approximately one-fifth of diplomatic missions worldwide in 2023 due to economic pressures. GDP estimated

at only \$72 billion with widespread poverty and food insecurity means North Korea cannot project power beyond weapons sales and limited military support. [95]

The most significant international relationship sees North Korea functioning as military supplier to Russia in reverse client arrangement. Since late 2024, North Korea deployed approximately 11,000 to 15,000 troops to support Russia's Ukraine war operations in Kursk region. North Korea supplies massive artillery shells, ammunition, missiles, and small arms with South Korean estimates indicating 20,000 containers of weaponry shipped by October 2024. In exchange, North Korea receives food, raw materials, oil, Russian military technology particularly for space and satellite capabilities, potentially intercontinental ballistic missile technology, and diplomatic protection through Russian vetoes of United Nations sanctions monitoring. [64]

Syria's Assad regime fall in December 2024 eliminated North Korea's closest Middle Eastern ally. The North Korean embassy evacuated, and new Syrian transitional government under Ahmed al-Sharaa established diplomatic relations with South Korea in April 2025, marking complete diplomatic reversal. Iran maintains limited cooperation with North Korea in ballistic missile technology and arms sales, but neither depends on the other, with both pursuing divergent interests on Taliban, Islamic State, Sunni extremism, and regional priorities. [57]

8 Comparative Analysis

8.1 Mechanisms of Dependency Creation

Nuclear powers employ distinct mechanisms creating client relationships, with contemporary dependencies emerging primarily through economic instruments rather than territorial conquest. Territorial inheritance from colonial empires sustains United States dependencies in Puerto Rico and Guam, United Kingdom's fourteen British Overseas Territories and three Crown Dependencies, and France's thirteen overseas territories, together affecting approximately four million people. These relationships represent historical legacies gradually dissolving through decolonization pressure and nationalist movements rather than newly created dependencies. [99] [96]

Military occupation creates the most coercive dependencies, exemplified by Russia's Ukrainian territories, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, plus Israel's West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights. These arrangements generate fierce resistance and international condemnation, proving costly to maintain while providing strategic depth and territorial control. Russia's Ukraine invasion demonstrates that contemporary military occupation faces substantially higher costs than historical imperial conquest due to international sanctions, military resistance enabled by external support, and reputational damage precluding normal diplomatic and economic relations. [98] [92]

Military basing agreements provide substantial influence without sovereignty transfer, exemplified by United States' 128 overseas installations, United Kingdom's 145 global sites, France's remaining Djibouti and Gabon presence, and China's Djibouti and Cambodia facilities. These arrangements require host nation consent and typically involve substantial economic transfers through base rental fees, employment, and infrastructure investment. The basing networks enable power projection and demonstrate commitment to alliance partners while creating dependencies where host nations rely on security guarantees and economic benefits from military presence. [104] [25]

Defence alliances create dependencies through security guarantees, particularly NATO's Article V and United States bilateral treaties covering over thirty countries under explicit American nuclear umbrella protection. Extended deterrence proves central to non-proliferation efforts, persuading Japan, South Korea, Australia, and European allies to forego independent nuclear weapons programs by providing credible security guarantees. Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization, United Kingdom's Five Power Defence Arrangements, and India's bilateral security partnerships provide regional security architectures with varying credibility and effectiveness. [56] [87]

Economic leverage through aid, debt, currency control, and trade dependence affects the most countries and represents contemporary dependency creation's dominant mechanism. China's Belt and Road Initiative enrolling 150 countries, France's CFA franc affecting fourteen nations, and United States aid recipients create dependencies without sovereignty transfer. Debt relationships prove particularly controversial, with Chinese lending creating obligations many recipient nations struggle to service. The

shift from Western aid dominance to Chinese infrastructure financing provides developing countries alternative partners but raises concerns about debt trap diplomacy and loss of policy autonomy through creditor influence. [45] [52]

8.2 Nuclear Weapons and Influence Correlation

Nuclear weapons capability correlates with but does not determine client state networks. The United States maintains the world's most extensive dependencies through seventeen formal territories, 128 overseas bases, thirty-one NATO allies under nuclear umbrella, and Monroe Doctrine hemisphere, demonstrating how superpower status combining nuclear arsenal with unmatched conventional forces, dominant economy, and institutional leadership creates comprehensive influence networks. Yet nuclear superiority did not prevent Afghanistan's fall in 2021, Iraq's contested status, or Latin American drift toward China and BRICS alternatives. [13] [104]

Russia inherited Soviet-era vassals but shed most between 2022 and 2025, retaining only five complete dependencies plus contested CSTO relationships. Nuclear arsenal proved irrelevant to African military expulsions, Armenia's withdrawal from CSTO, and Syria's regime collapse ending military basing access. France's nuclear deterrent similarly failed to prevent comprehensive rejection by Francophone African states expelling military presence across ten countries. These cases demonstrate that nuclear weapons deter major war and protect homeland territory but do not compel client loyalty or prevent influence erosion through nationalist movements and alternative partner availability. [98] [26]

China's approach emphasizes economic power over military force, achieving influence through 150-country Belt and Road network despite only two overseas military bases. The contrast with United States' 128 bases reveals strategic choice to leverage economic rather than military instruments. Beijing avoids nationalist resistance triggered by foreign troop presence while building comprehensive economic integration making recipient countries dependent on Chinese capital, technology, and market access. Nuclear weapons provide China security enabling outward economic expansion but do not directly create dependencies. [45] [9]

Regional nuclear powers demonstrate limited spheres despite weapons possession. India influences perhaps five South Asian neighbors through economic dominance and security partnerships but faces Chinese competition and nationalist resistance. Pakistan controls only disputed territories adjacent to borders while itself appearing increasingly as Chinese client. Israel maintains one African partner and occupied territories but lacks broader dependency network despite advanced nuclear program. North Korea possesses nuclear weapons yet maintains zero client relationships, confirming that economic weakness and diplomatic isolation preclude influence projection regardless of destructive capability. [70] [72]

The asymmetry between superpowers and regional nuclear states proves stark. United States' overseas base network, annual foreign aid budget, NATO alliance, and hemispheric sphere span every continent affecting 80 to 100-plus countries demonstrating meaningful dependence. Russia maintains five complete vassals and contested CSTO relationships among fragile post-Soviet states. China's 150-country Belt and Road network creates dependencies primarily through economics. Britain and France operate from colonial legacies with seventeen and thirteen formal territories respectively, though influence contracts. India's regional dominance extends to approximately five neighbors. Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea demonstrate minimal to zero client capacity. Nuclear weapons enable territorial defence but generate influence only when combined with economic strength, military reach, political legitimacy, and institutional frameworks. [104] [45]

8.3 Declining Formal Territorial Control

The trend toward reduced formal territorial control reflects decolonization's continuation. France withdrew from Syria in 1946, Tunisia and Morocco in 1956, Algeria in 1962, and numerous Sub-Saharan African nations in the 1960s but maintained influence through CFA franc and military bases until 2022-2025 African expulsions. United Kingdom's Commonwealth realm transitions from sixteen to fifteen following Barbados in 2021, with Jamaica, Bahamas, and Antigua planning republican referendums, demonstrate voluntary relationship dissolution. Hong Kong's 1997 and Macau's 1999 handovers to China represented the last major territorial transfers. [96] [26]

Only Russia’s territorial expansion through Ukraine invasion in 2014 and 2022 reverses the general pattern, meeting fierce resistance and international condemnation. The occupation costs exceed benefits through military casualties approaching 700,000, economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and mobilization of Western alliance support for Ukraine. Israel’s settlement expansion in West Bank similarly contradicts decolonization trends, with International Court of Justice 2024 ruling that occupation is illegal and ordering immediate cessation. These cases demonstrate that contemporary territorial control through force proves increasingly costly and unsustainable. [98] [92]

Nationalist movements accelerate formal dependency dissolution even for territories expressing economic preference for continued association. New Caledonia’s independence referendums, Caribbean realm republican transitions, and Pacific territories’ political evolution toward greater autonomy suggest that even beneficial territorial relationships face legitimacy questions. The principle of self-determination increasingly challenges inherited colonial arrangements, with only genuine popular consent through free referendums conferring legitimacy on continued dependency status. [50]

8.4 Economic Dependencies Ascendant

Contemporary influence increasingly flows through economic rather than territorial or military channels. China’s Belt and Road Initiative creating dependencies through infrastructure debt represents the purest expression of this trend, affecting more countries through economic means than any territorial empire historically controlled. The \$1.308 trillion in lending since 2013 across 150 countries demonstrates how financial flows create influence without military occupation or sovereignty transfer. [45]

United States foreign aid similarly creates dependencies, with top recipients including Ukraine, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia receiving billions annually that constitute substantial portions of government budgets and military capabilities. Aid conditionality enables policy influence, demonstrated by Trump administration’s transactional approach threatening reductions unless recipients adopt preferred positions on migration, trade, or diplomatic recognition. The fungibility of aid means recipients face difficult choices between sovereignty and economic necessity. [77]

France’s CFA franc system affecting fourteen nations and 210 million people represents monetary dependency where exchange rate pegs, reserve requirements, and convertibility guarantees maintained by France create comprehensive economic control. The arrangement persists despite independence decades ago, demonstrating economic mechanisms’ durability compared to military presence. Yet growing rejection by African populations suggests even economic dependencies face legitimacy crises when perceived as neo-colonial extraction rather than mutual benefit. [85] [58]

Debt dependencies prove particularly controversial as sustainable development financing or debt trap varies by project and terms. Chinese lending to Pakistan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and numerous African nations creates obligations that constrain policy autonomy and risk asset transfers through debt-for-equity swaps like Hambantota Port. Yet infrastructure gap in developing world means Chinese financing addresses real needs that Western institutions inadequately fund. The Lowy Institute finding that China shifted from net lender to net collector extracting \$34 billion more than providing in 2024 suggests Belt and Road may transition from influence-building to profit extraction, potentially undermining relationships. [52]

9 Conclusion

The examination of nuclear powers’ client state relationships reveals substantial variation in how weapons states project influence, with nuclear capability proving neither necessary nor sufficient for dependency network creation. The United States maintains the most extensive architecture spanning formal territories, military bases, defence alliances, and economic dependencies affecting over one hundred countries through overlapping mechanisms. China achieves comparable reach through Belt and Road economic integration despite minimal military presence, demonstrating contemporary influence flows primarily through financial channels. Russia’s contracted sphere following Ukraine invasion and France’s African collapse show even nuclear powers face rapid influence loss when military credibility fails or host nation consent withdraws.

The declining trend in formal territorial control reflects decolonization's continuation, with voluntary republican transitions among Commonwealth realms, African rejection of French military presence, and calls for CFA franc abolition demonstrating that inherited colonial relationships face fundamental legitimacy challenges. Only military occupation through force - Russia in Ukraine, Israel in Palestinian territories - maintains territorial control against population consent, generating fierce resistance and international condemnation while proving economically and politically costly. Contemporary territorial relationships require genuine consent through democratic processes to maintain legitimacy in an era where self-determination norms permeate international discourse.

Economic dependencies have become ascendant, with Chinese infrastructure lending, United States foreign aid, and monetary arrangements creating influence without sovereignty transfer. The Belt and Road Initiative affecting 150 countries represents the purest contemporary expression of economic dependency creation, though sustainability questions arise as China transitions from net lender to net collector. Debt relationships prove double-edged, addressing genuine development needs while potentially constraining policy autonomy and risking asset control transfers. The provision of alternative financing sources through Chinese investment enables developing nations to diversify dependencies, reducing Western leverage while creating new obligations to Beijing.

Nuclear weapons provide territorial security enabling outward power projection but do not directly generate client relationships. The correlation between nuclear status and influence networks reflects how weapons capability concentrates in powerful states possessing complementary economic and military advantages rather than weapons themselves creating dependencies. Regional nuclear powers demonstrate limited spheres confined to immediate neighbors, while superpower nuclear arsenals correlate with global reach through comprehensive military-economic capabilities rather than deterrent effect alone. North Korea's nuclear weapons paired with economic weakness and diplomatic isolation produce zero client relationships, confirming that influence requires multidimensional capabilities beyond destructive capacity.

The future trajectory suggests continued formalization of voluntary partnerships over coercive control, with economic integration through multilateral frameworks replacing territorial dependencies. Belt and Road, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and other China-centric institutions provide alternatives to Western-dominated Bretton Woods system, enabling countries to balance multiple partnerships rather than accepting unipolar dependency. Yet Chinese economic dominance creates new dependencies potentially as constraining as Western military-political arrangements, merely substituting creditors rather than eliminating debt vulnerabilities. The multipolar competition enables greater recipient nation autonomy through playing powers against each other, though this requires diplomatic skill and risks alienating all potential partners through excessive hedging.

Client state networks will likely continue contracting for established powers while expanding for rising states until new equilibrium emerges reflecting revised economic and military balances. United States alliance system faces questions about reliability and burden-sharing that may reduce dependency depth even as security threats potentially strengthen cohesion. Russian influence will remain limited to occupied territories and Belarus unless substantial economic recovery and political transformation restore credibility. French influence continues declining as African nations assert sovereignty and diversify partnerships. British dependencies gradually transition toward republican independence. Chinese economic leverage expands but faces growing debt distress and recipient nation concerns about conditions. Indian regional dominance encounters Chinese competition and nationalist resistance. These trends suggest transition from hierarchical client relationships toward more balanced partnerships reflecting multipolar rather than unipolar or bipolar structures, though major power advantages ensure some dependency relationships persist where small states require external security and economic support exceeding domestic capacity.

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A Appendix A: Methodological Notes

A.1 Defining Client States

This analysis employs a broad definition of client states encompassing four categories: (1) formal dependencies where the nuclear power exercises constitutional sovereignty including territories, protectorates, and special administrative regions; (2) military dependencies where host nations rely on security guarantees, extended deterrence, or military protection for territorial defense; (3) economic dependencies where recipients depend on aid, debt financing, trade access, or monetary arrangements controlled by the nuclear power; and (4) political dependencies where client states align foreign policy positions with patron preferences due to leverage or inducements.

The broad definition captures the full spectrum of influence relationships from complete territorial control through occupation (Russia in Ukraine, Israel in Palestinian territories) to voluntary security partnerships (NATO members under United States nuclear umbrella) to economic integration creating asymmetric dependence (Belt and Road Initiative participants). This approach recognizes that contemporary influence operates through multiple overlapping mechanisms rather than single hierarchical relationships.

A.2 Data Collection and Sources

Research utilized official government publications including defense white papers, foreign ministry statements, budget documents, and treaty texts as primary sources for military basing agreements, aid flows, and formal territorial relationships. International organization databases from United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and regional development banks provided economic data on debt obligations, aid disbursements, and trade patterns. Academic research from peer-reviewed journals, university press monographs, and policy institute reports informed analysis of historical relationships and contemporary trends. Credible journalism from established media organizations provided current developments and expert assessments, particularly for rapidly evolving situations in Ukraine, Africa, and Pacific island nations.

Geographic scope encompassed all nine nuclear-armed states and their relationships globally. Temporal focus centered on 2025 current status while incorporating historical context for inherited colonial relationships and recent developments from 2022 through 2025 representing the post-Ukraine invasion period of accelerated geopolitical realignment.

A.3 Limitations and Caveats

Several limitations constrain the analysis. Classification of dependencies involves subjective judgment particularly for borderline cases where relationships demonstrate some but not all characteristics of client status. South Korea and Japan maintain substantial economic and political autonomy despite military dependence on United States security guarantees, raising questions about whether they constitute true client states or simply allied partners. Belt and Road Initiative participants vary enormously in dependence levels, with some nations maintaining policy autonomy despite Chinese lending while others face substantial constraints.

Economic data on debt obligations particularly to China involves uncertainty due to limited transparency regarding terms, repayment schedules, and hidden liabilities through state-owned enterprises. Aid figures incorporate multiple categories including military assistance, economic support, humanitarian relief, and development financing that create different dependency dynamics. Military base numbers depend on definitions distinguishing major installations, forward operating sites, and cooperative security locations, with publicly available figures potentially understating actual presence.

Rapid geopolitical change means any static assessment faces obsolescence. African relationships particularly demonstrate volatility with French expulsions, Russian withdrawals, and Chinese expansion occurring simultaneously. Armenian-Russian relations shifted dramatically in 2023-2025 from alliance to estrangement. United States alliance commitments face ongoing uncertainty under political leadership changes. The analysis represents a snapshot of October 2025 conditions acknowledging continued evolution.

B Appendix B: Statistical Summary

Table 1: Quantitative Summary of Client State Relationships by Nuclear Power

Nuclear Power	Formal Territories	Military Bases	Economic Dependencies	Total Influence
United States	17	128	80+	150+
Russia	5	5	10	15
United Kingdom	17	145	20	50
France	13	2	14	25
China	2	2	150	150
India	0	0	5	5
Pakistan	2	0	0	2
Israel	3	1	5	8
North Korea	0	0	0	0

Table 2: Top Ten Aid Recipients from United States (2024-2025)

Country	Total Aid	Primary Category
Ukraine	\$66.9 billion	Military
Israel	\$15.8 billion	Military
Egypt	\$1.4 billion	Military/Economic
Jordan	\$1.72 billion	Economic/Security
Ethiopia	\$1.2 billion	Humanitarian
Afghanistan	\$1.1 billion	Humanitarian
Somalia	\$900 million	Humanitarian
Yemen	\$850 million	Humanitarian
Syria	\$820 million	Humanitarian
DR Congo	\$780 million	Humanitarian

Table 3: Belt and Road Initiative Top Debt Recipients

Country	Estimated Debt to China	Percent of External Debt
Pakistan	\$62 billion	22%
Kenya	\$9.2 billion	66%
Zambia	\$5.9 billion	31%
Ethiopia	\$5.0 billion	17%
Angola	\$4.8 billion	19%
Laos	\$4.5 billion	45%
Kyrgyzstan	\$4.0 billion	40%
Sri Lanka	\$4.2 billion	10%
Cambodia	\$3.8 billion	39%
Tajikistan	\$1.65 billion	27%

C Appendix C: Regional Maps

South Asian Dependencies: India

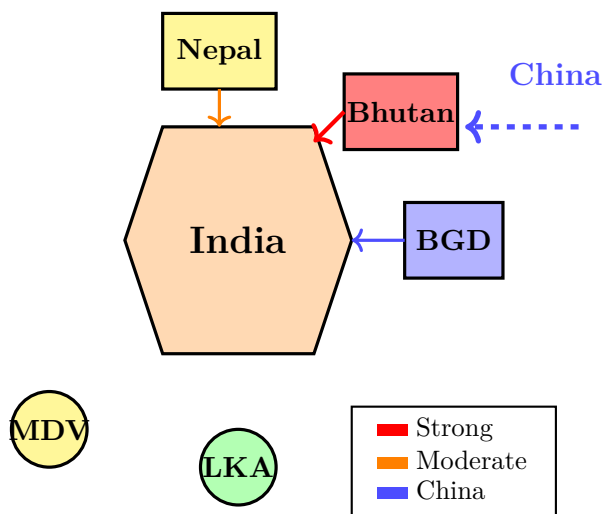


Figure 5: Indian sphere of influence in South Asia.

Dependency gradients and Chinese competitive pressure. Arrow thickness indicates relationship strength.

Russian Sphere: Post-Soviet Space (2025)

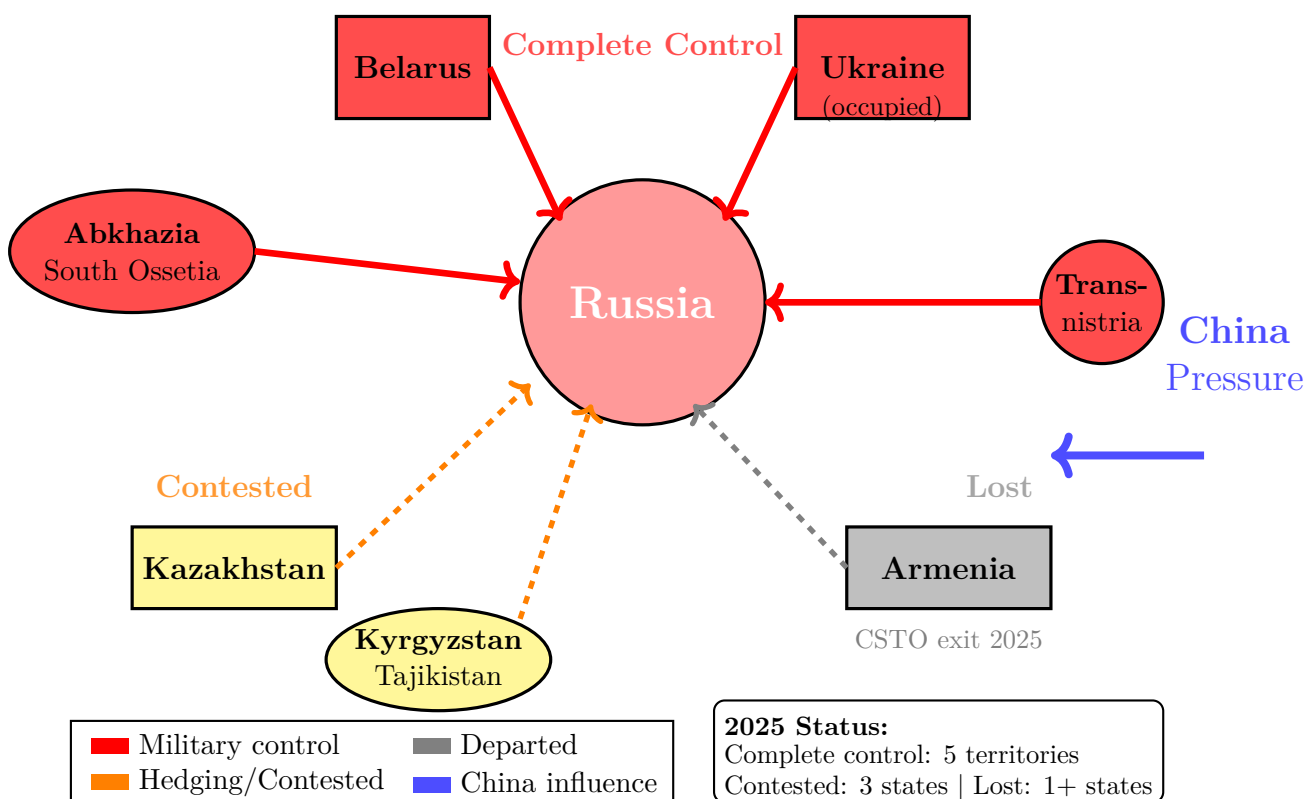


Figure 6: Russian sphere of influence reorganized as relationship diagram showing hierarchy of control.

Belarus remains sole reliable ally. All occupied territories maintained by force. Central Asian states hedge between Russia and China. Armenia departed CSTO alliance 2025.

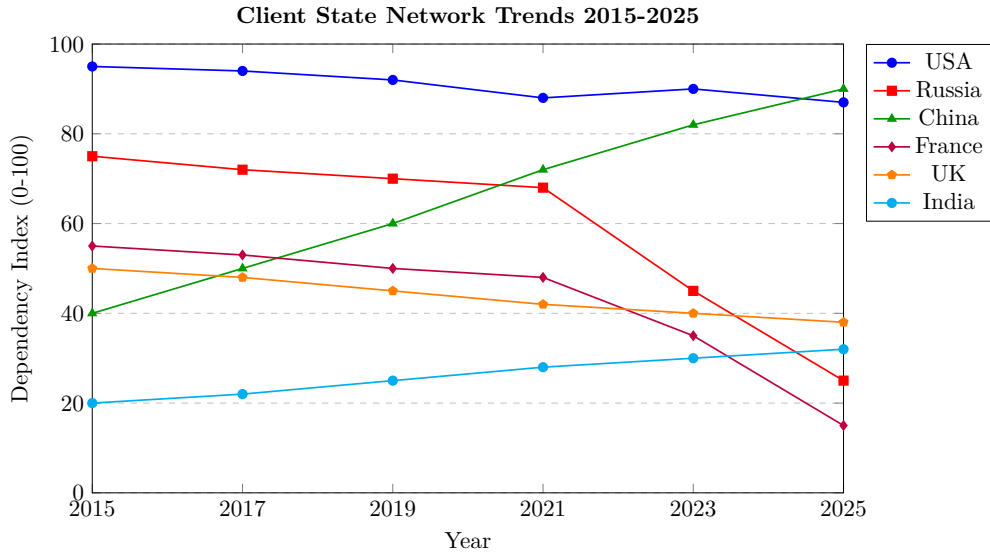


Figure 7: Relative dependency network strength indexed 0-100 showing divergent trajectories.

United States experiences modest decline from peak. Russia and France undergo collapse. China demonstrates sustained growth. United Kingdom shows gradual contraction. India achieves marginal regional gains.

D Appendix D: Case Study Comparisons

D.1 Formal Territorial Control

Three patterns characterize formal territorial relationships. **Colonial remnant territories** including United States' Puerto Rico and Guam, United Kingdom's fourteen British Overseas Territories, and France's thirteen overseas regions represent inherited imperial possessions gradually transitioning toward greater autonomy or independence through decolonization pressure. These territories demonstrate declining legitimacy of indefinite external control, with independence movements strengthening particularly in Caribbean and Pacific regions.

Strategic occupation territories including Russia's occupied Ukraine, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Israel's Palestinian territories represent coercive control through military force against population consent. These arrangements generate sustained resistance, international condemnation, and substantial costs while providing strategic depth or territorial expansion. The Ukraine case particularly demonstrates escalatory risks and sustainability questions.

Special administrative regions including China's Hong Kong and Macau represent negotiated transitions from colonial to sovereign control with temporary autonomy guarantees. The arrangements demonstrate how rising powers reclaim historical territories while managing international relationships and local populations, though autonomy erosion suggests limited durability of compromises.

D.2 Economic Dependency Mechanisms

Belt and Road Initiative debt relationships differ fundamentally from traditional aid dependencies. Chinese infrastructure lending provides physical capital - ports, railways, power plants - creating tangible development benefits but potential sovereignty compromises through debt obligations and operational control. United States foreign aid historically emphasized grants over loans, focused on military assistance and humanitarian relief rather than infrastructure, and operated within multilateral frameworks including World Bank and International Monetary Fund coordination.

The shift from Western aid dominance to Chinese infrastructure financing provides recipient nations alternatives reducing dependence on any single creditor while creating new obligations. Countries successfully balancing multiple relationships through strategic hedging avoid exclusive alignment, though this requires diplomatic sophistication and risks alienating all potential partners. Pakistan's overwhelming Chinese debt demonstrates failed hedging where concentration creates comprehensive dependence.

D.3 Military Basing Asymmetries

United States' 128 overseas military bases contrast sharply with China's two confirmed facilities, revealing strategic divergence. American forward presence enables rapid power projection, extended deterrence credibility, alliance reassurance, and crisis response capability at substantial fiscal cost estimated at \$150 billion annually for overseas operations. Chinese emphasis on economic instruments over military presence reduces costs while avoiding nationalist resistance triggered by foreign troops, though limiting power projection capacity and alliance signaling.

The American model faces sustainability questions given fiscal pressures and alliance burden-sharing debates. The Chinese approach encounters credibility challenges regarding security guarantee reliability absent military presence. Hybrid approaches combining limited military presence with comprehensive economic integration may represent future patterns, exemplified by China's Djibouti base supporting Belt and Road Initiative maritime security while avoiding extensive troop deployments.

The End