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## INTERFERENCE DEBATE WITHIN THE UN: RECORD OF SYSTEMATIC STUDY

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**Abstract.** This article explores the interference discourse within the United Nations. Methodologically, the article proves that public rhetoric of states is representative with regard to their perception of interference. It also introduces a novel database on interference discourse based on speeches of national representatives at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) during the high-level week from 2004 to 2023. The debate at the United Nations reflects a persistent gap in concerns regarding foreign interference between the West and the rest of the organization. Its origin dates back to the 1970s, which witnessed the rise of a coalition of developing and socialist states seeking to strengthen the sovereignty norm in international relations and Western states striving to remove the issue from international agenda. The collapse of the socialist camp strengthened positions of the West. As a result, the UNGA abandoned previous practice of regularly adopting resolutions condemning interference. Nevertheless, a number of states preserved the issue on the agenda through their rhetoric in this body. They became especially vocal in the early 2010s after the wave of political upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa which exemplified the role of external actors in fostering protest activities. Condemnation of interference at the United Nations comes primarily from the Middle Eastern and Latin American states, as well as Russia, North Korea and China. Sporadically, African governments also engage in it. Other developing states demonstrate less interest in the matter. The West remains reluctant to talk about interference. Despite attempts to manipulate the UN agenda, the organization remains instrumental for non-Western countries to condemn interventionism and undermining of state sovereignty. The use of systematic data on perceptions of interference helps identify like-minded partners interested in cooperation against this common challenge.

**Keywords:** intervention, UN, sovereignty, international security, anti-hegemonism, discourse, perception, public rhetoric of states.

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## ДИСКУРС ВМЕШАТЕЛЬСТВА НА ПЛОЩАДКЕ ООН: ОПЫТ СИСТЕМАТИЧЕСКОГО ИЗУЧЕНИЯ

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**Аннотация.** В статье исследуется репрезентация проблемы вмешательства на площадке ООН. Для оценки динамики восприятия государствами вызовов их суверенитету была сформирована база данных на основе выступлений в Генеральной Ассамблее ООН в ходе Недели высокого уровня с 2004 по 2023 г. Описывая эволюцию дискурса, авторы фиксируют сохраняющийся разрыв в восприятии проблемы вмешательства между Западом и остальными участниками организации. Собранные данные помогают выявить единомышленников, заинтересованных в активизации сотрудничества для борьбы с общим вызовом государственному суверенитету.

**Ключевые слова:** вмешательство, ООН, суверенитет, международная безопасность, антигегемонизм, дискурс, восприятие, публичная риторика государств.

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## INTRODUCTION

Hans Morgenthau, one of the founders of international studies, argued: “Intervention is as ancient and well-established instrument of foreign policy as are diplomatic pressure, negotiations and war” [1, p. 425]. Nevertheless, since the 2010s, there has been an explosive growth of research interest in this phenomenon (Figure 1). Even scholars acknowledging the long-standing history of foreign intervention tend to argue that it acquires new forms in the 21st century [2, 3, 4].

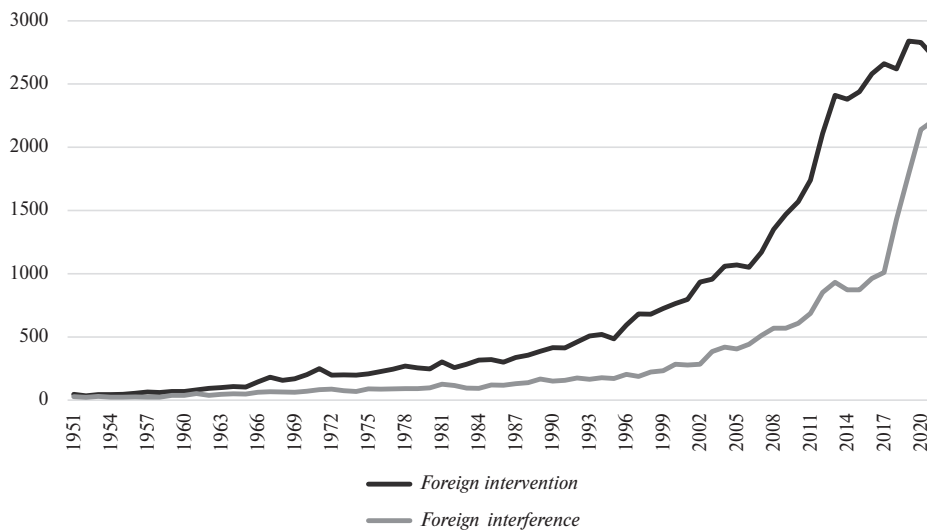
Scholarly literature exhibits sceptical assessments of foreign interventions impact, both on the politics of targeted countries – objects of intervention – and on the achievement of their initiators’s strategic goals [5, 6, 7, 8]. Meanwhile, the perception of risks to state sovereignty caused by external subversion (referred to as “intervention” in this article) remains understudied. To what extent do States regard foreign intervention as a threat? Which States are concerned and what are the reasons for their apprehensions? Answering these questions can foster the understanding of the international security landscape, as the ideas engendered in the minds of political leaders largely determine their policies. Thus, fears of foreign

intervention influence international relations regardless of their validity.

The differences in expression of threat perceptions by individual States complicates designing of representative indicators for cross-country comparisons [9, 10, 11]<sup>1</sup>. The present article resolves this challenge by assessing keynote speeches of official representatives at a venue with universal membership, namely the High-level Week in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). It covers discussions at this forum since the mid-2000s.

The UNGA brings together heads of State, governments and foreign ministers on an annual basis. Its High-level Week draws close attention of diplomacy, media and experts. During the General debate, a representative of each UN member State has a chance to outline national perspective on a wide range of issues without being restricted to a specific agenda. Therefore, references to

<sup>1</sup> Events that capture the actors’ perceptions that an intervention has taken place in a given case and that this intervention is meaningful to them. This requires the onset of events that are equally likely to occur across a wide range of (preferably all) countries in the world. The latter circumstance degrades the usefulness of national policy documents (such as national security strategies) for the research because not all States develop and publish them in the public domain. In addition, in some cases, these sources vary greatly in structure and content.



**Figure 1.** Number of scientific publications on foreign interference in the internal affairs of States

Compiled by the authors based on *Google Scholar*.

foreign intervention on this venue reflect the high significance attributed to this matter.

This study pursues several interrelated objectives. In methodological terms, it examines the representativeness of the rhetoric of States at the UNGA as a reflection of their threat perception. The article also presents a new database, a novel tool for studying concerns regarding foreign intervention. Finally, the study identifies changes in the threat perception regarding foreign interference in the context of transformation of international system throughout late 2000s to 2010s the mid-2020s.

The article summarizes the analysis of debates at the UNGA from 2004 to 2023. This extended period helps identify the stable patterns and major shifts in the perception of foreign intervention. The intervention discourse at the UN is compared to the record of voting on resolutions condemning such activities in preceding decades (the practice of their adoption significantly declined in the early 2000s).

The study reveals a growing concern among States regarding foreign intervention. However, this rise of threat perception at the official level falls far below the surge of reference to foreign intervention in research literature. References to foreign interventions at the UNGA appear as part of either the anti-hegemonic discourse or stigmatization of opponents at the regional level. The former contains

accusations brought against the USA and Western countries. The latter is exemplified by States attributing subversive actions to actors within their region and against the countries in their region. The UN venue serves the interests of mostly non-Western States, critical of foreign interventions. Meanwhile, the USA and its allies seek to exclude this issue from the agenda. Even with the growing speculation regarding the election interference in Western countries in the 2010s, the latter practically avoided raising it at the UNGA.

The subsequent analysis is divided into five sections. The first section considers the significance of public presentations as a tool to signal threat perception. The second section provides a retrospective analysis of how the issue of intervention has been addressed within the UN before mid-2000s. The third section presents the methodology of the “UN References to Foreign Interference in Internal Affairs” database. This database is employed in the fourth section to evaluate the discourse on intervention from 2004 to 2023. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings of the study and outlines potential practical implications.

#### PUBLIC RHETORIC AS THREAT PERCEPTION INDICATOR

The role of perceptions in foreign policy attracts attention of various theoretical traditions

in international relations studies. Robert Jervis played the leading role in placing it on the research agenda [12]. He claimed that structural stimuli enable various and often competing interpretations. Therefore, decision makers do not simply react to the external developments, rather they attach meanings to the available observations. Neoclassical Realists linked threat assessment in foreign policy with the individual beliefs of national leaders as well as their previous experience and strategic culture<sup>2</sup> of a political community [13]. In turn, constructivists argued that individual perception is a product of internalized normative expectations<sup>3</sup> which spread through transnational networks [14].

Whereas Neoclassical Realists expressed primary interest in differences in threat assessment among States, Constructivists focused on the convergence of perceptions in the course of States' interaction. However, both groups of scholars acknowledged that governments do not necessarily see the international environment as it really is. Moreover, they agreed that it is the perceptions of reality that determine foreign policies, not the reality per se.

The paramount role of perceptions in international relations fosters States to signal their perspectives to external audiences, including their concerns regarding primary threats. States need to communicate their vision of the world to attract allies and partners for joint activities as well as to deter opponents [15, 16]. For this reason, they voice their own assessments through various venues, including the United Nations.

The positions expressed by States at the UN attracted considerable research interest. This is particularly evident in studies on voting behavior

at the General Assembly [17, 18, 19, 20]. The latter annually adopts dozens of resolutions on a wide range of issues. Voting patterns serve as indicators of how States assess various international situations. However, the analysis of these data does not help to reveal the extent of their concerns. The UNGA's documents are not legally binding for Member States, so their support of any document sometimes serve just as a friendly gesture to its sponsors rather than a reflection of actual concern.

Voting against resolutions is somewhat more informative than voting in favor of resolutions, as the former occur relatively infrequently in the UNGA. Such votes indicate a strong interest in a particular issue, coupled with disagreement over the resolution's content. However, it may also reflect a gesture of solidarity with a key ally that is fundamentally opposed to the resolution or seeks to diminish its political significance<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, focusing on negative votes risks overlooking States that are principled supporters of the resolution and its provisions.

The opposite is true for another indicator of attention to an issue — resolution sponsorship. When a State sponsors a document, it typically signals a genuine concern with the issue at hand. However, there are limitations to this indicator. A failed vote can result in reputational costs, making States reluctant to propose initiatives that are unlikely to gain sufficient support, even if the issue is of substantive interest to them. Moreover, the established practice of swaps, whereby States agree to co-sponsor resolutions on topics of limited relevance in exchange for reciprocal support on issues of greater priority diminishes the value of this indicator [22, 23, 24].

States experience less constraints in their rhetoric than in their voting or sponsoring of draft resolutions. Therefore, policy speeches offer a more promising basis for analyzing threat perceptions. However, such speeches are not immune from strategic manipulations. The possibility of bluffing or other forms of misrepresentation aimed at achieving political or diplomatic advantage raises

<sup>2</sup> Strategic culture is understood as historically conditioned and consistent approaches, shared by representatives of a certain community, to assessing the international situation and responding to emerging stimuli.

<sup>3</sup> Role normative expectations are perceptions of socially encouraged, acceptable and condemnable behaviour of subjects with a given identity and social status within a certain community with regard for the context of some action. For instance, in most societies, killing others is a condemned act, but in the case of armed conflict, killing the enemy is not only condemned but is encouraged by the same societies. In societies that practice the death penalty, execution is also not socially condemnable but acceptable.

<sup>4</sup> It is indicative that the USA keeps records of other States' votes on resolutions significant for itself and can use this information in building relations with them [21].

important questions about the credibility of publicly voiced assessments<sup>5</sup>.

Existing literature attributes the credibility of signals to the costs that they impose on their initiator. As a result, it considers public rhetoric as a relatively weak form of signalling compared to material actions [26]. An important exception constitute threats and promises that entail reputational risks if unfulfilled. For instance, a failure to act on a stated threat may embolden competitors to escalate pressure on the State that issued it. Conversely, abandoning publicly declared promises can hinder ability of a State to secure future cooperation. In both scenarios, the gap between words and actions damages the reputation, increasing the cost of pursuing national interests later on [27, 28]. Compared to such threats and promises, voicing concern about particular challenges holds limited signalling value, as States can raise alarms over a broad range of issues without genuine intent to address them.

Nevertheless, public rhetoric at multilateral platforms can serve as informative evidence of States' assessments of the international environment provided that three conditions are met:

- the forum where it takes place does not impose restrictions on the subject matter of statements, allowing speakers to raise issues they deem appropriate;
- the platform attracts the attention of target audiences, increasing the likelihood that statements made will be noticed by them;
- the length of the presentation is limited, which encourages speakers to focus only on what they consider most important.

Under these conditions, the incentive for States to misrepresent their assessments declines. Distorting their position would risk missing a rare opportunity to draw attention to challenges they consider important. This makes multilateral platforms especially valuable for small and medium-sized States, which often lack alternative means to promote their agendas<sup>6</sup>. When voting or co-spon-

<sup>5</sup> John Mearsheimer concluded that States rarely lie to each other outright, but this does not rule out other forms of misrepresentation [25].

<sup>6</sup> Albert Hirschman [29], for instance, writes about the importance for community members of the very possibility to be heard.

sorship of resolutions, these States are more likely to adjust their behavior in line with the preferences of more powerful actors.

The General debate at the UN General Assembly during the High-level Week meets all these criteria. It gives States a chance to voice their assessments without restrictions on the subject matter<sup>7</sup>. The UNGA sessions bring together a large number of heads of State and governments, and foreign ministers<sup>8</sup>. Due to the large number of participants, the rules of procedure recommend limiting statements to 15 minutes<sup>9</sup>. This threshold compels delegations to focus on issues they deem most important. In this context, including a topic means its prioritisation over others by a given State.

The universal membership of a venue increases its value for the analysis. The UN membership is a primary indicator of international recognition, and the General Assembly is the only UN body where all members are equally represented<sup>10</sup>. In addition, observer entities such as the Vatican, the European Union, and Palestine also participate in the General debate. The annual nature of the High-level Week enables longitudinal and cross-national studies, making it a robust source for comparative research.

## THE ISSUE OF INTERVENTION IN THE UNITED NATIONS DOCUMENTS

The United Nations debate on intervention evolved over time. The UN Charter enshrined the fundamental principles of international law. The Organisation's non-interference "in matters

<sup>7</sup> Formally, the UNGA sessions are devoted to particular topics, but the latter are formulated in a deliberately vague manner and do not limit the speakers' choice of issues to cover. For instance, the 78th session in 2023 was entitled "Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity: Accelerating Action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals towards Peace, Prosperity, Progress and Sustainability for All".

<sup>8</sup> In 2023, only 6 of 193 speakers were Permanent Representatives of States to the UN.

<sup>9</sup> In practice, speakers regularly deviate from the time limit, but usually only slightly. In 2023, the average speech length was 19 minutes.

<sup>10</sup> In 2023, four States, Afghanistan, Madagascar, Myanmar and Niger, did not take the floor during the general debate.

which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” is among them. Another principle requires States to refrain “from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”. Finally, the Charter proclaims “the principle of sovereign equality” of states [source 1, art. 2]. At the same time, the document does not contain an explicit reference to the inadmissibility of States to interfere in each other’s internal affairs<sup>11</sup>. This omission provoked discussions on the status and scope of the relevant norm [30, 31, 32, 33].

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, the struggle between the socialist and Western camps defined the operation of the UN. Both sides accused each other of foreign interventions. The USA and its allies retained the majority in the body that determined the outcome of votes in the General Assembly [19]. Therefore, in 1949, the Western States promoted a resolution demanding “to refrain from any threats or acts, direct or indirect, aimed at impairing the freedom, independence or integrity of any State, or at fomenting civil strife and subverting the will of the people in any State” [source 3]. The Soviet Union opposed the document, stipulating that it did not object to that particular paragraph [source 4]<sup>12</sup>.

By the second half of the 1950s, the process of decolonisation changed the calculus by strengthening the position of newly independent Third World countries. The latter expressed acute concerns regarding their recently acquired sovereignty [34, p. 787]. Amid a period of reduced tension in the Cold War, both the USSR and the USA sought to garner the support of these states [35]. The convergence of these trends led to a narrowing of the divide between the two major blocs within the United Nations. This alignment facilitated

<sup>11</sup> In the case “Nicaragua v. United States”, the UN International Court of Justice categorised the principle of non-intervention as a source of legal obligations relying on customary law rather than the UN Charter [source 2].

<sup>12</sup> Belarus, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Ukraine also voted against the resolution. During the First Committee’s deliberations, five States abstained from voting on this article. In 1950, they also opposed the UNGA’s Resolution 380 (V) “Peace requires deeds”, which affirmed that “whatever the weapons used, any aggression, whether committed openly, or by fomenting civil strife in interest of a foreign power, or otherwise, is the gravest of all crimes against peace and security throughout the world”.

the near-unanimous adoption of the 1957 resolution on peaceful and good-neighbourly inter-state relations, which formally introduced the principle of “non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” into the normative framework of interstate relations [source 5].

In 1965, the UN General Assembly adopted almost by a consensus the Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty. This document extended the prohibition beyond military intervention to include other forms of coercive influence. It specifically emphasised that: “No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from it advantages of any kind” [source 6]. The following year, a new resolution reaffirmed these principles [source 7]. The frequency and consistency of such references underscore the extent to which violations of sovereignty were regarded as a critical and immediate concern.

The apogee of “détente” in the UN was Resolution 2625 adopted in 1970. It approved the Declaration on the Principles of International Law, which enshrined the obligation of governments “not to interfere in matters within the domestic jurisdiction of any State” [source 8]. The adoption of the document by consensus allowed it to be classified as *opinion juris* – confirming the established legal norm.

By the mid-1970s, the United States and its allies confronted a surge of economic nationalism in many Third World countries. This trend posed a challenge to Western corporations that had continued to benefit from unequal exchange even after the formal end of colonialism. In response, Western states began actively promoting neoliberal ideology, advocating for market liberalisation and, over time, advancing the broader project of globalism. [36]. In the late 1970s, Western countries also began to emphasise human rights discourse as a means of countering the influence of leftist movements and national liberation struggles. By the early 1980s, this discourse evolved into a broader political agenda centred on democratisation [37].

As a result, the West increasingly opposed the adoption of international documents that endorsed the sovereign right of States to independently determine their development models. A prominent early example was the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, introduced at the UN General Assembly in 1974 [source 9]. The document affirmed each State's right to freely choose its economic system, asserted full sovereignty over national resources, and prohibited the use of coercive economic or political measures. Although Western States either opposed the document or abstained from voting, they lacked numbers to prevent its adoption.

Throughout the second half of the 1970s and into the 1980s, developing countries, backed by the socialist bloc regularly introduced draft resolutions on foreign interventions, while Western states opposed such efforts. Despite their reluctance, the UNGA adopted resolutions entitled "Non-intervention in the Internal Affairs of States" between 1976 and 1980 on an annual basis [sources 10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. The consistent focus on this issue underscored its continued importance for a large number of member states. These resolutions typically received broad support, with approximately 70–80% of UN members voting positively.

A recurring theme in these resolutions was the request to all member States to publicly express their stance on the issue of non-intervention. This provision conflicted with the preference of the USA and its allies to downplay or avoid the topic. In response, Western representatives typically argued that existing documents already sufficiently condemned intervention, rendering additional resolutions unnecessary. They also warned against isolating a single principle from the broader framework of international law<sup>13</sup>. They focused on the inadmissibility of military intervention, whereas the adopted resolutions went further, condemning slander campaigns, subversive activities, and economic coercion.

The struggle culminated in 1981 with the adoption of the Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Af-

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the response from Spain, the Netherlands and the USA in the UN Secretary-General's reports [sources 15, 16].

fairs of States [source 17]. It reflected the interests of the Third World States not only in condemning various forms of foreign influence but also in stipulating that it does not affect the right of peoples to self-determination and the struggle against colonialism, racism and foreign occupation. This justified these issues withdrawal from the internal affairs. This made the document even less acceptable to the USA, which supported Israel and South Africa despite the negative consequences for its image of a champion of human rights [38, 39].

Starting from 1989, Third World countries, redefined as developing countries after the end of the Cold War, submitted draft resolutions to the UNGA entitled "Respect for the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of States in their electoral processes" on an annual basis [sources 18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. They had a more limited scope than the previous documents, postulating the inadmissibility of external influence on elections<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, they explicitly condemned the apartheid regime in South Africa and expressed support for the struggle of the Palestinian people against the Israeli occupation.

Concerning resolutions on non-interference in elections, the voting patterns that had prevailed since the late 1970s initially continued. The USSR and its allies aligned with developing countries in support of the resolutions, while Western states generally opposed them or abstained<sup>15</sup>. The collapse of the socialist camp significantly altered the balance between these factions. The former People's democracies (Albania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia) and the Baltic States joined the countries voting against or abstaining. As a result, by 1995, fewer than half of UN Member States supported such resolutions. Nevertheless, the UN General Assembly adopted similar resolutions in 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002 [sources 23, 24, 25, 26, 27], after which this practice discontinued.

<sup>14</sup> Another distinction from the resolutions of the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s: they were adopted following the report of the Third UNGA committee, not the First one.

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, they were considered immediately after the resolutions calling for periodic genuine elections on an alternative basis. The latter were supported by Western countries and adopted by consensus.

Following the end of the Cold War, the advocacy for international involvement in the internal affairs of States – often justified by the imperative to protect human rights – gained significant traction [40]. The USA and its allies promoted the notion of “limited sovereignty”. Meanwhile, representatives of international organisations seeking to expand their mandates, emerged as key proponents of this approach. In 1992, the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali presented a report “An Agenda for Peace”, stating: “The time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty has passed” [source 28].

These statements corroborated with the inclusion of the United Nations in the resolution of internal conflicts, the number of which increased dramatically in the 1990s. The UN Security Council (SC) adopting the resolutions approving the deployment of international forces to Somalia to stop the civil war set a precedent. In several cases (for instance, in Cambodia and Bosnia), the UN assumed control over local authorities, turning these countries into de facto protectorates. Such actions were allegedly justified by the risks of extending cross-border instability from territories with limited statehood.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan compared the Organisation to an “international policeman”. He stated in one of his presentations: “Our job is to intervene” [source 29]. His 2000 report set the issue in polemical terms: “I also accept that the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention offer vital protection to small and weak states. But to the critics I would pose this question: if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?” [source 30].

His rhetoric resonated with a number of developing countries reassessing threats. In particular, given the collapse of statehood in Somalia, the genocide in Rwanda and the armed clashes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), cross-border threats dominated threat perception in Africa. The Constitutive Act of the African Union in 2000 authorised the Assembly to launch intervention in cases of war crimes, genocide and crimes

against humanity<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, a significant number of states remained sensitive to challenges to their sovereignty. The bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 increased the polarisation over the issue of foreign intervention [41].

Attempts to resolve the contradiction between the principle of non-intervention and the apprehensions of cross-border threats gave rise to the “Responsibility to Protect” principle (*R2P*). It emerged from deliberations of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty initiated by Canada. Subsequently, the principle found its way into the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change established under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General [source 32]. Consensus resolution of the UNGA on the results of the World Summit Outcome 2005 approved it [source 33].

The document postulated: “Each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity”. The international community should assist national governments using “appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful means”. If these measures were insufficient, then “collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organisations” was envisaged [source 33].

Violation of the *R2P* was equated to threats to peace, breach of peace and acts of aggression – therefore providing grounds for forceful reaction. The provisions of the resolution excluding genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity from the scope of the non-interference in internal affairs principle looked similar as the earlier efforts to exempt condemnation of apartheid and foreign occupation from it<sup>17</sup>. However, the document recognised the exclusive powers of the UN SC to authorise coercive measures.

<sup>16</sup> This paragraph immediately followed the provision on Member States’ non-interference in each other’s internal affairs [source 31].

<sup>17</sup> The danger of such offences countering international peacekeeping was justified by the reference to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948 [source 34].

Thus, it excluded any justification of intervention without a mandate from this body.

The R2P introduction reinterpreted the UN Charter in terms of the prohibition of the Organisation's interference in internal affairs. The States sensitive to challenges to state sovereignty conditioned by foreign interference regarded the authorisation of the UN SC as a preferable alternative to voluntaristic interventions by individual actors. Meanwhile, Western States supported the R2P to normatively enshrine constraints over sovereignty.

Throughout decades, the changing balance of power shaped the debate over foreign interventions at the UN. After a brief period of consensus lasting from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, it highlighted the clash between developing and socialist countries seeking to strengthen national sovereignty against Western states seeking to withdraw this topic from the international agenda. After the Cold War, the strengthening of the latter resulted in the cessation of the thematic resolutions, and the attempts to enshrine constraints concerning state sovereignty within the framework of the R2P.

Despite the absence of new significant resolutions condemning foreign interventions after the early 2000s, the topic did not disappear from the UN agenda. It persisted in statements of official representatives in the UNGA. The study of these documents allows for a better understanding of threat perceptions by individual States of the challenges of foreign intervention in the absence of other markers such as voting results.

#### METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYSING THE RHETORIC OF STATES ON THE ISSUE OF INTERVENTION

The UN provides large amounts of data on its activities, including not only voting records but also transcripts of meetings. The latter constitute a valuable source of information on positions of individual States on a range of issues, including the challenges to state sovereignty. However, the sheer volume of interactions within the UN impose difficulties for data collection and selection. In order to promote systematic examination of the role of foreign interventions in national

threat assessment our research team developed a specialized dataset based on the UN records<sup>18</sup>.

It used transcripts of General Debates held during the UN General Assembly's High-Level Weeks, as published in the United Nations Digital Library<sup>19</sup>. The regularity, inclusiveness, and high-level nature of the format predefined the selection of this category of documents. During the General Debate at the High-Level Weeks, which takes place annually, official representatives of almost all Member States, as well as observers, voice their positions on the international agenda. Unlike other discussions, the general debate does not result in the adoption of resolutions on specific topics, allowing speakers to freely choose subjects for their remarks.

The high status of the venue justifies its value in signalling threat perception. However, its relevance may vary for certain groups of states. For small and medium-sized countries, the venue is important due to their limited access to alternative mechanisms for conveying their positions to major powers. In contrast, powerful States have access to a broader range of diplomatic channels. Nevertheless, their engagement with the General Debate reflects a desire to shape the multilateral agenda and reinforce the legitimacy of their privileged role in international affairs.

The research team tracked references to the issue of foreign intervention through analysis of the transcripts, using a predefined word-marker dictionary. To minimise the risk of subjective bias, each transcript was coded independently by at least two researchers. In cases of disagreement, the coders engaged in discussion to resolve discrepancies. The head of the team decided on unresolved issues.

The methodology was tested on a pilot sample consisting of transcripts from the year 2021. Based on its result, the research team refined the coding guide using the collected data, and cross-validated preliminary findings. Subsequently, it filled the complete database chronologically, year by

<sup>18</sup> Up-to-date versions of the database and the coding guide are available at MGIMO's (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) repository: <https://open.mgimo.ru/handle/123456789/2466>

<sup>19</sup> See: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>

year. Minor adjustments to the data categorisation procedures were made as necessary, and earlier entries were revised accordingly to ensure consistency. Discrepancies between coders' assessments remained minimal, typically not exceeding a dozen cases per year, which indicates a high level of methodological sophistication of the study.

To identify relevant references, the research team developed a list of keywords (markers), drawing on terminology used in the previously adopted UNGA resolutions. The coding process relied on 20 primary terms and their derivatives, including *intervene, intervention, interfere, interference, intrude, intrusion, subvert, subversion, meddle, meddling, coup, election influence, assassinate, assassination, overthrow, overthrowal, invade, invasion, occupy, occupation*. Coders excluded instances in which these terms appeared in irrelevant contexts, such as references to *medical intervention*.

Each identified reference received a unique identification number. Additionally, the database incorporated metadata such as the speech date, the UNGA session number, the title of the corresponding document in the United Nations Digital Library, and hyperlinks to original sources. The research team included the markers used to classify each passage under the topic of intervention to facilitate verification. The database also recorded the speaker's name and position, the country represented, and the corresponding country code according to the UN Statistics Division classification (M49). This approach enabled a systematic analysis of trends in State references to the issue of intervention over time.

The research team collected supplementary information to deepen the analysis of how States perceive foreign interventions. In instances where speakers explicitly identified either the initiators or targets, this information was included in the database with the relevant M49 codes. If a single statement referenced multiple targets of intervention, the research team treated each as a separate data point. Furthermore, it documented references to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, along with instances in which speakers denied their own country's involvement in acts of intervention.

The database also captured speakers' assessments regarding the goals and modalities of intervention. Immediate objectives attributed to interventionist actions included attempts to influence political trajectories in specific regions, alter the composition of political leadership, reshape the nature of political regimes, and challenge territorial integrity, among other factors. When such objectives were explicitly stated, the relevant textual excerpts were incorporated into the database. The database also documented direct objectives in dedicated columns using a nominal scale to indicate the presence or absence of each specified attribute. Additionally, where speeches referenced strategic motivations behind interventions these were also included in the database.

The classification of intervention modes in the database comprised 14 subtypes: political statements; official visits; economic coercion techniques; granting or denial of aid; cyber operations; propaganda; material support to socio-political organisations; training of activists; preparation of political forces; training of armed opposition; asylum for political exiles; facilitation and execution of coups; political assassinations; military intervention; and other methods. The coding of these modes followed the same nominal-scale approach used for immediate objectives.

Each category was defined on the basis of existing documents and scholarly literature. A comprehensive coding guide accompanying the database covers these definitions. Nonetheless, the analysis of certain variables proved challenging due to limited available information. For example, speakers rarely specified the goals or methods employed by alleged initiators of intervention.

Following the coding process completion, the research team assembled a dataset of intervention references spanning the period from 2004 to 2023. This timeframe encompasses several major international crises that served as focal points in global political discourse, including the 2010–2011 socio-political uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (commonly referred to as the “Arab Spring”), the 2014 coup d'état in Ukraine, the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, and the initiation of Russia's Special Military Operation in 2022. As such, this period offers a valu-

able basis for tracking evolving threat perceptions and conducting cross-country comparative analyses.

### EVOLUTION OF THE THREAT OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION ASSESSMENT IN THE UN (2004–2023)

The analysis of the entries in the dataset attracted attention to certain methodological issues concerning the comparative value of different metrics. For the purposes of this article, any instances included in it solely on the basis of the markers occupation and invasion (along with their cognate terms) were excluded from the analysis. While these markers were initially included to assess the representativeness of the dataset, subsequent review revealed that they often describe actions not directly related to interventions in internal affairs, rather other types of coercive activities<sup>20</sup>.

Additionally, in some speeches, multiple “interventions” appeared in relation to different countries. In the coding process, the research team treated each such mention as a separate observation. However, such enumerations were sometimes illustrative or reflected structural aspects of the speech rather than an intentional effort to highlight the significance of each case. Accordingly, the analysis prioritised the number of speeches that mentioned intervention, rather than the total number of individual references – despite the fact that a single speech could contain multiple mentions.

The collected data enabled insights into the overall patterns of threat perception regarding foreign interventions. In addition, findings for regional groupings and for coalitions of States striving to influence the international affairs (*G77*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD) helped to identify States that play crucial role in placing the issue on the agen-

da (see the table)<sup>21</sup>. As these groupings have very different number of members, the research team calculated weighted scores dividing mentions and speeches with references to this issue by the number of members to a corresponding category of States<sup>22</sup>.

The data demonstrates that after 2004 the number of speeches as well as the number of references to interventions during the UNGA’s High-level Weeks tended to increase on average (Figure 2). However, this increase was considerably more gradual than the rapid surge in academic publications (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the growth in the number of speeches mentioning intervention remained smaller than the rise in total references. Although, representatives of certain States engaged with the issue in greater detail, the overall number of States addressing it remained relatively stable. Taken together, these trends suggest a moderate rise in concern over foreign intervention as a challenge to state sovereignty. They also highlight the uneven distribution of concerns among States, with an average of only 30 to 50 countries – less than one-quarter of the UN membership – raising the issue in any given year.

From the mid-2000s to mid-2020s, concerns over foreign interventions experienced several surges and declines. The peak occurred in 2012, when 58 representatives addressed the issue, generating a total of 97 references. This record for the number of references was only surpassed in 2023, although the number of speakers in that year did not exceed the 2012 figure. A renewed increase in references to foreign interventions took place between 2017 and 2019, although this trend was driven by a smaller group of States. The primary factor influencing these fluctuations was the political uprisings wave in the Middle East and North Africa during the early 2010s – particularly in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria – which witnessed a massive involvement of

<sup>20</sup> For instance, a significant number of references in the dataset are condemnations of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The occupation goals are not aimed at influencing the internal structure of the Palestinian National Authority (at least that is not the primary objective). Moreover, previous the UNGA resolutions dissociated this issue from the domain of foreign interventions.

<sup>21</sup> EU representatives speak at UN High-Level Weeks, as well as participate in the *G7* and OECD; therefore, particulars of their speeches were taken into account in the analysis.

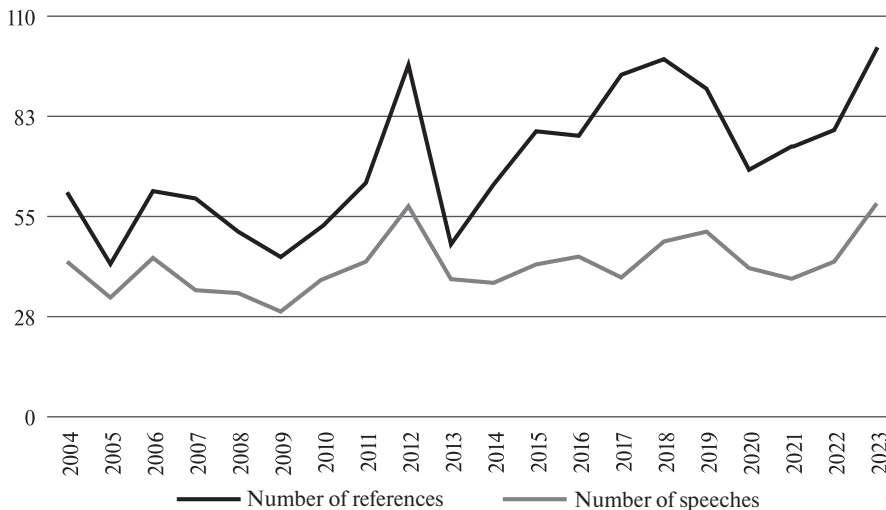
<sup>22</sup> For instance, the African Group (53 States) is more than twice the size of the Eastern European Group (23). The *G77* includes almost four times as many members as the OECD – 134 and 37, respectively.

**Table.** Division of States by regional groupings in the UN

African States (54)	Asia-Pacific States (54)	Eastern European States (23)	Latin American and Caribbean States (33)	Western European and other States (29)
Algeria	Afghanistan	Azerbaijan	Antigua and Barbuda	Australia
Angola	Bangladesh	Albania	Argentina	Austria
Benin	Bahrain	Armenia	Bahamas	Andorra
Botswana	Brunei Darussalam	Belarus	Barbados	Belgium
Burkina Faso	Bhutan	Bulgaria	Belize	UK
Burundi	Vanuatu	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bolivia	Germany
Gabon	Vietnam	Hungary	Brazil	Greece
Gambia	India	Georgia	Venezuela	Denmark
Ghana	Indonesia	Latvia	Haiti	Israel
Guinea	Jordan	Lithuania	Guyana	Ireland
Guinea-Bissau	Iraq	Poland	Guatemala	Iceland
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Iran	Moldova	Honduras	Spain
Djibouti	Yemen	Russia	Grenada	Italy
Egypt	Kazakhstan	Romania	Dominica	Canada
Zambia	Cambodia	North Macedonia	Dominican Republic	Liechtenstein
Zimbabwe	Qatar	Serbia	Colombia	Luxembourg
Cape Verde	Cyprus	Slovakia	Costa Rica	Malta
Cameroon	Kiribati	Slovenia	Cuba	Monaco
Kenya	China	Ukraine	Mexico	Netherlands
Comoros	Democratic People's Republic of Korea	Croatia	Nicaragua	New Zealand
Congo	Kuwait	Montenegro	Panama	Norway
Côte d'Ivoire	Kyrgyzstan	Czech Republic	Paraguay	Portugal
Lesotho	Laos	Estonia	Peru	San Marino
Liberia	Lebanon		El Salvador	USA
Libya	Malaysia		Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Türkiye
Mauritius	Maldives		Saint Kitts and Nevis	Finland
Mauritania	Marshall Islands		Saint Lucia	France
Madagascar	Micronesia		Suriname	Switzerland
Malawi	Mongolia		Trinidad and Tobago	Sweden
Mali	Myanmar		Uruguay	
Morocco	Nauru		Chile	
Mozambique	Nepal		Ecuador	
Namibia	United Arab Emirates		Jamaica	
Niger	Oman			
Nigeria	Pakistan			
United Republic of Tanzania	Palau			
Rwanda	Papua New Guinea			
Sao Tome and Principe	Republic of Korea			
Seychelles	Samoa			
Senegal	Saudi Arabia Singapore			
Somalia	Syria			
Sudan	Solomon Islands			
Sierra Leone	Tajikistan			
Togo	Thailand			
Tunisia	Timor-Leste			
Uganda	Tonga			
Central African Republic	Tuvalu			
Chad	Turkmenistan			
Equatorial Guinea	Uzbekistan			
Eritrea	Fiji			
Eswatini	Philippines			
Ethiopia	Sri Lanka			
Republic of South Africa	Japan			
South Sudan				

Note. To avoid double counting, the research team treated Türkiye as a member of the group “Western European and other States” as the State is elected to various UN bodies from this group, although it is also a member of the “Asia-Pacific States” group. On the same basis, the United States was also counted as a member of the “Western European and other States” group, although it is formally an observer.

Compiled by the authors.



**Figure 2.** Dynamics of references to interventions in the UNGA

Compiled by the authors.

external actors (for example, NATO intervention in Libya led to ousting of Myanmar Qadafi).

Subsequent waves of concerns regarding foreign interventions are more difficult to link directly to specific events. Chronologically, they followed widespread allegations of external influence during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the European Union electoral campaigns together with the intensification of Western efforts to discredit Russia after its launching the Special Military Operation. Nonetheless, Western engagement in the debate on intervention remained limited and did not cause this surge. The sharp decline in attention to the topic happened in 2020–2021. It coincided with the *COVID-19* pandemic, which temporarily dominated the international agenda.

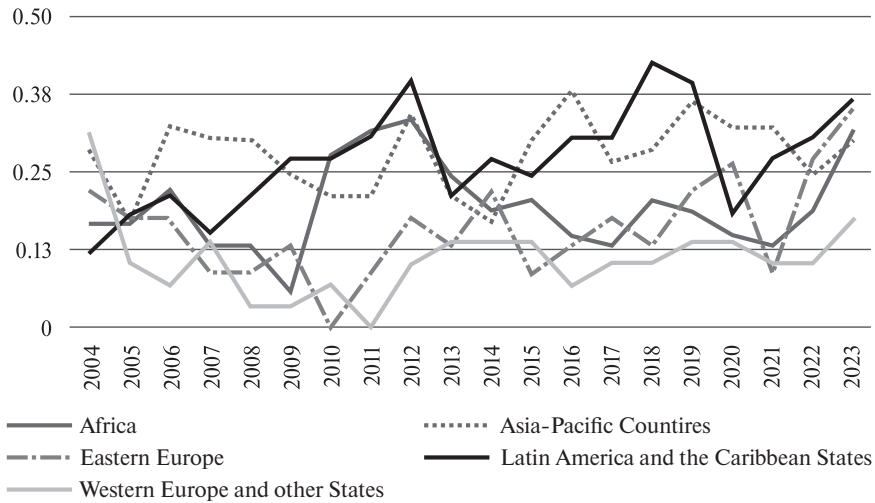
Detailed analysis reveals that less than a half of the UN Member States in any regional group consistently raised the issue of foreign interventions between 2004 and 2023 (Figure 3). Nonetheless, since the late 2000s, there has been a noticeable increase in concerns over this issue, initially led by Asian countries, followed by States in Latin America and the Caribbean. The influence of the Asian group on global indicators was particularly significant due to the large number of countries it comprises.

Individual Latin American States also exerted a disproportionate influence on the intervention-related discourse by repeatedly addressing the is-

sue in their General Debate speeches. Within the Asia-Pacific group, States from the Middle East were particularly prominent. Their concerns intensified during the Arab Spring (2011–2012), a period marked by a widespread political upheaval with external actors actively involved. These States continued to play a leading role in shaping the discourse in the late 2010s, amid intra-regional tensions. Mutual accusations by Qatar and Iran<sup>23</sup>, on the one side, and Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia on the other drove the surge in references during this period. It was these circumstances, rather than the scandalous elections in the United States, that caused the intensified debate on intervention at the UN venue in 2017.

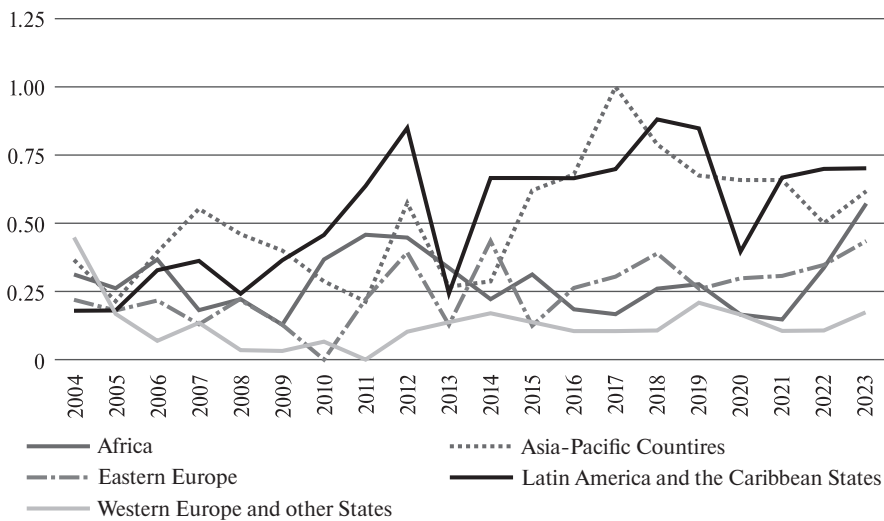
Among East Asian States, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was the most frequent source of references to the issue of foreign interventions, consistently using its rhetoric to accuse the United States and the Republic of Korea. China addressed the topic less frequently but still did so regularly. By contrast, US allies in the region rarely mentioned the issue, with Japan notably remaining silent on the subject for over two decades. In South Asia, Pakistan stood out as the most vocal State on intervention-related matters. It frequently accused India of subversive actions and also commented on the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

<sup>23</sup> Also Türkiye from the Western European Group.



**Figure 3.** Frequency of speeches mentioning intervention by regional groups

Note. The weighted score is the number of statements with references to intervention by representatives of States in a group, divided by the number of States in the group. Compiled by the authors.



**Figure 4.** Frequency of references to intervention by regional groups

Note. The weighted score is the number of references to intervention by representatives of States in a group, divided by the number of States in the group. Compiled by the authors.

In Latin America, increased references to violations of state sovereignty through foreign intervention coincided with the expansion of the region’s Left Turn, marked by the rise to power of governments critical of Western dominance in countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador. Representatives from these States not only highlighted regional concerns but also actively condemned Western military interventions

in Libya and Syria. Venezuela and Cuba played a leading role in shaping the discourse. Remarkably, Cuba was the only country to raise the issue of foreign interventions at every UN General Assembly session from 2004 to 2023.

African countries made a notable contribution to the increase in the total number of references to intervention in the early 2010s (see Figures 3, 4). At the same time, references to the situation in

Libya and Syria appeared in rhetoric of not only Arab States (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia) but also other representatives of the continent. After 2013, this wave subsided, and in the following decade, the share of speakers in the African Group voicing concerns regarding foreign intervention remained below the global average. It was not until 2023 that African States started to refer concerns regarding foreign interventions more often again. This wave largely represented a response to the political instability in the Sahel region and discussions surrounding the potential foreign interference in countries such as Mali and Niger.

The two remaining UN regional groups, Eastern European States, and Western Europe and Other States, are not only smaller in size but also showed comparatively lower levels of concern over the issue of intervention. An exception within Eastern Europe was Russia, which consistently addressed the topic starting from 2012 and ranks among the leading States in terms of total references. During the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia periodically raised concerns about threats to its sovereignty, particularly in the lead-up to the 2012 elections, but the topic disappeared from its rhetoric following the change in leadership. Belarus made occasional statements on the issue, while Ukraine started to address it more regularly after 2014.

Eastern European countries that are members of the European Union and NATO, similar to the Western European and Other States group, referred to the issue of foreign interventions infrequently. Within the latter group, France and the USA stand out as the most frequent speakers on this topic. However, their statements usually constitute responses to external accusations, in which they present their actions as non-interventionist. This defensive posture is particularly evident in the case of the USA, which leads by a substantial margin as the most frequently mentioned initiator of intervention, with 127 accusations posed by representatives of other States. Additionally, the issue surfaces periodically in the mutual criticisms exchanged between Greece and Türkiye in the context of the Cyprus dispute<sup>24</sup>.

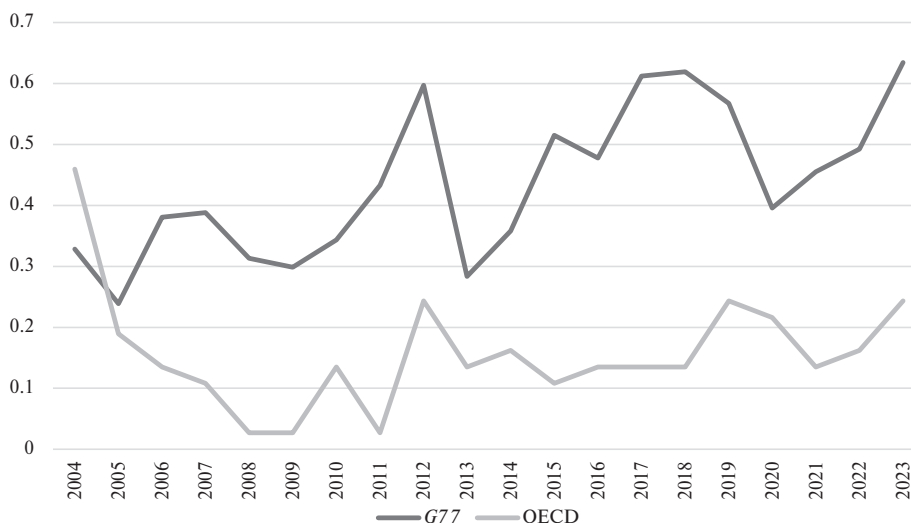
<sup>24</sup> Also in the rhetoric of Cyprus, a member of the Asia-Pacific group of States.

The West's defensive and suppressive stance on debates over foreign intervention in the UNGA is evident from a comparison of the rhetoric of *G77* vs. *OECD* members (Figures 5, 6). The former is a coalition of developing countries formed during the Cold War to defend their interests in the UN against the dominance of major powers. The OECD, by contrast, originated as a forum for developed economies, although its membership expanded in the 2000s and the 2010s through incorporation of several Latin American and East European countries with close ties to the USA. The positions expressed by these two coalitions are indicative of broader non-Western and Western approaches

Even ignoring the difference in the two groupings size, we can trace that the frequency of references to the issue of foreign interventions and speeches mentioning such interventions is noticeably higher among *G77* participants than among OECD representatives over the entire period under consideration, except for 2004. This anomaly is related to the attempts to justify the benefit of foreign interference under the R2P principle. The high number of references to the issue of intervention by the lobbyists of this concept – Canada, Australia, the UK, and New Zealand – is indicative. After the approval of the *R2P* concept in 2005, their attention to this subject subsided.

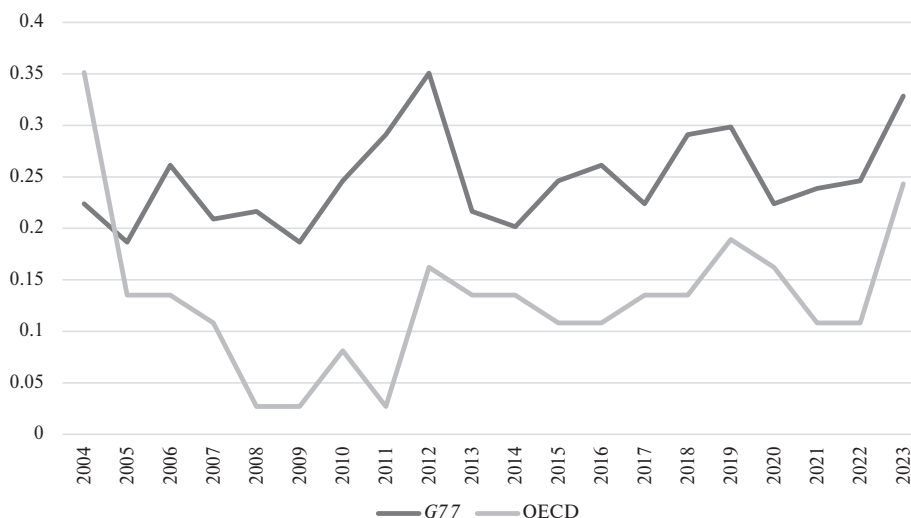
Thus, the analysis of the rhetoric during the High-level Weeks at the UN reveals a persistent difference in the threat perception of foreign interventions between the West and the other States. The latter put it forward more actively on the agenda and perceived the challenges of external influence more acutely. Nevertheless, the group of non-Western States is not homogeneous. The Middle East and Latin America play the leading role, followed by Russia, the DPRK and, less frequently, China. Sporadically, certain African States join them.

Political upheavals in the Middle East and Africa marked by significant involvement of external powers emerged as the primary drivers of concern over foreign interventions from the mid-2000s through the mid-2020s. Although Western countries, particularly the USA, are most frequently identified as initiators of intervention, the issue is



**Figure 5.** Frequency of references to intervention by G77 and OECD participants

Compiled by the authors.



**Figure 6.** Frequency of speeches mentioning interventions by G77 and OECD participants

Compiled by the authors.

also commonly raised in relation to regional tensions and disputes among developing countries themselves. This dynamic is especially apparent in the context of strained relations between Iran and several of its Arab neighbours. This dimension of the intervention issue makes it difficult to form a broad coalition based on condemnation of Western interventionism.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Western attempts to manipulate the United Nations, the UNGA remains an important venue for advocating anti-hegemonic ap-

proaches to the international order, condemning interventionism and attempts to undermine sovereignty. It provides useful indicators of threat perceptions of developing States, including the issue of foreign interventions.

While previous studies focused on voting statistics and co-sponsorship of resolutions, the present article relies on systemic studying of the States' rhetoric. It shows, among other things, that the "UN References to Foreign Interference in Internal Affairs" database provides a working tool for tracking trends and identifying similarities and differences in countries' positions.

The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2023) declared priority attention to supporting its allies and partners in “suppressing attempts of external interference within their internal affairs” [source 34]. In this regard, the data on threat perceptions of various groups of states contributes to the identification of like-minded players interested in intensifying cooperation in combating common challenges.

Despite the UN Charter lacking an explicit reference to the inadmissibility of states’ interference in the affairs of other countries, it arose as a fundamental principle of international law. In the period up to the early 2000s, the UNGA adopted a number of resolutions contributing to the definition of this phenomenon, enshrining its political condemnation and legal delegitimation. The Soviet Union and Russia actively participated in this work together with developing countries.

After the end of the Cold War, the West, in cooperation with the UN bureaucracy, succeeded in preventing new resolutions condemning foreign interventions. Some developing States have

adopted a contradictory stance, facing the cross-border threats from countries with limited statehood. Nevertheless, there remains a core group of actors adherent to the strict understanding of national sovereignty and critical of foreign interventions. It includes representatives from the Middle East, Latin America, and some Asian countries.

Based on the attention they pay to foreign interventions, these countries are Moscow’s priority partners in countering this phenomenon. The growing dissatisfaction with the West’s policy in a number of African countries may contribute to the expansion of a coalition opposing interventionism. It should be borne in mind that most of the abovementioned countries are no less concerned about challenges to state sovereignty resulting from interference by neighbours than about Western interventionism. Addressing these localised concerns, while helping to weaken regional tensions, can also alleviate the perception of intervention-engendered challenges to state sovereignty.

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