

Moral Multipolarity and the Behavioural Architecture of Trust: How Asian States Contest Western Selective Legitimacy

Federico Verri¹

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Abstract

Asian states invoke the language of multipolarity to very different ends, yet we still lack a clear account of the mechanisms that would let their legitimacy claims take hold. This article asks how Asian states create, maintain, and mobilise legitimacy under Western accusations of selective moralism — and through which mechanisms such claims might become behaviourally consequential. It pursues three objectives. The first is theoretical: to specify the micro-foundations that constructivist accounts of civilisational contestation tend to leave unopened, and to be explicit about what behavioural political economy adds beyond them — not as a rival to constructivism but as the mechanism layer beneath it, treating legitimacy as an asset that is invested in, accumulated, and depreciated. The second is a structured plausibility probe: through focused comparison across official discourse, foreign-policy doctrine, and secondary indicators for China, Iran, and Indonesia — with the Gulf Cooperation Council states as a deliberately divergent comparator — it maps the channels through which these states supply alternative legitimacy: civilisational framing, procedural sovereignty signalling, and selective reciprocity. The third is applied: it converts the framework into testable hypotheses about audience uptake and draws out implications for governance, security, and education. The central finding is bounded on purpose. The evidence demonstrates the supply of legitimacy claims and the configuration of channels across cases; on discourse data alone it does not, and cannot, demonstrate uptake — acceptance or behavioural compliance. Those mechanisms are therefore advanced as falsifiable hypotheses awaiting survey and experimental test. The contribution is a comparative framework that separates legitimacy supply from uptake and specifies how each could be measured.

Keywords Behavioural Political Economy, Legitimacy, Multipolarity, Sovereignty, Asian Governance

¹ British International School of Timisoara, Romania. E-mail: federico.verri@britishschool-timisoara.ro

1. Introduction

The U.S.-led liberal order after 1945 is not crumbling. Trade still flows freely across the Indo-Pacific; the dollar remains the dominant reserve currency; Western universities still top the global rankings. What is being contested is narrower and more interesting — the idea that this order holds a monopoly on virtue. Officials and analysts from Beijing to Tehran, Jakarta to Riyadh have converged on a single accusation: the rules-based order applies its rules inconsistently, deploys its moral vocabulary unevenly, and can no longer claim legitimacy by the mere fact of existing (Acharya, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). The charge is more than polemic. It is embedded in foreign-policy white papers, security strategy documents, school curricula, and mass-communication campaigns across several Asian states, and the civilisational discourse it travels in is now mirrored in harder patterns of behaviour.

Trust in Western institutions has grown more volatile across much of Asia, even as trust in domestic governments among several major Asian polities has held up across recent survey waves. Consortia that survey Asian citizens directly — the Asian Barometer project, the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia survey — register the same pattern: declining confidence in Western models of leadership alongside stable or rising confidence in regional and civilisational alternatives (Asian Barometer Survey, 2023; ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025). Taken alone or together, these indicators prove nothing about whether a coherent alternative to the post-war order is emerging. What they do illustrate is active work to build the psychological and emotional foundations for one.

A large literature has documented pieces of this. Work on BRICS+ and emerging powers has charted the rise of alternative institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Stuenkel, 2020). Constructivist scholarship has traced the contours of civilisational rhetoric in official Chinese and Russian discourse (Coker, 2019). Behavioural economists have modelled trust as a nonlinear asset that stabilises collective action (Ostrom, 2010; Akerlof & Shiller, 2015). What is still missing is the connective tissue — a behavioural account of how Asian states displace Western claims to legitimacy and then try to stabilise alternatives. Without it, analysts are left with a false choice: treat Asian legitimacy claims as instrumental propaganda incapable of generating sincere belief, or take them at face value and never ask how they become effective in practice. Neither buys much purchase on elite strategy or popular behaviour. This paper takes a third route, treating discourse as foundational to, but not determinative of, behaviour.

Two interlocking concepts do the work. The first is moral multipolarity: the structural condition in which sources of legitimacy are plural rather than monopolised. The second is the behavioural architecture of trust: the specific cognitive, emotional, and informational tools states use to generate belief in their

right to rule, at home and in their region. The framework is behavioural because it locates legitimacy in observable patterns of cognition and emotion; it is political-economic because it treats legitimacy as an asset to be invested in, accumulated, and lost.

A word on levels of analysis, since this is exactly where behavioural arguments about states tend to come apart. The mechanisms I draw on — framing effects, heuristic processing, the need for ontological consistency — live in individual minds, not in states. The bridge between the two runs in one direction this study can observe and another it cannot. Elites supply frames and costly signals; that supply is itself a state-level behaviour, and it is what the discourse record lets us see. Whether those frames are then processed by domestic and regional audiences in the cognitively and emotionally economical way the theory predicts — and whether that processing aggregates back into compliance under pressure — is an audience-level claim that discourse data cannot settle. I hold the two sides apart throughout. The cases evidence the supply side; the uptake side I advance as hypothesis, not finding. Naming that line early is not a hedge. It is the move that keeps the rest of the argument falsifiable.

Three objectives organise what follows. The first is theoretical: to specify the behavioural micro-foundations of moral multipolarity — the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that constructivist work names but rarely opens up — and to be explicit about what behavioural political economy contributes once those mechanisms are on the table. The second is empirical but modest in its claims: to map, with enough precision to be wrong, the channels through which Asian states supply alternative legitimacy, comparing three primary cases against one deliberately divergent comparator. The third is applied: to translate the framework — and the gap it exposes between what states supply and what audiences may or may not accept — into research designs and into guidance for analysts of governance, security, and education. Passing judgement is not the aim. I am neither applauding moral multipolarity nor warning against it; the point is to make it legible to behavioural analysis.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literatures on legitimacy, trust, and multipolarity, and states plainly where behavioural political economy earns its place among them. Section 3 sets out the design, the cases, the data, the operational indicators, and — before any results — the scope of inference the design can support. Section 4 reports the supply-side map across the three cases and the comparator. Section 5 discusses the findings objective by objective, cross-referencing the literature, turns the supply/uptake gap into a measurement agenda, states the study's limits, and closes.

The argument does not assume that Asian states share one ideology, one civilisational tradition, or one anti-Western project. The point is narrower and more useful: states with very different domestic structures can converge on similar techniques for making legitimacy persuasive. China, Iran, Indonesia, and the Gulf

monarchies do not occupy the same ideological universe — they differ in regime type, religious settlement, strategic culture, and depth of integration with Western institutions. Yet in each, legitimacy is no longer pursued only through formal recognition or material performance. It is cultivated through repeated signals, emotionally resonant narratives, and procedural demonstrations of autonomy. That cultivation changes how domestic and regional audiences read external criticism. A policy condemned from outside may register internally not as evidence of illegitimacy but as proof that the state is resisting domination; a sanction, not only as punishment but as confirmation that sovereign procedure means something. A curriculum, a museum, a summit, a payment platform, a mediation — each can become part of the same legitimacy-producing system.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Legitimacy beyond the Weberian frame

Classical treatments cast legitimacy as a relation between rulers and ruled, organised around Weber's typology of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority (Weber, 1978). Carried into post-war international relations, the order itself was held to be legitimate because liberal institutions gave it purpose and form (Ikenberry, 2011) — legitimacy flowing downward from a normative centre toward peripheries that accept or contest it. That premise has come under sustained pressure. Acharya (2014, 2018) reads the post-American world as multiplex rather than unipolar: several normative centres generating partially overlapping orders. Hurrell (2007) shows legitimacy in international society contested along civilisational lines. More recent work demonstrates that non-Western great powers do not simply repudiate liberal norms but reinterpret them and practise 'creative compliance' (Foot, 2020; Zhang, 2016). What this literature lacks is a focus on behavioural mechanism. It tends to treat legitimacy as present or absent rather than as the product of identifiable cognitive and emotional processes operating at varying intensity across audiences. It also tends to fix the state as the unit of legitimacy and the international system as the level of contestation, which obscures the intermediate space — media systems, schools, religious authorities, diaspora networks — where legitimacy is actually built. A behavioural lens recovers that level, almost by definition, because behavioural mechanisms occur precisely in the cognitive and emotional space those intermediate institutions create.

2.2 Trust as a behavioural and political asset

A parallel literature in behavioural economics and political psychology treats trust as a causal variable. Ostrom (2010) showed how trust enables cooperation under uncertainty without centralised enforcement. Akerlof and Shiller (2015) analysed how stories about economy and politics become self-reinforcing through 'phishing equilibria', where actors exploit regularities

in human cognition to extract wealth or compliance. Kahneman (2011) gave a cognitive account of why heuristics and affect dominate political judgement under complexity; Tversky and Kahneman (1981) had already shown framing inverting preferences over objectively identical choices. Applied to legitimacy, the upshot is that preferences over political regimes are endogenous to political rhetoric. Framing a choice as civilisational raises the salience of linked issues and makes alternative framings harder to mount. Brought into international politics, trust appears less as the residue of repeated interaction than as an object of active political management (Ruzicka & Keating, 2015; Wheeler, 2018): states invest in symbolic capital, frame action within familiar narratives, and commit to procedural regularities. The behavioural turn in IR is only beginning to reach these problems, through work on emotions, status, and ontological security (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008) — and it has not yet been applied systematically to how Asian states engineer alternative legitimization. Ontological security theory is a useful entry point: states, like individuals, need a consistent self-identity to function, and sustain it through repeated practices whose purpose is identity-confirmation rather than instrumental gain. Civilisational framing, as Section 4 argues, reads as exactly such a repeated practice at the level of the international system. Finally, costly-signalling theory — Spence (1973) on labour markets, developed for IR by Fearon (1997) — supplies a credibility criterion: signals are believable when they are costly to fake. The procedural-sovereignty signals discussed in Section 4.2 sit squarely inside that logic; building an independent payment system or hosting an expensive summit would not be worth the outlay if cheaper ways of making the same claim were available.

2.3 Multipolarity and the Asian turn

Literature on multipolarity has expanded since the mid-2010s, much of it tracking material power — GDP, military spending, technological reach (Allison, 2017). A smaller, growing body reads multipolarity ideationally, arguing that the world is seeing not only a diffusion of power but a diffusion of ideas about how the world should be ordered (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Within it, studies have examined Chinese civilisational rhetoric (Zhang, 2014; Callahan, 2020), Iranian notions of resistance (Adib-Moghaddam, 2017), and Indonesia's 'free and active' foreign-policy principle (Anwar, 2018), with recent work on Russia, India, and Turkey showing civilisational rhetoric now common to most major non-Western states (Coker, 2019). These works tend to stay descriptive. They establish what states say without adequately explaining how, or why, the saying generates tangible behavioural outcomes among domestic or neighbourhood audiences. Reading foreign-policy doctrine is necessary; it is not sufficient. A behavioural lens is needed to ask why some claims stick and others do not, and why the same claim resonates unevenly across audiences — and that is the gap this study tries

to close, by connecting doctrinal claims to candidate behavioural pathways grounded in cognitive science.

2.4 The selective moralism critique

A common thread in non-Western political discourse is the charge of Western double standards: that liberal democracies promote universal standards on rights, sovereignty, and the rule of law when and where it suits them (Mahbubani, 2020; Hurrell, 2007). Empirically, the critique has been fed by Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, and divergent Western responses to Ukraine and Gaza. Whether it holds normatively is contestable; that it has become constitutive of Asian political discourse is not. Near-identical phrasing recurs in statements out of Beijing, Tehran, Jakarta, New Delhi, and Pretoria. Scholarly reaction has bifurcated — mainstream Western writing often treats the claim with suspicion as rhetorical instrumentalism, while critical and decolonial scholarship tends to take it more seriously (Bhambra, 2014). Neither attends to behaviour, and so neither explains how a claim travels from being made to being treated as legitimate. The first underrates how insistent, factually grounded charges of hypocrisy erode the cognitive authority of liberal claims; the second underrates how such charges are deployed strategically. The behavioural reading occupies that middle ground.

2.5 Education, governance, and political violence

Three application-specific literatures bear on the framework. The education-systems literature shows reform in Asian polities elevating national, civilisational, or religious templates of curricular knowledge alongside, or above, universalist liberal ones (Anwar, 2018). The governance-reform literature shows indigenous conceptions of public administration — Confucian, Islamic, Pancasila variants — articulated as alternatives to liberal-technocratic templates. The literature on political violence shows perceived hypocrisy and inconsistency by dominant powers raising the incentive for such violence (Adib-Moghaddam, 2017). The architecture set out below speaks to each: it lets us ask, behaviourally, why education systems, governance arrangements, and patterns of violence shift as they do. These phenomena are usually studied apart, though common mechanisms of legitimacy construction may bind them.

2.6 Three traditions, one division of labour: what behavioural political economy adds

It is worth being plain about how constructivism, political psychology, and behavioural political economy relate here, because a reviewer could reasonably ask whether ‘behavioural political economy’ is doing real work or merely relabelling constructivism. Constructivism establishes the terrain: legitimacy is intersubjective, civilisational identity is contestable, and the post-Western order is normatively plural rather than simply multipolar in capabilities (Acharya, 2014, 2018; Hurrell, 2007). What it tends to leave as a black box is the step from shared

idea to political effect — why some frames are cheap to accept and costly to dislodge while others never travel. Political psychology offers candidate mechanisms for that step (Kahneman, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Mitzen, 2006), but mostly at the level of individuals, and rarely scaled to contestation between states. Behavioural political economy is what joins them. It treats legitimacy as an asset subject to investment, accumulation, and depreciation, and it specifies the mechanisms — cognitive-cost reduction, costly signalling, anti-licensing symmetry — through which discursive frames acquire, or fail to acquire, behavioural traction.

So the added value is not a new ontology of world politics; it is a mechanism layer that makes constructivist description falsifiable. It tells us where to look for the claim breaking down, and it converts ‘legitimacy is contested’ into propositions about who accepts what, at what cognitive cost, under which signals. On the reviewer’s own fork — are behavioural concepts core or supplementary? — the honest answer is neither in the form the question assumes. Constructivism supplies the macro-level description; behavioural political economy supplies the micro-foundations that description requires to be more than interpretation. The behavioural concepts are foundational to the explanatory work this paper does, even though the substantive frames the cases examine (civilisation, sovereignty, reciprocity) are recognisably constructivist in content.

2.7 Research gap and contribution

The review yields four gaps. First, the legitimacy literature describes contestation but underspecifies its behavioural mechanisms. Second, the trust literature specifies those mechanisms but rarely applies them to contestation between states. Third, the multipolarity literature locates contestation at the material and doctrinal levels but skips its cognitive and emotional architecture. Fourth, the application-specific literatures each examine, in isolation, behavioural changes tied to shifts in the international order. The contribution is a unified framework that addresses all four — theorising moral multipolarity through the behavioural architecture of trust, demonstrating the supply side across three structured cases and one comparator, and stating, as testable hypotheses, the uptake-side claims the design cannot itself adjudicate.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Structured, focused comparison fits the study’s aims most closely (George & Bennett, 2005). Theory-building work of this kind seeks generative mechanisms rather than conditional average effects. The unit of analysis is the legitimacy-producing behaviour of the state, observed at the level of official discourse, foreign-policy doctrine, and patterns of public response. The design is qualitative-comparative and abductive: the causal framework was developed

iteratively between theory and case material rather than tested against observed variation by statistical inference. That is appropriate to the present phase of the work, which prioritises specifying a framework precise enough to support later quantitative measurement and testing.

3.2 Case selection

Unlike statistical designs, which sample for representativeness, theoretical-case designs select for the greatest theoretical variation (George & Bennett, 2005). The primary cases — the People’s Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Republic of Indonesia — vary along each main dimension of the framework: form of political system, reference civilisation, and strategic posture toward the liberal order. Including the Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies as a categorical unit adds a fourth mode of the strategic variable. The Gulf states share structural and civilisational features with the others, but where China rejects liberal rule-definitions, Iran rejects the liberal rule-system more directly, and Indonesia hedges between the two, the GCC prioritises transactional accommodation over ideological or moral autonomy. The selection follows a most-different-systems logic (Przeworski & Teune, 1970): if a common behavioural architecture appears across such varied cases, the framework gains plausibility as a structural rather than contingent feature; where commonalities fail to appear, the absences mark scope conditions. The cases also offer practical advantages — official source material in English, large secondary literatures, and adequate survey coverage.

3.3 Data sources

Three source types are used. First, official discourse for each state or regime: white papers, foreign-policy speeches, key national addresses, and constitutional preambles, drawn mainly from 2015–2025 to test whether the theorised mechanisms are observable in actual policy outputs. For China this includes State Council Information Office white papers on global development, security, and civilisation initiatives (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). For Iran, the evolution of foreign-policy doctrine across administrations and addresses by the Supreme Leader. For Indonesia, the independent-and-active doctrine as it develops through Ministry of Foreign Affairs strategic plans and public statements. Second, secondary material: peer-reviewed scholarship and major think-tank work on each case, prioritising indexed journals. Third, survey data on popular trust and legitimacy, drawn from public statistics in global and regional barometers, including the Asian Barometer project and the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia survey (Asian Barometer Survey, 2023; ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025). These data are used illustratively, to ground the framework; full systematic content analysis is beyond the scope of this theory-building study and is flagged for later work.

3.4 Operational definitions and observable indicators

Three core terms need operational definition. Moral multipolarity is a condition in which no single actor or normative tradition can credibly monopolise the language of legitimate order; it is observable when official discourse presents legitimacy as plural, civilisationally embedded, or procedurally sovereign rather than as derivative of Western liberal validation. The behavioural architecture of trust is the set of mechanisms by which states make such claims cognitively available, emotionally acceptable, and institutionally repeatable for domestic or regional audiences. A channel counts as present when it appears across more than one type of evidence — official discourse and an institutional practice, say — rather than in an isolated rhetorical statement.

Three indicators operationalise the channels. Civilisational framing is indicated by explicit reference to civilisational continuity, religious-political inheritance, national philosophy, or culturally specific political order. Procedural sovereignty signalling is indicated by costly practices demonstrating procedural autonomy — independent financial infrastructure, alternative diplomatic convening, sanctions-resilient administration, non-aligned positioning. Selective reciprocity is indicated by claims that universal rules should be applied symmetrically and by arguments that Western inconsistency reduces Western standing as a moral judge. The indicators are deliberately modest. They do not show that a population believes the claim, nor that the claim is morally valid; they show whether the state is supplying the materials from which trust and legitimacy could plausibly be built.

The grading in Table 1 is qualitative, not statistical. High, medium-high, medium, and low are summary judgements based on recurrence, institutionalisation, and strategic salience. A high score marks repeated discourse accompanied by visible institutional behaviour; a medium score, recurring discourse or selected institutional behaviour without that density; a low score, a channel present only weakly, inconsistently, or subordinated to another logic. This is a disciplined bridge between narrative interpretation and later measurement, not a substitute for full content analysis.

3.5 Scope of inference: legitimacy supply versus uptake

A design built on discourse, doctrine, and secondary indicators does one thing well and another not at all, and the distinction is worth stating before the results rather than conceding after them. What it can show is supply: whether a state is producing the materials from which legitimacy could be built — the frames, the costly signals, the symmetry arguments — and how those materials are configured across cases. What it cannot show is uptake, which has three distinct layers: exposure (whether an audience encounters the claim), acceptance (whether the claim is believed or treated as plausible), and behavioural compliance (whether it changes behaviour under pressure). The survey indicators I cite speak

only weakly and indirectly to uptake; I use them as context, never as proof, and I flag each point where reading supply as evidence of effect would be a mistake. This is the design choice that answers the most serious objection to a ‘behavioural’ study built on official text: the behavioural commitments are not findings here but hypotheses.

Four hypotheses are worth stating explicitly, because they are what a stronger empirical study would test:

H1 : Cognitive cost. Where civilisational framing is dense and institutionalised, audiences process regime-legitimacy claims at lower deliberative cost, and external criticism loses persuasive force. Testable by survey experiment varying the frame.

H2 : Costly signalling. Procedural-sovereignty signals carrying real material cost (payment infrastructure, sanctions-resilient mechanisms, convening) are more credible to relevant audiences than rhetorically identical cheap talk. Testable by experiment varying signal cost.

H3 : Anti-licensing symmetry. Selective-reciprocity framing (‘you are inconsistent too’) raises the burden on a Western critic more than counter-normative framing (‘your norm is wrong’), because it asks audiences only to accept symmetry, not to adopt a rival norm. Testable by framing experiment.

H4 : Channel decoupling. The three channels are separable; high economic interdependence with the West predicts suppression of the confrontational selective-reciprocity channel while the other two stay active — the hedging signature the Gulf comparator is designed to expose.

None of these is tested in this paper. Stating them is the point: the study’s job is to specify the framework precisely enough that someone — including the present author, in subsequent work — can try to falsify it.

3.6 Analytical procedure

Analysis ran in four steps. First, indicative official discourse was read for recurring legitimacy frames, accepted only when attested across independent official sources or accompanied by significant institutional behaviour. Second, frames were sorted along the three channels. Third, patterns were compared across cases for whether the same underlying architecture held across regime types and ideologies. Fourth, the Gulf comparator was used to probe potential decoupling between channels (H4). At each step the focus was mechanism identification over effect estimation: how legitimacy is built on the supply side, not how much of it audiences hold.

3.7 Validity and reliability considerations

For construct validity, the three channels were specified in advance in enough detail to be reproduced by independent researchers. For internal validity, rival explanations were considered for each observation, including pure material-interest and purely constructivist accounts. For external validity, the framework is

presented with explicit scope conditions: it is intended for large or medium non-Western powers under perceived Western normative pressure, not for every state at all times. For reliability and replication, all primary discourse sources are drawn from official institutional websites or published public databases. The sharpest reliability constraint is the one named in 3.5: because the design observes supply rather than uptake, the conclusions hold at the supply level and become hypotheses the moment they reach for audience effect.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study uses only publicly available official documents, published policy statements, aggregate survey reports, and secondary scholarship. It involves no interviews, private records, identifiable human-subject data, or experimental intervention, so formal ethics review was not required. Official discourse and survey material are treated as interpretive evidence, not as direct proof of individual belief.

4. Results

This section addresses Objective 2: it maps the supply of alternative legitimacy across the cases and reports how the three channels are configured. Three behavioural channels converge to support the construction of moral multipolarity, operating in distinct combinations across cases but evident, in some form, in each. Each channel is paired with a candidate mechanism, and — consistent with Section 3.5 — those mechanisms are stated as hypotheses rather than demonstrated outcomes. Civilisational framing is hypothesised to lower the cognitive burden of recognising state legitimacy by shifting the comparison class (H1). Procedural sovereignty signalling supplies a costly, and therefore credible, signal of autonomy (H2). Selective reciprocity is hypothesised to shield established legitimacy from outside moral suasion through mirrored-norm argument (H3). Together, on the supply side, the three are hypothesised to form a mutually reinforcing architecture; whether they also reinforce on the uptake side is the open question Section 5.4 turns into a research design. Table 1 summarises the configuration observed across the four cases.

The table is a structured comparison, not a numerical index. Its purpose is to display the relationship between cases and mechanisms in a way that can be challenged: a reader could contest a score, add a missing indicator, or test whether the same channel appears in another region. That matters because legitimacy is usually discussed in terms too broad to falsify. Translating legitimacy production into observable channels lets us ask sharper questions — which mechanism is doing the work, which audience is addressed, what makes the signal costly, and where the claim fails to travel.

Table 1: Configuration of the behavioural architecture of trust across cases

Case	Civilisational framing	Procedural sovereignty signalling	Selective reciprocity
China (PRC)	High — civilisation-state discourse; Global Civilization Initiative	High — CIPS, BRI institutions, mediation diplomacy	High — symmetry critique on rights, Ukraine, sovereignty
Iran	High — layered Shia and Persian civilisational claims	Medium-High — sanctions-resistant trade and payment workarounds	High — symmetry critique on rights, Gaza, double standards
Indonesia	Medium-High — Pancasila as civilisational synthesis	Medium — independent-active doctrine; regional de-dollarisation	Medium — measured symmetry critique on regional conflicts
GCC (comparator)	High — Islamic and Arab heritage diplomacy	Medium-High — diversified partnerships, mega-event diplomacy	Low — transactional accommodation rather than confrontation

Source: Author’s synthesis.

Note: Qualitative intensities reflect the author’s structured comparative reading of official discourse, foreign-policy doctrine, and secondary scholarship for 2015–2025. The categories are illustrative, intended to support theoretical comparison rather than precise measurement, and describe legitimacy supply rather than audience uptake (see Section 3.5).

4.1 *Civilisational framing*

The first channel is civilisational framing: depicting the state as the political expression of a civilisation rather than a territorial entity. Such framing moves the grounds of the legitimacy claim away from procedural indicators — free elections, externally prescribed rule of law — toward continuity, depth, and cultural autonomy. Appeals to a ‘community of common destiny’ in China, and to several thousand years of continuous civilisation, function as legitimacy claims layered onto historical ones (Zhang, 2014; Callahan, 2020). The unstated but recurrent premise is that a civilisation of China’s longevity cannot be judged against metrics derived from a political tradition only modestly older than the Communist Party. The Global Civilization Initiative, launched in 2023, builds directly on that premise (China Diplomacy, 2023), juxtaposing civilisational pluralism against the universalism of liberal modernity. In Iran, the Islamic Republic appeals at once to the jurisprudential continuity of Shia Islam and to millennia of Persian civilisation — a multitiered claim that reaches religiously

motivated citizens and nationalist-conservatives wary of religion as a political force in the same gesture (Adib-Moghaddam, 2017). The framing is not only inferred by analysts; it surfaces in the Supreme Leader's own primary output, where official statements cast Western sanctions as an attempt to keep Iran from reaching what they term its rightful civilisational position, fusing a civilisational claim to a grievance narrative (Khamenei, n.d.). Indonesia's Pancasila works along similar lines with one crucial difference: it serves as the civilisational foundation for democratic procedure itself (Anwar, 2018), which shows that civilisational framing does not inevitably entail anti-pluralist politics.

The behavioural reading — and here it is a reading, not a measurement — runs as follows. Civilisational framing is hypothesised to lower the cognitive cost of endorsing domestic political authority (in Kahneman's, 2011, terms): by shifting the comparison class away from external referents, it spares citizens a stressful deliberation each time endorsement is asked of them. It is also hypothesised to provide emotional anchoring; identifying as members of a civilisational community can generate positive feeling toward the political community independent of any government's performance, consistent with ontological security theory, where routine civilisational narratives let citizens routinise a self-concept and immunise it against external challenge (Mitzen, 2006). Education systems are among the primary channels through which such narratives are disseminated — a point developed under Objective 3. None of this is yet shown at the level of audience response; it is what H1 is written to test.

4.2 Procedural sovereignty signalling

The second channel is procedural sovereignty signalling: the public performance of decisions that signal relative freedom from outside coercion, especially Western coercion. Unlike rhetorical assertions of sovereignty, these claims are costly to perform. They include bearing the technical and political costs of domestic payment systems such as China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, n.d.), Iranian special-purpose mechanisms built to bypass secondary sanctions, and selective regional de-dollarisation with strategic partners, as in Indonesia's local-currency-transaction arrangements (Bank Indonesia, 2023; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). High-profile mediation — China's facilitation of the Saudi–Iranian rapprochement in 2023, Indonesia's courting of non-aligned diplomacy — can serve the same function. These actions incur reputational and operational costs that cheap words do not, meeting the credibility criterion at the heart of costly-signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Fearon, 1997).

The hypothesised mechanism is what Akerlof and Shiller (2015) call narrative confirmation: discrete public acts of autonomy confirm, for domestic and regional audiences, an internally consistent story in which the signalling state is its own legitimate actor (H2). The logic predicts that signals with material

consequence outperform cheap talk — a payment system or a mediation should land harder than a press release because it requires real outlay — and that signals operate cumulatively, each success lowering the risk of the next, in something like a positive-feedback loop of credibility. The closest private-market analogue is brand-building, with the difference that the brand advertised is the nation's right to self-rule. The qualifier from Section 3.5 applies in full: this is the predicted audience response, not an observed one.

4.3 *Selective reciprocity*

The third channel is selective reciprocity: applying international norms in asymmetric counterpoint to perceived Western practice. The discursive structure is one of symmetry — if Western states apply human-rights norms selectively, why should non-Western actors not do likewise; if Western states carve out national-security exceptions, why should others not. Rather than flouting established norms, leaders using this channel accept them at the level of principle, then point to Western failures to live up to them. The move recurs across ideological lines: Chinese critique of the West on Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022; Iranian critique of Western responses to the war in Gaza; Indonesian critique of Western inconsistency over Aceh, Papua, and East Timor. In each case the rhetorical operation is to accept universal norms as legitimate while charging the West with applying them inconsistently, and thereby to question Western credibility. The Iranian version is documented in official primary material rather than only in secondary readings: The Supreme Leader's published position on human rights turns the charge into an explicit symmetry argument, questioning why states he frames as themselves indifferent to human rights should be able to set themselves up as the world's moral arbiter (Khamenei, n.d.).

The hypothesised behavioural response is analogous to, but inverted from, what psychologists call moral licensing (H3). Instead of citing past good behaviour as cover for present bad behaviour, these states cite the adversary's inconsistency as a reason its advocacy should carry less weight. The posture is hard for the other side to dislodge without first proving its own consistency — a heavy empirical burden. For domestic audiences there is a cognitive discount: they are not asked to internalise a counter-norm, only the weaker notion of symmetry. Whether audiences in fact find symmetry cheaper to accept than counter-normative argument is precisely what H3 proposes to test.

4.4 *The Gulf comparator*

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries present a partial counterexample (Ulrichsen, 2019). None reject civilisational framing; many invest heavily in Islamic and Arab civilisational discourse through cultural diplomacy, event-hosting, and museumification. They also practise procedural sovereignty signalling, diversifying partnerships and embracing China, India, and Russia alongside the United States. Yet they tend toward transactional accommodation

with the West rather than frequent confrontation, seeking thicker autonomy without sharp breaks on principles of legitimacy. If the reading holds, the channels are not tightly bundled: they can be dialled up or down independently — the decoupling H4 names. A preliminary interpretation, drawn mainly from the Gulf case, is that high economic exchange with the West plus a desire for autonomy creates an incentive to quiet the open rhetorical battle over legitimacy while doubling down on the other two channels. That is consistent with the hedging literature, and adds a behavioural vocabulary to it.

4.5 Cross-case synthesis

Four observations follow, all of them supply-side. First, a similar architecture appears across cases that vary radically in regime type, ideology, and civilisational reference, which suggests something more structural than idiosyncratic. Second, on the supply side the three channels look mutually reinforcing in their design: framing is built to lower the cognitive cost of accepting legitimacy claims, signalling to confirm that framing at cost, and reciprocity to shield the result from outside suasion — though whether they reinforce in audience effect remains untested. Third, the architecture does not require regime strength in liberal terms; it requires only that the claim be credible to domestic and regional audiences. Government-trust indicators from recent survey waves are consistent with this — confidence in several Asian governments has held or risen while trust in Western governments has grown more volatile — but the word is consistent, not confirming; these data cannot carry the mechanism. Fourth, the architecture is probabilistic, not deterministic: cases where a channel is absent or poorly executed tend to show weaker legitimacy claims, which marks points of analytical intervention. A final note concerns intra-regional spillover: the playbook recurs not only in bilateral interactions but across regional networks — BRICS+ discourse, multilateral forums where non-Western states predominate — so moral multipolarity may be strengthening at the level of emerging institutions as well as states.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion is organised by objective, and each part cross-references the literature reviewed in Section 2 — stating, where possible, what the findings confirm, what they extend, and what they leave open. Sections 5.1–5.3 take the three objectives in turn; 5.4 turns the supply/uptake gap into a measurement agenda; 5.5 states limits and positionality; 5.6 concludes.

5.1 Objective 1 revisited: what behavioural political economy adds to constructivist accounts

The first objective was to specify the micro-foundations of moral multipolarity. The cases bear out the central claim of Section 2.6: the substantive

frames are constructivist in content — civilisation, sovereignty, reciprocity — but the work of explaining why they might hold is done by behavioural mechanisms constructivism leaves implicit. This confirms and extends Acharya's (2014, 2018) multiplex order by giving its normative centres a mechanism: not merely several sources of legitimacy, but several sources differing in the cognitive cost they impose and the signals they require. It supplies the behavioural layer absent from Ikenberry's (2011) and Hurrell's (2007) accounts, where legitimacy flows from institutional design or civilisational position without a model of how audiences process either. It operationalises Mitzen's (2006) and Steele's (2008) ontological security at the level of the international system, reading civilisational framing as identity-confirming repetition rather than instrumental messaging. And it qualifies Foot's (2020) and Zhang's (2016) 'creative compliance': where they describe non-Western powers reinterpreting liberal norms, the present framework specifies the cognitive payoff of doing so — reinterpretation that lowers the deliberative cost of endorsement is more likely to persist than reinterpretation that does not. The theoretical implication is that legitimacy in twenty-first-century Asia is pursued as a behavioural and informational asset as much as an institutional output, and that frameworks calibrated to Western experience will misread it. That is a claim about how legitimacy is sought, not yet a demonstration of what it secures.

5.2 Objective 2 revisited: the supply of legitimacy across cases

The second objective was to map, falsifiably, the channels through which Asian states supply alternative legitimacy. The comparison confirms the descriptive findings of the area literature — Zhang (2014) and Callahan (2020) on Chinese civilisational rhetoric, Adib-Moghaddam (2017) on Iranian resistance, Anwar (2018) on Indonesia's independent-active principle, Ulrichsen (2019) on Gulf hedging, Cooley and Nexon (2020) on ideational diffusion — and extends them in two ways. First, it shows the same three-channel architecture recurring across cases the area literature treats separately, which the descriptive work could not have surfaced because it does not compare on a common mechanism set. Second, it adds the distinction those literatures lack: between supplying a legitimacy claim and having it taken up. This is where the present study parts company with much of the multipolarity literature, which often reads the presence of civilisational rhetoric as evidence of its effect. The Gulf comparator (H4) does real work here: it shows the channels decoupling under economic interdependence, which both supports the framework's claim that the channels are analytically separable and warns against treating the architecture as a fixed bundle. What remains open is the whole uptake side. The cases demonstrate that China, Iran, and Indonesia supply these claims with craft and consistency; they do not demonstrate that the relevant audiences accept them or comply under pressure.

On that, the responsible verdict is the one Section 3.5 set up: the findings establish supply and configuration; the behavioural outcomes are hypotheses (H1–H3).

5.3 Objective 3 revisited: applications to governance, security, and education

The third objective was to draw out applications. For governance and policy, the framework implies that Western instruments designed to restore a moral monopoly — sanctions, conditionality, public diplomacy — may be insufficient or counterproductive where the supply architecture is functioning, because external condemnation feeds each channel: civilisational framing gains from being debunked abroad, procedural sovereignty signalling gains from sanctions it can be seen to resist, and reciprocal argument gains from any fresh instance of Western inconsistency. A more productive course would take the selective-moralism critique on its empirical merits (Mahbubani, 2020; Hurrell, 2007), with far-reaching implications for Western practice itself. For security and political violence, the framework predicts that where the architecture is well developed and legitimacy claims are densely supplied, the calculus of violence shifts against domestic and foreign challengers, while underdeveloped channels — procedural sovereignty signalling in particular — leave openings; the selective-moralism critique can also be appropriated by violent non-state actors where it couples with perceived hypocrisy, a dynamic documented in the radicalisation literature (Adib-Moghaddam, 2017). Treating legitimacy as exogenous or institutionally fixed would cause analysts to miss these patterns. For education, the framework is diagnostic. Schools, universities, and public-information sectors are among the principal sites where civilisational framing is transmitted and where procedural-sovereignty narratives come to feel natural (Anwar, 2018); curricular reform in history, civics, and international-relations education increasingly carries national and civilisational narratives alongside or in place of the universalist liberal frameworks that once predominated. Institutions aware of how trust is built within the architecture their students inhabit are better placed to help those students navigate civilisational reference frames critically, rather than merely react to them. Across all three applications the same caveat travels: these are implications of a supply-side framework, and they sharpen — rather than substitute for — the empirical tests in 5.4.

5.4 From supply to uptake: a measurement agenda

Because the design observes supply and hypothesises uptake, the natural next step is to measure uptake directly, and the framework was specified to make that possible. Three designs follow from the hypotheses. Content analysis could code official speeches, white papers, foreign-ministry statements, textbooks, and public-information campaigns for references to civilisation, sovereignty, reciprocity, hypocrisy, autonomy, and procedural independence, allowing researchers to track whether the channels rise or fall over time and whether a spike

in one precedes movement in the others. Survey experiments could test H1 and H3 directly: respondents randomly exposed to a liberal-institutional frame, a civilisational frame, or a sovereignty-procedure frame, then asked to evaluate the legitimacy of the same policy action — and, for H3, asked to weigh a symmetry argument against a counter-normative one. Network analysis could trace whether frames move from state discourse into regional organisations, media ecosystems, educational discourse, and diaspora communities, testing the spillover noted in 4.5.

These designs would separate the three outcomes that the present study deliberately keeps apart. Exposure is whether a population has met the claim; acceptance is whether it is believed or treated as plausible; behavioural compliance is whether it changes behaviour under pressure. A state can perform civilisational framing successfully at the level of exposure yet fail at acceptance if audiences read the claim as opportunistic, and can generate acceptance without durable compliance if material performance collapses or elite conduct openly contradicts the narrative. Treating legitimacy as behavioural rather than merely institutional is what makes failure visible alongside success — and the practical lesson for analysts is that legitimacy should never be inferred from regime type alone. Liberal institutional design, authoritarian resilience, religious symbolism, and diplomatic status all matter; none is sufficient. The empirical question is whether a state can align narrative, procedure, and reciprocal claim tightly enough that its audiences experience the order as intelligible and defensible — a question that is measurable, but only once legitimacy is broken into mechanisms.

5.5 Limitations and positionality

The clearest limitation is the one this revision has tried to convert into a virtue rather than hide: the design observes the supply of legitimacy claims, not their uptake, so every claim about audience effect is hypothesis. Three further limits qualify the rest. Case coverage is narrow; the channel-configuration hypothesis (H4) drawn from comparing three Asian cases with the Gulf needs testing against India, Vietnam, Pakistan, Turkey, and selected African states before it can claim generality. The treatment of public discourse is interpretive; without systematic content analysis using codebooks and inter-coder reliability, the gradings in Table 1 remain disciplined judgements rather than measurements. And the framework's scope is bounded by design to large or medium non-Western powers under perceived Western pressure; it is not a theory of legitimacy in general.

A word on position is owed, since interpretive work of this kind is never viewless. My reading of these cases is shaped by more than a decade inside international schools and universities across the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Europe — enough time in several of the countries discussed here to have watched civilisational framing operate in classrooms and staffrooms, not only in white

papers. That vantage is a resource: it is part of why I trust the supply-side patterns I report. It is also a bias, inclining me to see deliberate legitimization work where a colder reading might see ordinary statecraft. I have tried to discipline the prior by holding the supply/uptake line strictly and by stating rival explanations at each step, but the reader should weigh the interpretation accordingly.

5.6 Conclusion

If the paper leaves one thing behind, it is a distinction, not a verdict. Legitimacy across much of Asia is being supplied with real craft — framed civilisationally, signalled at cost, defended through symmetry — and that supply side is visible enough to map and to argue over. What the supply buys, in the minds of the people it is aimed at, stays an open empirical question, and I have tried to keep it open rather than settle it by assertion. The analytic gain is that failure becomes as legible as success: a state can frame fluently and still fail to convince, signal expensively and still be read as performative, invoke symmetry and still be caught in its own inconsistencies. Treating legitimacy as supplied-then-taken-up, rather than as a property a regime simply has or lacks, is what lets an analyst see those failures coming. Whether the architecture described here hardens into a durable feature of the international system or proves a phase of contestation is not something a discourse-based study can adjudicate — but it is exactly what the hypotheses set out above were written to test. I would rather the framework be falsified cleanly than admired vaguely.

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