



# The Re-emergence of Non-material Factors in International Relations

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**Abstract:** For years, material factors have been regarded as central to the study of international relations (IR). Whether in the form of military force, money, resources, land, or territory, material factors have traditionally been considered the primary components of power that determine state behaviour and the defining elements of the international system. Although non-material factors, such as culture, values, knowledge, and norms, do affect the life of nations, they have long received limited attention globally for a variety of reasons. This study argues that in the post-Cold War era, particularly since the 1990s, non-material factors have re-emerged and are increasingly influencing global affairs. Accompanying this trend is the growing prominence of theories and scholarly works that foreground the role of non-material dimensions in IR.

**Keywords:** international relations; non-material factors; constructivism; soft power; norm.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the global landscape has witnessed a series of unpredictable developments that have significantly influenced the foreign policy orientations of states. Opportunities and challenges no longer stem solely from material elements traditionally regarded as the primary drivers of international relations (IR). Increasingly, non-material or ideational factors are exerting notable influence on global affairs. On the one hand, these elements foster solidarity among nations and serve as catalysts for human progress. On the other,

they contain divisive and threatening dimensions that often underlie conflicts. Beliefs, religion, spirituality, culture, language, nationalism, identity, norms, trust, and anxieties – factors that are inherently intersubjective and typically situated below the level of the nation-state – now play a substantial role in shaping the motivations, behaviours, and attitudes of international actors.

This is not to suggest that non-material factors have never had a place in the course of human development. Historically, the Church, for instance, held dominant power in Western Europe for a millennium (from the 4th to the 14th century). The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in Central Europe – a conflict which is often described as one

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of the greatest demographic crises in European history before the twentieth century – caused an estimated 15-20% population loss in the Holy Roman Empire, a proportion far higher than that experienced in either the First or Second World Wars (Pert 2024). Moreover, humanity can scarcely forget that the Cold War, a conflict rooted in divergent political ideologies, ended barely more than three decades ago. These historical references serve merely to illustrate that non-material factors are not new to world politics, even if they were long overshadowed by materialist explanations.

Although the approach of this article is primarily empirical, its closest theoretical resonance lies in constructivism. Constructivist scholarship emphasizes that international politics is socially constructed through ideas, norms, and identities rather than being determined solely by material power. Adopting this perspective, the study employs a qualitative research design, relying on secondary document analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis. As non-material factors are intangible, intersubjective, and context-dependent, interpretive analysis rather than statistical measurement is applied. To strengthen the argument, the research also incorporates descriptive statistics and secondary quantitative data (e.g., international survey results, citation counts, and published diagrams). These figures are used in a supportive role to illustrate broader trends, while the primary contribution of the article remains qualitative and interpretive.

The analysis presented below goes beyond merely acknowledging the emergence of non-material concerns to analyse the renewed prominence of these factors in contemporary IR. It contributes to existing scholarship by situating the analysis of non-material factors within the post-Cold War and contemporary contexts. In other

words, it addresses the question: Why is it necessary to study non-material factors now?

## 2. Non-Material Factors in IR

In contrast to material factors, which are tangible, measurable, and observable, non-material factors, which are often termed ideational, normative, or social, are intangible and more difficult to quantify.<sup>1</sup> In IR, these elements include ideas, norms, values, and identities that influence actors' perceptions and behaviours. Specific non-material factors commonly addressed in IR scholarship include belief, ideology, norm, value, religion, culture, identity, historical experience, principle, rule, law, knowledge, reputation, legitimacy, and leadership. In addition to these, a number of less frequently cited yet influential non-material elements are also noted, such as fear, uncertainty, (mis)trust, societal cohesion, vulnerability (or perceived vulnerability), and even national character. However, within the scope of this study, the analysis will be limited to a selection of non-material factors that are widely recognized as holding substantial relevance to IR, namely values, culture, knowledge, and norms. To provide conceptual clarity and ensure analytical consistency, the aforementioned factors are briefly defined as follows. '*Culture*' encompasses fundamental non-material elements such as beliefs, faith systems, religion, language, customs, and collective practices embedded within a given community. '*Values*' refer to intersubjectively constructed perceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use 'non-material factors' as an umbrella term. While the literature sometimes distinguishes between ideational (ideas, beliefs, identities, etc), normative (rules, norms, laws, etc), and social (relations, legitimacy, reputation, etc) factors, I employ the broader term to capture their interrelated roles in IR.

what is considered good or bad, as well as appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. ‘*Knowledge*’ denotes the body of information, skills, and technologies acquired and transmitted through processes of education, transfer, research, and development.

‘*Norms*’ are standards of behaviour grounded in values and accepted within a social community, and may be either codified or informal (Le 2021).

### **3. The Resurgence of Non-Material Factors in International Practice and IR Academia**

#### ***3.1. The Reappearance of Non-Material Factors in International Practice***

In the mid-twentieth century, Soviet leader Josef Stalin famously derided the relevance of normative authority in world politics with his cynical remark, “The Pope! How many [military] divisions has he got?” (Lotman 2018). This statement epitomized a worldview grounded entirely in material power, where influence was measured in military divisions and coercive capability. Indeed, the Pope commanded no army. Yet, decades later, while the Holy See remained intact, Stalin’s empire had long since collapsed. This historical irony poignantly illustrates the enduring influence of non-material power, such as legitimacy, identity, and belief, which transcends sheer military might and territorial control.

Against this backdrop, concerns over the recurrence of conflict and war, coupled with aspirations for a better world, have prompted states to engage in IR not solely in pursuit of material gains. Fundamental questions such as “What kind of world ought we to build?”, “What can be done to mitigate conflict and war?”, “What are the pathways to sustainable peace?”, and “How

can cooperation and development be enhanced?” have brought non-material factors to the fore. These concerns have facilitated the diffusion of ideational elements and enabled them to become an integral part of international life (Hurrell and Macdonald 2013:2). As Hoang Khac Nam (2021) observes, the growing prominence of non-material factors has led to an increasing incorporation of normative and ideational considerations into both domestic and foreign policy agendas – dimensions that were previously peripheral or largely absent in the conduct of IR.

The European Union offers a compelling example of this dimension within contemporary IR. The EU has progressively shifted its emphasis from material-based power to normative power, grounded in values such as peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Adler and Crawford (2006) even coined the term “*balance of practices*” to describe the global dynamic between the United States and the European Union, where the former exercises military power, while the latter projects normative power. Rather than engaging in traditional military competition, the EU has chosen to advance its influence through strategic communication, humanitarian assistance, the promotion of development policies, and its role as a model of regional integration. In doing so, the EU has succeeded in placing emerging issues onto a globally resonant policy agenda (Le Lena 2023). In a similar vein, NATO, which has long been regarded as a military alliance rooted in hard power, redefined its role post-1990 through successive documents entitled *The Alliance’s Strategic Concept* (1991, 1999, 2009, and 2022). These strategies consistently expanded NATO’s remit beyond collective defence to include the

promotion of democracy, human rights, and shared values (NATO 2010, 2022)

The growing number and increasing impact of global movements have served as another powerful driver for the heightened visibility of non-material elements such as values, norms, beliefs, and religion in international political life. These movements range from democracy, human rights, and environmental protection initiatives to the activities of terrorist groups invoking religious ideologies. In 2018, Greta Thunberg and the *Fridays for Future* (FFF) movement, which advocates for urgent political action to address the climate crisis, began to draw the attention of the international community. Within just over seven years (by 2025), what started as a local initiative in Sweden had expanded to 185 countries worldwide. Notably, the third Global Climate Strike initiated by FFF mobilized approximately 7.6 million participants and generated over 6,000 protest events across 185 countries (Wahlström et al. 2020). In response to this unprecedented mobilization, leaders of the European Union, along with numerous national governments and members of the scientific community, were compelled to speak out, issue public commitments, and undertake policy adjustments (Eckersley et al. 2025).

From 2021 to 2022, more than 12,500 protests erupted worldwide, initially sparked by material concerns such as food, energy, and cost-of-living crises (Ortiz et al. 2023). However, their intensity and global spread were fueled by non-material drivers, including perceived injustice, collective frustration, declining institutional trust, and weakened social cohesion, highlighting the ideational foundations of contemporary mobilization. These dynamics illustrate how values, norms, and shared emotions function not only as underlying motivations for

political mobilization but also as catalysts for transnational solidarity. The politicization of everyday life and the moral framing of socio-economic crises reflect a growing convergence between material conditions and ideational forces in shaping contemporary international affairs.

Comparable patterns can also be observed in other cases where non-material factors have reshaped international practice. The Arab Spring of 2010–2011 demonstrated how discourses of democracy and human dignity transcended national borders, galvanizing transnational networks and triggering political transformations across the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement illustrates the centrality of global norms, legitimacy, and collective commitments in shaping state behaviour, even when material interests diverge. Together, these examples substantiate the argument that non-material factors, such as ideas, norms, values, and legitimacy, remain critical to understanding contemporary IR.

Building upon these transnational dynamics, the democratization of IR has accelerated the return of non-material factors by creating greater space for small and medium-sized states, as well as international organizations, to contribute to the construction of the “rules of the game.”

With the majority of states in the international system being small and medium-sized<sup>2</sup>, this process has elevated principles such as respect for sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, multilateral cooperation, and adherence to international law as central tenets of global and regional

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<sup>2</sup> According to statistics from the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022), there are 108 countries that are members of the United Nations Forum of Small States (FOSS), meaning that two-thirds of the world's countries are categorized as small states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore 2022).

governance. ASEAN provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. Through the “ASEAN Way,” which emphasizes consensus-building, non-interference, informal diplomacy, and respect for sovereignty, ASEAN states, many of them smaller powers, have been able to shape regional norms, build mechanisms for peaceful conflict management, and limit the influence of external great powers in Southeast Asia. Similarly, across parts of Africa, small and medium-sized states have championed values of pan-African solidarity, regional ownership, and collective security through institutions such as the African Union and ECOWAS. In both cases, non-material factors, norms, and regional identities have become indispensable tools for smaller actors to protect their interests, build stable regional orders, and assert their agency in a global arena often dominated by larger powers. Notably, there was a period from 2005 to 2015 when ASEAN was praised as a group of small and medium-sized states that effectively established the normative framework across East Asia. During this time, major powers such as the United States, China, Japan, and Russia, as well as other countries like Australia and New Zealand, were required to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation if they wanted to participate in ASEAN-centric mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Furthermore, globalization and increasing mobility have accelerated the diffusion of culture across borders. This cultural diffusion, distinct from global social movements, has given rise to new conceptual frameworks such as soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy, as states increasingly perceive culture not only as an identity marker but also as a

source of influence and national power. While in the late nineteenth century only a few countries, notably France (1883) and Italy (1889), had established institutional mechanisms to promote their culture and language abroad, cultural diplomacy has now become a widely recognized and frequently employed concept in contemporary international affairs (UNESCO 2023). The United States has employed popular cultural trends, such as Hollywood cinema, hip-hop music, and street culture, as instruments of cultural diplomacy to project an image of a free and modern America. Similarly, India has promoted philosophies of life and practices such as yoga as tools for advancing peace, health, and spiritual values in IR. The United Kingdom, meanwhile, launched its ‘GREAT Britain’ campaign, described as its most ambitious international marketing effort to date. With a budget of USD 125 million, the campaign aimed at showcasing British culture, heritage, music, education, and natural landscapes to the world (Parsons 2012).

In Northeast Asia, culture has become a central component of foreign policy, contributing significantly to the shaping of national soft power. Japan has actively promoted the *Cool Japan* strategy, combining it with minimalist lifestyle aesthetics to project an image of a nation that is refined and contemplative, yet simultaneously dynamic and modern. These cultural values have enabled Japan to forge effective connections with regions such as Southeast Asia, Europe, and Latin America. (Kawashima 2018). Similarly, China has made substantial investments in soft power, allocating over USD 10 billion annually for more than two decades to build a global network of 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms (Herr 2019). These institutions have served as key

instruments in promoting Chinese language and culture abroad, bolstering China's cultural presence on the international stage.

Alongside efforts to project a relatable and favorable national image to global audiences, numerous studies have highlighted the tangible impacts of cultural movements on various dimensions of international life. The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) serves as a prominent example. *Hallyu* has made a significant contribution to South Korea's economic growth and post-crisis recovery, particularly in the tourism sector and the export of consumer goods. According to Kang (2022), the global spread of Korean culture generated an estimated USD 12.3 billion for the South Korean economy. The so-called "BTS [boy band] effect" alone was responsible for an additional USD 1.1 billion in exports, primarily in cosmetics, food products, and clothing. Moreover, *Hallyu* has been credited with revitalizing the tourism industry. In 2022, South Korea generated USD 21.5 billion in tourism revenue from 17.5 million international visitors. Building on the momentum of *Hallyu*, the South Korean government has set a target of USD 35 billion in tourism revenue by 2030 (Kang 2022).

Another notable trend is the growing reliance on notions such as *strategic trust*, *shared values*, and *like-mindedness* in the formation and upgrading of partnerships. At bilateral level, William Burns, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State and Director of the CIA under President Joe Biden, has emphasized that to be considered a "truly strategic partner," countries must share "a convergence of values and interests" with the United States (Burns 2009). This tendency is evident in the majority – if not all – of the treaties and joint statements concluded between the United States and its allies or strategic partners during the process

of upgrading bilateral ties to the level of an alliance or strategic partnership. Similarly, a review of joint statements signed between Vietnam and its international partners, whether under the framework of comprehensive partnerships, strategic partnerships, or comprehensive strategic partnerships, reveals a consistent emphasis on shared values as the foundation of bilateral relations. Moreover, for Vietnam, a country that has endured millennia of warfare, trust remains a paramount consideration in the establishment of strategic cooperation frameworks.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to bilateral partnerships often formed on the basis of shared values and trust, states also establish and participate in multilateral mechanisms and institutional frameworks grounded in common normative foundations. A foundation of shared values is often regarded as a key criterion for shaping numerous coalition-building mechanisms in contemporary IR. The European Union offers a quintessential example of a group of states formed on the basis of shared commitments to democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the aspiration to build a peaceful and stable politico-economic community. The Group of Seven (G7) consists of states that share commitments to free-market economies, democratic governance, and the defence of a rules-based international order. Similarly, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, brings together countries united by a common

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<sup>3</sup> See also the article by former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Vietnam, Pham Binh Minh, published in *Tap chi Cong san (The Communist Review)*, which discusses Vietnam's approach to building strategic and comprehensive partnerships. In the article, Pham Binh Minh (2014) argues that the most crucial factor for Vietnam in establishing a strategic or comprehensive strategic partnership is "strategic trust".

commitment to freedom of navigation and a shared interest in counterbalancing China's influence. "Freedom of navigation" in this context is not merely a technical maritime practice. It is a normative principle enshrined in international law, particularly UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea). By upholding this principle, Quad members not only demonstrate a shared commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific but also make "freedom of navigation" a non-material factor – a norm and value – that legitimizes their cooperation and structures their response to China's maritime claims. In a similar vein, though less frequently discussed, the D9+ alliance, comprising EU member states with advanced approaches to digital transformation and e-government, also exemplifies forms of cooperation grounded in shared values, interests, and perspectives in addressing global challenges.

In the context of escalating great power competition in particular, apart from *constitutive norms*<sup>4</sup>, *regulative norms* such as trade liberalization, humanitarian assistance, intellectual property rights, and freedom of navigation have not only become well-established in global discourse but have also emerged as contested arenas of influence. Major powers actively promote, reinterpret, or challenge these norms in order to legitimize their positions and extend their reach, thereby accelerating both their construction and diffusion. Specifically, in the case of the norm of trade liberalization, while goods and capital represent tangible, material elements, trade liberalization itself constitutes an intangible norm that governs

and directs the flow of these material components. Likewise, although humanitarian assistance is manifested through the provision of logistical and material support to vulnerable populations, the rules and frameworks that enable and regulate such activities are inherently non-material. Furthermore, to prevent maritime conflict and to ensure the unhindered movement of goods across the globe – clearly material concerns – the norm of freedom of navigation, as an intangible principle, has been actively pursued and upheld by numerous states.

Finally, since the end of the Cold War, rapid advances in information and communication technologies have acted as powerful drivers for the amplification and diffusion of non-material factors. Knowledge, norms, beliefs, and perceptions are now transmitted across borders at unprecedented speed, transforming how ideas shape both national development trajectories and the broader landscape of IR. Over the past decade, since the concept of Industry 4.0 was first introduced (in 2012), the world has witnessed the remarkable rise and dominance of data-driven corporations within the global economy (Manyika and Chui 2014). Notably, the emergence of ChatGPT in November 2022 has further underscored the critical importance of non-material factors to humanity. Within just two months of its launch, this chatbot reached 100 million users worldwide (Milmo 2023). ChatGPT has generated significant momentum in the global race to research and apply artificial intelligence (AI), attracting the participation of major technology companies such as Microsoft, Google, Alibaba, and Baidu. While ChatGPT did not mark the inception of AI, it has served as a stark reminder to the world

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<sup>4</sup> *Constitutive norms* are understood as norms that not only prescribe behaviour but also define the nature and identity of actors within the international system, effectively 'creating' social entities or their roles. By contrast, *regulative norms* generally serve to guide and constrain the behaviour of actors operating within an existing institutional or normative framework.

of the growing significance of technology, intelligence, and knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

At the national level, AI is reshaping the foundational structures of national governance across multiple dimensions. Economically, it restructures labor markets, enhances production efficiency, and automates supply chains, transforming the allocation of resources and redefining the dynamics of global competition (Agrawal et al. 2019). In the realm of security and defence, AI is being applied to strengthen the capacity for strategic information gathering, analysis, and decision-making, as well as to support the development of combat scenarios and the operation of autonomous weapons systems (Szabadföldi 2021). Societally, AI transforms healthcare, education, transportation, and environmental management, embedding new values and perceptions into daily life.

Beyond the national domain, AI offers new opportunities for cooperation and technological application across multiple sectors, serving as a catalyst for emerging models of international collaboration. Nation-states have begun to establish intergovernmental mechanisms aimed at the research, governance, oversight, and strategic orientation of AI technologies. AI has also been integrated into the agendas of various specialized international organizations, particularly within global efforts to address climate change, monitor public health crises, and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2023; World Health Organization 2024). These developments

highlight that AI is not merely a technological tool but a force that reshapes global norms, ethics, and standards. Its diffusion signals the emergence of a new global order, one increasingly defined by technology governance in which non-material factors, such as knowledge, legitimacy, trust, ethical principles, and norms, play a decisive role. At the other end of the spectrum, however, non-material factors can also exert detrimental effects on the dynamics of IR. An increasingly polarized global landscape is being shaped by factors such as religious and ideological conflicts, the resurgence of extremist nationalism, disinformation campaigns, as well as identity politics, and notably the dark side of AI.

As previously mentioned, religion and belief systems have historically exerted profound influence on human societies. Indeed, they do continue to shape world politics today. Whereas religious and ethnic conflicts showed a general decline during the period from 1990 to 2001, the post-2001 era has witnessed a marked resurgence in religiously motivated hostility. According to a Pew Research study (2014), the proportion of the global population living in countries with high levels of religious hostility increased significantly, from 45% in 2007 to 74% in 2012 (Pew Research Center 2014). By 2018, more than one-quarter of countries worldwide had experienced incidents of religion-related violence. In Europe, hostility towards Muslim and Jewish communities saw a notable rise. Threats targeting Hindu populations were also recorded in more than 18 countries. Alarming, as of 2024, 55 out of 198 countries continued to impose severe restrictions on religious freedom, most prominently Egypt, Russia, India, Indonesia, and Turkey (Majumdar 2024).

In line with this broader trend, Figure 1 illustrates a sharp rise in the number of

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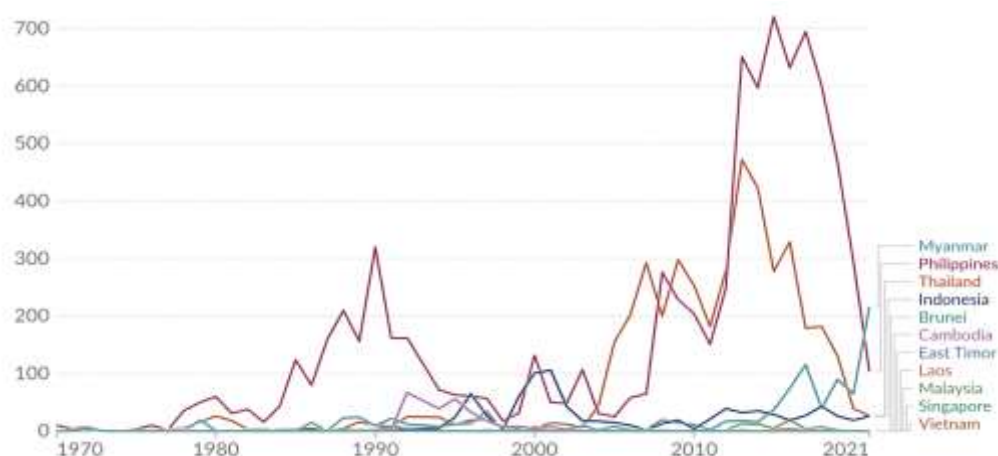
<sup>5</sup> Artificial intelligence first appeared in 1943, when Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts published the paper "A Logical Calculus of the Ideas Immanent in Nervous Activity," which discussed artificial neural networks. In 1956, the term "artificial intelligence" was proposed by American computer scientist John McCarthy at the Dartmouth Conference, marking the official birth of the field.



terrorist incidents linked primarily to religious and ethnic motivations in Southeast Asia after the year 2000. The

Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar have emerged as key hotspots of terrorist activity in recent years.

**Figure 1:** *Number of Terrorist Incidents in Southeast Asia (1970–2021)*



(Source: Our World in Data 2023)

Religious movements have contributed to the onset of armed conflicts and civil wars, exacerbating divisions among communities and faith groups. At the same time, they have given rise to novel forms of governance that transcend the traditional Westphalian state model in IR. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) presents a salient illustration of this phenomenon. Since its emergence in 2014, ISIS rapidly established itself as one of the most formidable security threats to the international system in the twenty-first century. Beyond its brutal terrorist operations, ISIS challenged the foundations of the Westphalian order through the deliberate rejection of established principles of state sovereignty and fixed territorial boundaries. In 2014, the group dismantled border checkpoints between Iraq and Syria and proclaimed the end of the "Sykes-Picot era", signaling its ambition to create a

transnational caliphate that disregards the traditional nation-state framework.

ISIS instituted a post-Westphalian model of governance through the formation of *wilayat* (provinces) in weak or failing states. These entities were not delineated by national sovereignty or legal recognition, but were founded upon radical religious ideology. The legitimacy of these *wilayat* did not derive from constitutions or national laws, but rather from extremist interpretations of Islamic principles. They enforced a strict version of Sharia law and operated through mechanisms of violence, coercion, propaganda, and fear. Between 2014 and 2017, this model of governance controlled significant swathes of territory.

Although the territorial control of these *wilayat* had diminished by 2024 and their model shifted from direct rule to a decentralized insurgency, ISIS-affiliated entities continue to operate in various regions, including Afghanistan, Pakistan,

Egypt, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Turkey, and Russia, and, though to a lesser extent, the Philippines. Parallel to the post-Westphalian structure advanced by ISIS, other religiously driven governance models have emerged. These include the Taliban (Afghanistan), the Houthi movement (Yemen), Al-Shabaab (Somalia), Hezbollah (Lebanon), Boko Haram (Nigeria), and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Syria), among others. Such entities openly reject the authority of existing state structures, instead attempting to impose alternative orders rooted in religious doctrine. They deny the validity of both national constitutions and international law, thereby weakening the legitimacy of central governments, obstructing multilateral cooperation mechanisms, and posing grave consequences for national security and global governance.

One equally profound and potentially disruptive factor that must not be overlooked in the study of IR is AI. Among its potential risks to the world are the spread of misinformation, the propagation of discriminatory ideologies, violations of privacy, fraud, and the misuse of AI in support of terrorist activities. No longer confined to national boundaries or limited to a select group of researchers, AI has become a pervasive force shaping transnational dynamics. In October 2023, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres established an advisory body tasked with providing recommendations in the field of AI. In November 2023, the United Kingdom hosted the world's first AI summit, focusing on the risks posed by criminals and terrorists exploiting AI to develop weapons of mass destruction. In March 2024, the European Parliament passed the EU AI Act, introducing stringent regulations on high-risk AI systems to ensure their safe,

transparent, and accountable development. Also in March, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled *Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development*. Although non-binding, the resolution encourages states to develop national legal and policy frameworks with a view to building global consensus on safe and trustworthy AI. It is evident that in the coming years, knowledge, as manifested in technology, will continue to exert a profound influence on IR. Observing the technological competition between the United States and China, the disruptive impact of Deepseek's launch in February 2025 on the global tech landscape, and the sweeping changes wrought by Industry 4.0 makes it clear that divorcing non-material factors from this world is no longer possible. Now more than ever, non-material factors are demonstrating their increasingly tangible impacts.

### ***3.2. The Re-Emergence of Non-Material Factors in Academia***

As the discipline of IR reflects international political life, the pronounced resurgence of non-material factors has correspondingly been recognized across multiple dimensions of IR scholarship.

*First*, theoretical schools that foreground non-material factors have found fertile ground to emerge and develop (Le Lena 2021). Constructivism, the English School, feminism, and postcolonialism have gradually gained prominence in the study of IR. Rather than analysing IR solely through the lens of calculations of power, security, and wealth, as is characteristic of realist and liberal theories, these approaches examine non-material factors such as ideas, perceptions, identities, and norms.

Among these, constructivism has received particular attention. While also seeking to explain key phenomena in IR, it does so not through a lens dominated by the material world but by focusing on ideational dimensions. For example, to explain the behaviour of an international actor, constructivist theory posits that social reality is constructed by human perception and based on the sharing of ideas. In other words, the intersubjective understandings of actors regarding social reality give it a structuring character vis-à-vis international actors. This means that such factors can constrain or enable the behaviour of actors in IR. The theory also emphasizes that the relationship between material elements and actors is in fact mediated by actors' perceptions; an actor's identity and interests determine its behaviour, and national interests are not fixed but depend on identity and perception. Notably, in analysing the power of an actor in IR, constructivist scholars argue that power is not merely the ability of one actor to compel another to do its bidding, but also the ability to create identities and interests that constrain the behaviour of others. Overall, constructivism foregrounds non-material factors and the ways in which states 'perceive' and 'interpret' the world around them (Le Lena 2021).

In addition to constructivism, the English School represents another theoretical tradition that accords significant importance to non-material factors within the international political environment. This approach offers a comprehensive framework for understanding global politics through three central concepts: the international system, international society, and world society. Crucially, scholars of the English School contend that it is ideational rather than material factors that fundamentally constitute and shape the nature of

international politics (Le Lena 2021). Particularly with respect to the concept of international society, English School scholars assert that shared outlooks (like-mindedness), common sets of rules, norms, institutions, and constructed identities form the basis of an international society, regardless of the anarchic character of the international system as conceived by realism (Bull 2012: 13).

Furthermore, as Le Lena (2021) analyses, a number of approaches, including feminism, normative theory, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, also emphasize non-material factors. These theories further highlight the limitations of traditional IR theories, particularly their neglect of the role of non-material elements in the study of IR. Feminist approaches highlight how power relations are embedded in gendered structures and discourses, thereby shaping both the strategies and legitimacy of international actors. Postcolonial perspectives similarly draw attention to how colonial histories, hierarchies, and identities continue to inform patterns of domination and resistance in global politics. By exposing these underlying dynamics, such approaches reveal how non-material factors, such as ideas, identity, hierarchy, and justice, directly influence the formulation of behaviour and strategy in IR.

*Secondly*, the emergence of new, specialized terminologies marks another significant trend in the field of IR, complementing the traditional conceptual framework.. This trend reflects an expanding scope of inquiry and an increasing scholarly recognition of, and interest in, the role of ideational and normative dimensions in global affairs. A range of concepts – such as *soft power*, *smart power*, *sharp power*, *network power*, *normative power*, *public diplomacy*, *cultural*

*diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and strategic narratives* and so on – have emerged to supplement pre-existing notions of power and diplomacy.

In a seminal article entitled “*Hard, Soft, and Smart Power*” (2013), Joseph Nye, the originator of the soft power concept, juxtaposes the material power imbalance between Vietnam and the United States during the war with the eventual outcome of the war to argue that power measured solely in material terms does not necessarily translate into effective foreign policy. This example paved the way for the notion of *smart power*, understood as the strategic combination of hard and soft power resources. It is, however, important to avoid

conflating hard power with material factors and soft power with non-material ones, even though non-material dimensions frequently serve as critical resources enabling the conversion of power into effective strategic outcomes. For instance, a country’s cultural appeal, its commitment to political values, or its legitimate and ethical foreign policy practices are often linked to soft power because of their capacity to persuade and attract other actors in the international system. In short, the expansion of vocabulary and conceptual innovation in IR underscores a broader epistemological shift, one that increasingly foregrounds non-material variables in both analytical and policy-oriented discourse.

**Figure 2:** *Frequency of Keywords in the Google Database (1930–2022)*



(Source: Author’s compilation using Google Books Ngram Viewer 2025)

*Thirdly*, research on non-material factors and theoretical works belonging to emerging schools of thought have gradually increased in influence and quantity within the field of IR. To illustrate this point, this study employs the Google Books Ngram Viewer tool to track the frequency of several key terms in Google’s publication database from 1920 to 2022.

The data clearly indicate a significant temporal shift in the frequency of terms such as “soft power,” “public diplomacy,” “cultural diplomacy,” and “cultural cooperation,” reflecting broader trends in scholarly engagement with these concepts. While “cultural cooperation” dominated academic discourse between 1950 and 1990, a notable transition occurred thereafter,

marked by a sustained rise in the usage of the other terms, most prominently “soft power.” Between 1990 and 2022, publications on “soft power” increased nearly 22 times, whereas those on “public diplomacy” rose by 2.5 times, “cultural diplomacy” by 3.5 times, and “cultural cooperation” by 1.1 times, underscoring the growing academic attention to these evolving frameworks of international engagement.

Beyond the increase in the number of studies examining non-material factors, citation data from related research, especially studies that apply or advance theories emphasizing non-material dimensions, also attest to the significant resurgence of this line of inquiry within the academic community. In practice, citation counts serve as a proxy for scholarly influence and relevance. Works with high citation counts frequently constitute foundational contributions, widely utilized in teaching, research, and policy formulation.

According to data from InCites (Clarivate), the AD Scientific Index (2025), the Observatory of International Research (2025), and findings by Hannah June Kim and Irvine Bernard Grofman (2019), only a very small proportion of publications in the fields of political science and IR surpass the threshold of 5,000 citations, a distinction generally reserved for “classic” or “highly cited works” (Kim and Grofman 2019). An analysis of Google Scholar data pertaining to several seminal publications by key scholars aligned with the constructivist tradition – including Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, and John G. Ruggie – reveal that these works fall within this exceptional category. Specifically, as of June 2025:

i. *Activists Beyond Borders* (1998) by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink has been cited 21,205 times.

ii. *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) by Alexander Wendt has been cited 18,953 times.

iii. *Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics* (1992) by Alexander Wendt has been cited 13,330 times.

iv. *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink has been cited 13,172 times.

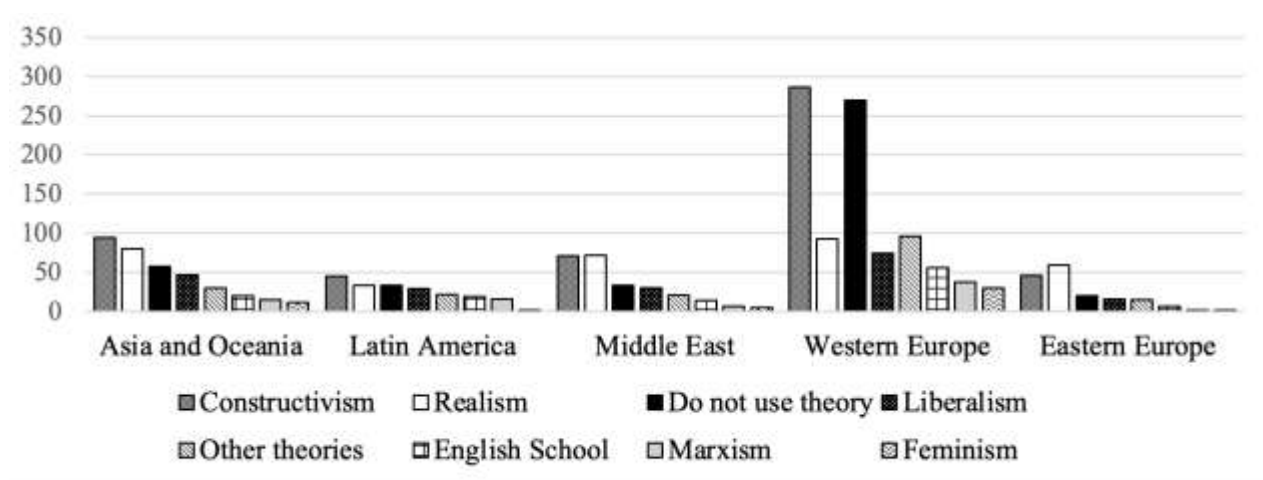
v. *International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order* (1982) by John G. Ruggie has been cited 7,470 times.

vi. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* by Peter J. Katzenstein has been cited 5,859 times.

vii. *National Interests in International Society* (1998) by Martha Finnemore has been cited 5,594 times.

Notably, findings from a 2017 report by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project at the Global Research Institute, William & Mary (United States), indicate that constructivism is among the most widely employed theories in IR research.

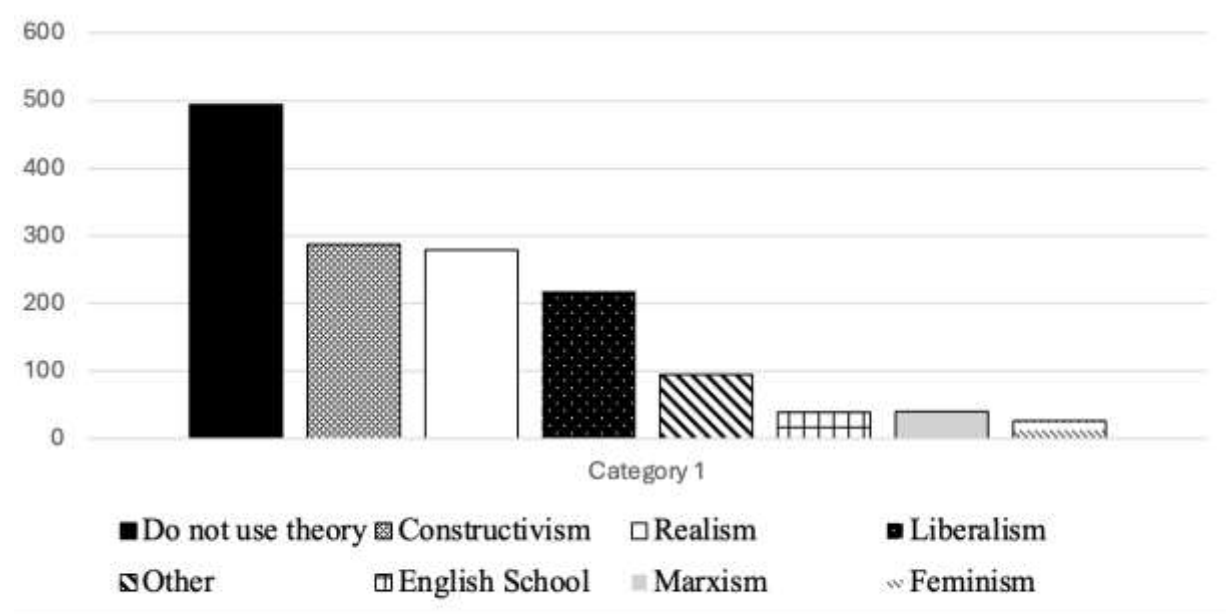
Specifically, in 2017, the TRIP Project conducted a study employing statistical methods and surveys, distributing questionnaires to individuals, including lecturers and IR researchers at universities, research institutes, and government committees, across 36 countries. The survey received 3,784 responses (Maliniak et al. 2017). In response to the question, “*What is your primary approach to the study of international relations?*”, the aggregated responses by region were as follows.

**Figure 3:** What is your primary approach to the study of international relations?

Source: Maliniak et al. 2017

Based on Figure 3, it is readily apparent that, with the exception of Eastern Europe, where scholars most frequently selected realism as their primary theoretical approach, constructivism was the most commonly chosen approach among scholars in all other regions.

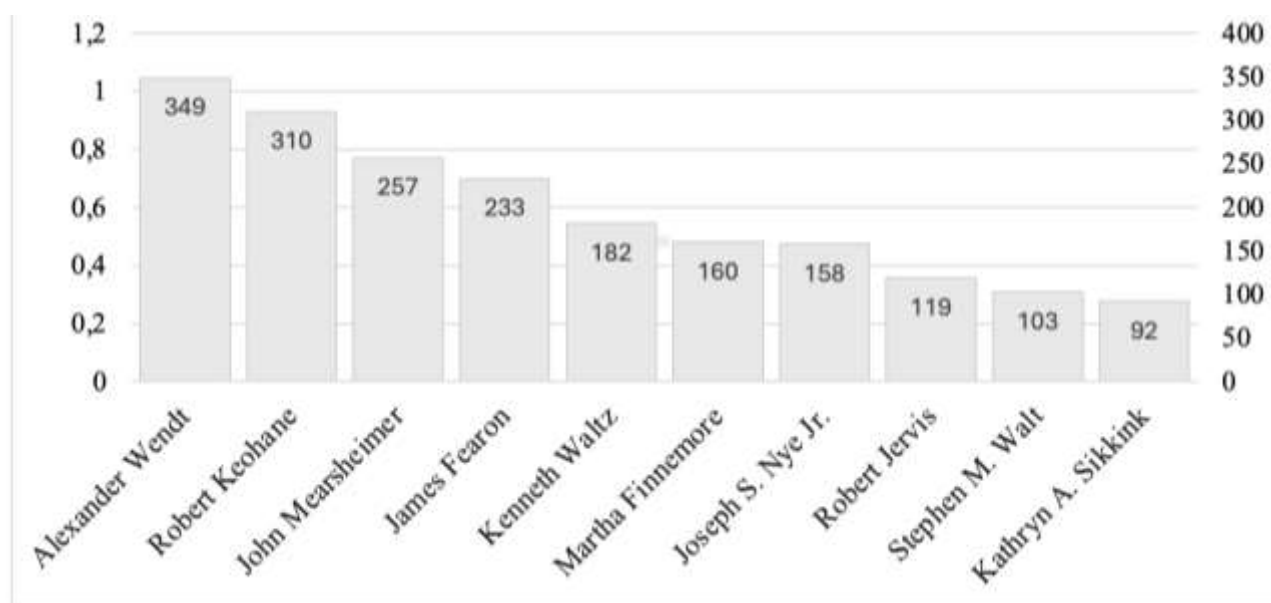
Similarly, when the same question was asked of a group of IR researchers, lecturers, and scholars based in the United States (Figure 4), the findings were comparable: *constructivism* remained the most widely applied theoretical approach in studies of IR. *Realism* and *liberalism* ranked second and third, respectively.

**Figure 4:** What is your primary approach to the study of international relations? (For US faculty only)

Source: Maliniak et al. 2017

Regarding the question “List the four scholars who have had the greatest influence on the field of international relations over the past twenty years?”

**Figure 5:** List the four international relations scholars who have had the greatest influence on the field over the past twenty years



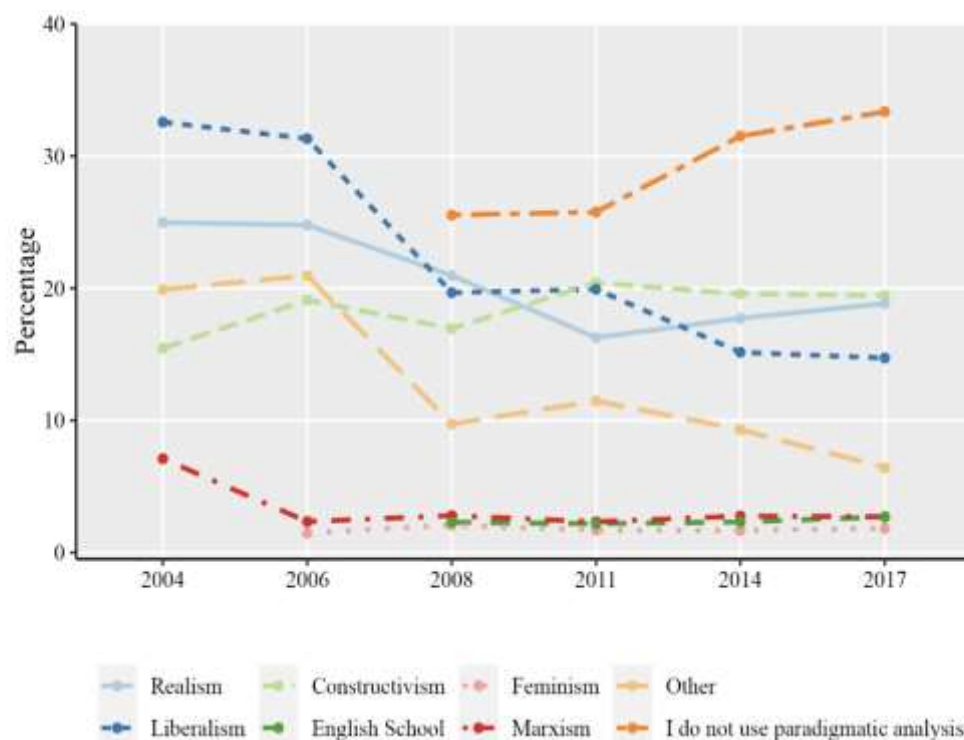
(Source: Maliniak et al. 2017)

The results are presented in Figure 5. According to these findings, Alexander Wendt, a leading scholar of constructivism, was identified as the most influential figure in the field of IR over the past twenty years. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn A. Sikkink, also prominent representatives of constructivism, were likewise ranked among the most influential scholars by IR researchers.

It should be noted, however, that these figures do not diminish the enduring influence of established scholars such as Robert Keohane, John Mearsheimer, and Kenneth Waltz. Rather, the results reflect

the relative “prominence” of these scholars at the time of the survey.

This observation aligns closely with Figure 6, which compiles biennial TRIP surveys from 2004 to 2017 on the most frequently employed approaches and theories in IR research. According to this figure, there has been a notable shift in theoretical trends. In 2004, liberalism was the most widely used theory, followed by realism, constructivism, and Marxism. By 2011, however, constructivism had surpassed liberalism, emerging alongside realism as one of the two most frequently applied theories.

**Figure 6:** Trends in the Application of IR theories in Research (2004–2017)

(Source: Peterson et al. 2022)

These results clearly demonstrate that constructivism, a theory that foregrounds non-material factors, has gradually secured a prominent position among the most widely applied theoretical approaches in IR research. This trend also suggests a corresponding increase in studies that address non-material factors.

#### 4. Conclusion

International relations has long been a field predominantly shaped by material factors. However, the end of the Cold War, the deepening processes of globalization, the democratization of international political life, and the shared human aspiration for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world have collectively enabled the re-emergence of non-material factors. These factors,

historically deemed secondary, now occupy a position of undeniable prominence. Factors such as values, culture, beliefs, knowledge, and norms, are increasingly critical in shaping behaviours, guiding strategies, and influencing the redistribution of power among international actors.

Whereas in the past, non-material factors primarily operated at the national level, they have now expanded across regional and global spheres under the impetus of globalization. They provide foundations for cooperation, foster strategic trust, and help establish new norms of conduct, yet they also pose risks of division, conflict, and instability in IR. Abundant empirical evidence, from the rise of global social movements and the intensification of technological and knowledge competition, to the escalation of religious and ethnic conflicts and the spread of global popular



culture, attests to the growing salience of non-material factors in structuring, operating, and shaping the contemporary world order.

Simultaneously, the proliferation and rising influence of theoretical approaches emphasizing non-material dimensions, such as constructivism, the English School, and postcolonialism have charted new directions for IR studies. These frameworks enrich academic discourse while equipping scholars with essential tools to identify, analyze, and explain the complex, multidimensional transformations of the present world, far beyond the materialist confines of realism or liberalism.

This article has not sought to exhaustively analyze the impacts of non-material factors, but rather to demonstrate the necessity of studying them in light of contemporary drivers such as global movements, democratization, cultural diffusion, great power competition, and technological transformation

Thus, as IR grows ever more intricate and unpredictable, the study of non-material factors has become an objective necessity. It is essential not only to grasp the true nature of power, interests, and the behaviours of global actors, but also to inform sound policymaking, develop trust, foster cooperation, and lay the foundations of a peaceful, stable, just, and sustainable international order. This is both an urgent challenge and a critical opportunity for the discipline of IR to evolve and reaffirm its scholarly value. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to contribute constructively to human progress in the twenty-first century.

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