International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 495-507



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (IJEMP)
www.gaexcellence.com/ijemp

REMOTE WORK AS A CRISIS HR STRATEGY DURING GEOPOLITICAL CRISES: IMPLICATIONS OF WORKFORCE CONTINUITY IN MULTINATIONAL FIRMS

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Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 30.07.2026
Revised date: 24.08.2026
Accepted date: 07.09.2026
Published date: 20.09.2026

To cite this document:

Musa, N., Mutalib, N. N., Roslim, S., & Azmi, N. A. (2026). Remote Work As A Crisis HR Strategy During Geopolitical Crises: Implications Of Workforce Continuity In Multinational Firms. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices, 9*(35), 495-507.

Abstract:

Multinational organizations are facing growing challenges to their operations, mobility, infrastructure and employee safety due to geopolitical crises. Although remote work was widely examined during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons learned from public health crises are not relevant to geopolitical shocks, which have unique localized security risks, political unrest, sanctions, and infrastructure disruptions. This paper seeks to fill this void by creating a conceptual framework that explains how remote work can help to maintain workforce continuity and employee well-being during geopolitical crises. The framework is based on a synthesis of the literature on crisis and combines Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. These theories are complementary: ORT describes the macro level adaptation and continuity of organizations, while COR describes the micro level adaptation and preservation of physical and psychological resources of employees. The proposed framework indicates that strategic remote work utilization can help to prevent resource depletion and is likely to have a positive impact on workforce stability. This conceptual novelty is the explicit linking of macro-level organizational adaptability with micro-level employee resource preservation in the unpredictable setting of geopolitical volatility. Practically, the framework provides HR practitioners with a

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 495-507

theoretical basis for crisis preparedness and offers distinct propositions for future empirical validation.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.935028

Keyword:

Crisis Human Resource Strategy, Employee Well-Being, Geopolitical Crisis, Organizational Resilience, Remote Work, Workforce Continuity

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Introduction

Over the recent years, the geopolitical conflicts have been increasingly disruptive of the activities of the world economies and organizational operations (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Multinational firms (MNCs) have been faced with unpredictable environments due to armed conflicts, political unrest and international tensions. This impacts supply chains, organisational operations and employee mobility and safety of the employees in the regions affected. In this context, remote work may serve as a crisis-oriented HR strategy by enabling employees to continue their work without relying entirely on physical workplaces.

Remote work has become an established work arrangement supported by digital technologies and was widely adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, substantial research has examined its implications for employee and organizational outcomes, including productivity, job satisfaction, engagement, and work-life balance. However, much of the existing literature has focused on remote work in the context of public health crises and relatively stable working environments. Much less has been done about remote work as a strategic HR solution to geopolitical crises, when organizations may be confronted with localized security threats, disruption of infrastructure, limited employee mobility, and a fast-changing operating environment.

But it is important to differentiate between geopolitical crises and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although remote work has been widely used in the global health crisis, the results from pandemic situations may not be entirely transferable to geopolitical disruptions. Social distancing was the primary need in public health crises, which were mostly in well-functioning national infrastructures. Geopolitical crises, on the other hand, tend to include armed conflict, political instability, economic sanctions, border closures, and significant damage to

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EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 495-507
infrastructure, including power grid or internet outages. These conditions give rise to a completely different operating environment, and a different theoretical approach is required.

Workforce continuity is unique during geopolitical crises. Workforce continuity is the capacity of an organization to keep employees engaged and essential work activities are going during an external disruption. MNCs could be impacted by workforce availability disruptions in their organizational operations, performance, customer relationships, and reputation. HR strategies that allow employees to work from other locations may therefore be important for maintaining workforce continuity while minimizing employees' exposure to unsafe physical environments. But remote working can also help the health of employees, as they work in safer and more controlled environments during times of uncertainty and disruption.

Although the significance of crisis-oriented HR strategies has been growing, little conceptual attention has been paid to the link between remote work, workforce continuity and employee well-being in the context of geopolitical crises. Previous studies have mainly focused on remote working in the context of the pandemic and have tended to focus on individual outcomes. The potential of remote work is less understood as a strategic HR tool that can serve as a continuity plan for the organization while also safeguarding employee resources during geopolitical disruption. This is especially significant for MNCs, which have operations in various parts of the world and are therefore vulnerable to varying geopolitical risks.

This paper seeks to create a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between remote work and workforce continuity and employee well-being during geopolitical crises through a synthesis of existing literature and theoretical perspectives. The conceptual novelty of this paper is the specific combination of Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) and Conservation of Resource (COR) Theory in a geopolitical context. In so doing, it tackles the specific double threat of geopolitical uncertainty – macro-level operational failure and micro-level threats to employee safety.

Literature Review

Remote Work: Definition and Conceptualization

The term remote work describes a work arrangement where an employee carries out his or her job duties away from the traditional workplace but still has access to the organization's systems via digital technology. Online communication systems, virtual collaboration tools and cloud-based services allow employees to communicate with others, supervisors and organizational systems, irrespective of their geographical location. This allows organizations to be less reliant on physical workplaces and work activities to be conducted in geographically dispersed locations.

The term remote work is often used in conjunction with the terms telework, telecommuting and work from home, but these terms can have varying meanings. The term telecommuting is more broadly used to refer to the use of electronic communication in place of physical commuting, while work from home is more specifically used to refer to working from an employee's home. Encocompasses a wider variety of off-site working arrangements such as home offices, temporary workstations or other workstations with appropriate digital connectivity. The growth of remote work has also challenged the traditional notions of space and time in work, especially in crisis situations (Donnelly & Johns, 2021).

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Technological progress and organizational investments in information technology have facilitated the expansion of telework. With the help of digital tools like video conferencing, cloud-based platforms, and collaborative software, employees can communicate, access organizational resources, and coordinate tasks regardless of geographical location. These technologies help to minimize the need for physical proximity in knowledge-based work and give organizations more flexibility in sustaining distributed work arrangements.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of remote work has significantly grown, as organizations had to adapt from traditional office-based work to digitally enabled work due to lockdowns and movement restrictions (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). This experience has helped push the digital work infrastructure investment and helped normalise remote working in different industries. Subsequent research has investigated remote work and its effects on employee productivity, job satisfaction, work-life balance, engagement and organizational performance (Wang et al., 2021; International Labour Organization, 2023).

Despite the extensive research since the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the studies have been about remote work due to public health measures or as a flexible working option. Much less has been paid to its strategic importance in other types of crises, such as geopolitical crises that could impact physical workplaces, employee mobility, and organizational functioning. This indicates that the role of remote work should be looked at in a new light, not just as a flexibility tool, but as a crisis-oriented HR solution to ensure workforce continuity during geopolitical crises.

Case Study: Automattic Inc. and the Paradigm of Asynchronous Autonomy

An example of a distributed work model is Automattic Inc., where employees can work remotely with increased use of asynchronous communication and autonomy, instead of being in constant physical or real-time contact. This is an example of organising work around the outcome, NOT around the working location conventioal working hors. These qualities are applicable to crisis situations, as they can help organizations become more flexible when employees can't move around or go to traditional workplaces. Therefore, the distributed work model can be a great illustration of the nature of remote work that can help organizations become flexible during disruption.

Crisis Human Resource Management (HRM)

Crisis HRM can include flexible work arrangements, emergency communication mechanisms, employee support initiatives, and rapid workforce restructuring to maintain operations in the face of uncertainty (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Barbieri at al., 2021). The response will vary according to the type and severity of the crisis and the level of disruption of normal working conditions. HR practices are especially significant in situations of geopolitical crisis, where employees may be worried about their safety, mobility, workplace disruptions, and working conditions. Thus, remote work may be viewed as a potential crisis HR strategy, as it enables employees to carry on their work from alternative locations, while minimizing reliance on potentially unsafe or inaccessible physical workplaces. Crisis situations can also lead to uncertainty among employees and the need for HRM practices that facilitate employee adjustment and well-being (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

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While crisis HRM has been addressed in various types of organizational disruption, there is relatively little research on HR responses to geopolitical crises. Geopolitical disruptions can include multifaceted security risks, border closures, infrastructure damage and sudden policy shifts that can have a direct impact on multinational companies and their staff. This situation underscores the importance of crisis HR strategies that can serve to meet employee safety and organizational continuity needs at the same time. Thus, exploring remote work as a crisis HR approach offers a chance to broaden the scope of crisis HRM beyond the traditional disaster and pandemic settings.

Case Study: Airbnb's Strategic Transparency and Psychological Safety

An example of this is Airbnb, which has illustrated how organizations can keep their employees connected and psychologically safe through a digital communication and decentralized working model. Transparent communication and ongoing interaction can help maintain employees' ties with the organization and foster trust between employees and management in a distributed working environment. In the context of geopolitical crises, these practices can be extended to address the psychological and social needs of employees, complementing remote work strategies to ensure that organizations can continue to communicate, connect and support their staff when traditional workplace structures are unavailable.

Geopolitical Conflicts and Organizational Disruptions

Geopolitical conflicts are political, military or security-related tensions between states or political actors that can affect international economic and organizational activities. Multinational companies (MNCs) can be impacted by these conflicts in their supply chains, physical facilities, employee transfers, and access to operating sites (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Business continuity, employee safety and workforce availability can also be uncertain for organisations that are in or close to conflict affected areas. These conditions can make HR functions very difficult, especially in terms of employee management and sustaining key operations during times of turmoil.

Traditionally, organizations have reacted to geopolitical disruptions by moving operations, having emergency plans, and sending employees to safer areas. But these methods are not always adequate or possible if physical mobility is limited, infrastructure is unavailable, or access to workplaces is limited. With the development of digital technologies, organizations have an extra alternative in the form of remote work arrangements (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-garces, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Remote working can help to minimize reliance on impacted physical workplaces and may help to keep essential work functions going in the event of geopolitical disruption.

The organizational impact of geopolitical conflict is therefore not just about the immediate impact on operations but can also have a direct impact on an organization's capacity to maintain its workforce and critical activities. Workforce continuity is especially critical for MNCs as employees can be geographically spread across varying levels of geopolitical risk exposure (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Working remotely can offer more flexibility in redistributing work activities and less reliance on workplaces in conflict areas. But it is dependent on digital infrastructure, organizational readiness and the type of work that employees do.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a cautionary tale for any multinational technology company that must navigate geopolitical conflicts that could put their employees and physical assets at risk, as is the case with Softserve. The disruption underscored the need to ensure continuity of operations by having geographically distributed digital infrastructure and alternative working arrangements. Softserve's experience also shows that working remotely is not enough to ensure continuity of the organization, as it relies on the availability and resilience of supporting infrastructure. During geopolitical crisis situations, telecommunications internet connectivity, data infrastructure, or physical security could be disrupted, which could reduce the ability of employees to work remotely. Geographically distributed operations and robust digital infrastructure are thus complementary capabilities that can enhance the effectiveness of remote working as a crisis strategy.

Workforce Continuity

Workforce continuity is the ability of an organization to maintain employees and the work processes during an external disruption. Organizational resilience is closely linked to the capacity of organizations to mobilize human and organizational resources in the face of disruption from a strategic HR perspective (Cooke et al., 2021; Sriharan et al., 2024). It is a key element of organizational resilience, especially for multinational companies with geographically distributed sites. Changes in the availability of the workforce can impact organizational operations, service delivery, and performance. Therefore, it is essential that organizations have plans to enable employees to continue to work during a workplace disruption.

Telework can help maintain continuity of the workforce by enabling employees to work from other work sites when they are unable to work in their normal workplace because of limitations or concerns about the safety of the workplace. The flexibility of remote work can help organizations to continue essential business operations during disruptions, thereby minimizing reliance on physical offices. But its effectiveness relies on a number of factors including the digital infrastructure, organizational preparedness, and the nature of employees' work. It might thus be more suitable for service and knowledge-based occupations than for occupations that require constant physical presence.

Workforce continuity is a strategic issue that involves organizations having access to employees, work processes and critical organizational resources during disruption. One way to achieve this goal is to allow work activities to be spread out across locations instead of being centralized in a physical workplace, which is what remote work can do. This geographical flexibility can be particularly useful for multinational companies where geopolitical events in one area may not impact the ability of employees or teams in other areas to work. However, the extent to which remote working can help to maintain continuity of the workforce is still contingent on the capacity of organisations, digital infrastructures and the suitability of the work tasks for remote working.

Organizational Resilience Theory

Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) is a theory that explains how organizations can develop the capacity to predict, withstand, adjust to, and bounce back from disruptive events

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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and still function (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Duchek, 2020). Organizational resilience involves more than responding to disruption after it occurs; it also requires organizations to develop capabilities and resources that enable them to adapt to changing conditions (Nizamidou, 2023). From an HR perspective, resilent organizations need to have the flexibility to work, effective communication, and the right technological resources to ensure that the workforce can continue to work during times of uncertainty and disruption.

ORT provides an organizational perspective on how remote working can help to ensure continuity of workforce in geopolitical crises. Organizations can benefit from remote work to decrease their reliance on disrupted physical workplaces and provide flexibility in maintaining essential work processes. This makes remote working a possible adaptive capacity that can enhance the resilience of the organization in case of geopolitical disruption of traditional working patterns. But the success of this capability relies on organizational readiness, digital infrastructure, and the appropriateness of work activities for remote execution.
remote execution.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

According to Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, people are driven to obtain, maintain and defend resources that have value for them, especially in stressful and threatening situations (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Resources can be physical, psychological, social, and other factors that enable individuals to cope with demands and promote their health. The loss or threat of loss of resources can induce stress, and access to or protection of resources can buffer individuals from stressful situations. This is especially true in crisis situations, where employees might feel uncertain, unsafe, and have higher psychological demands (Hong J. -C. et al., 2021).

COR Theory offers an individual level lens to understanding how remote work can help employees thrive in geopolitical crisis. Working remotely can contribute to employees' physical and psychological resource conservation by decreasing exposure to unsafe work environments, decreasing exposure to demands of commuting to work, and increasing flexibility in working under conditions of disruption. Working remotely can help protect valuable resources and promote employee well-being by allowing them to continue working activities while limiting exposure to crisis-related demands. These benefits, however, may be contingent on employees having access to appropriate digital resources, organizational support, and appropriate working conditions.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Although ORT and COR Theory have different theoretical backgrounds, they are basically complementary in crisis human resource management. In particular, ORT is concerned with macro-level continuity and adaptation in organizations, that is, how organizations can continue to function and how they can adapt their work processes when their physical workplaces are affected. On the other hand, COR Theory offers a micro-level perspective on employee resource preservation, explaining how working remotely can help an employee preserve his or her physical safety and psychological well-being by taking the employee out of unsafe environments. They are complementary and together create a comprehensive multi-level framework that combines the continuity of the organisation's operations with the human sustainability of the individual.

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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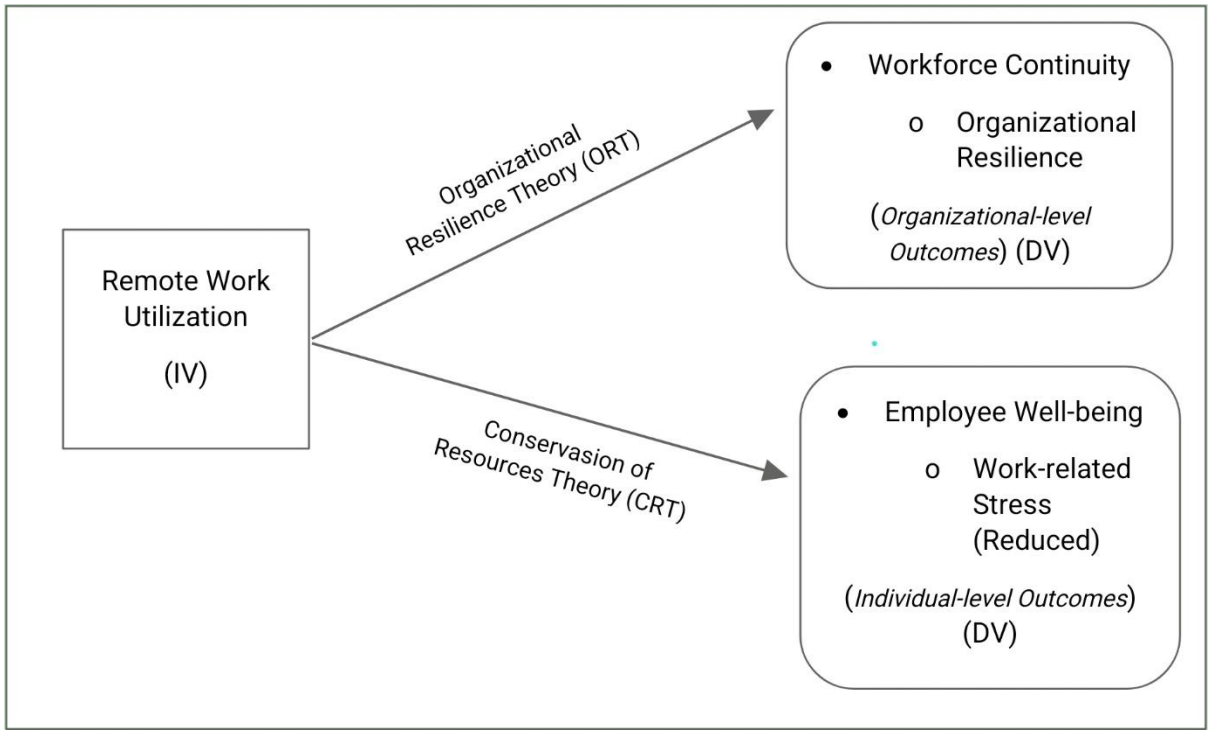


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework
Source: Adapted from Hobfoll et al. (2018), Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), and Duchek (2020)

The proposed conceptual framework combines Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory to explain the possible contribution of remote work utilization in the context of geopolitical crises to workforce continuity and employee well-being. The framework is a two-level approach, connecting remote work utilization with workforce continuity at the organizational level and employee well-being at the individual level.

Theoretically, ORT offers the basis for the connection between remote work utilization and workforce continuity at the organizational level. By allowing employees to carry out key work activities from other workplaces, remote working can help to reduce the reliance of the organisation on affected workplaces. This flexibility can help organizations adapt and sustain key business operations during geopolitical events.

On an individual level, COR Theory offers the theoretical basis for the link between remote work utilization and employee well-being. In times of geopolitical crisis, workers can be exposed to threats to their physical safety, mobility, time and psychological resources. Working remotely can help employees save some of these resources by avoiding unsafe physical environments and the demands of commuting, which can help promote employee well-being

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Proposition Development

Proposition 1 (P1): Remote Work Utilization is proposed to positively influence Workforce Continuity during geopolitical crises through macro-level organizational adaptation and operational flexibility.

Proposition 2 (P2): Remote Work Utilization can be used as a micro-level mechanism for physical and psychological resource preservation during geopolitical crises to support Employee Well-being.

Limitations of the Study

Firstly, the study is conceptual in nature and has not yet been empirically validated. Although the proposed framework is informed by Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the relationships among remote work utilization, workforce continuity, and employee well-being have not been statistically tested or empirically validated. Thus, the suggested relationships are still theoretical and need to be empirically tested to see how well they can be applied to other geopolitical and organizational settings. Future studies may be quantitative survey or qualitative case studies to validate and further develop the proposed framework.

Secondly, there are limitations on the framework due to technology and infrastructure. The success of remote working as a crisis management tool relies on the availability and reliability of digital infrastructure, such as internet connectivity, cloud-based systems, and telecommunications networks. In the event of a serious geopolitical crisis, a failure in the telecommunications infrastructure or intentional disruption of internet access could make it difficult for workers to work remotely. The proposed framework is thus particularly relevant in crisis situations where digital connectivity and technological infrastructure is sufficient. Future research could examine other resilience strategies to be implemented if communications were lost or limited.

Third, the applicability of the proposed framework could differ from industry to industry. The framework is mainly suitable for MNCs that are service-oriented, knowledge-based and digitally enabled, where work activities can be carried out remotely. It may have a more limited application in physically demanding industries, like manufacturing, logistics, mining, and other sectors that require workers to be physically present or use special equipment. Future research may therefore examine how crisis-oriented HR strategies and organizational resilience mechanisms can be adapted to industries where remote work is less feasible.

Finally, the framework does not fully incorporate the legal, regulatory, and cultural differences that may influence the implementation of remote work across host countries. MNCs operating across different geopolitical contexts may face variations in employment regulations, tax requirements, data protection laws, and other institutional conditions. In addition, cultural expectations regarding remote work and managerial trust may influence employees' experiences and the effectiveness of remote work arrangements. Future conceptual and empirical research should therefore consider these institutional and cultural factors as potential boundary conditions that may influence the effectiveness of remote work as a crisis-oriented HR strategy.

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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Conclusion

This conceptual paper positions remote work utilization as a crisis-oriented human resource strategy for supporting workforce continuity and employee well-being in multinational firms during geopolitical crises. Drawing on Organizational Resilience Theory (ORT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the proposed conceptual framework provides a two-level perspective on the role of remote work during periods of geopolitical disruption. At the organizational level, ORT provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how remote work may enhance organizational adaptability and support the continuation of essential work processes. At the individual level, COR Theory explains how remote work may help employees conserve valuable physical and psychological resources and consequently support employee well-being during crisis conditions.

The proposed framework contributes to the crisis human resource management and organizational resilience literature by extending the discussion of remote work beyond its predominant focus on public health crises and flexible work arrangements. It highlights the potential of remote work to function not only as a flexible working arrangement but also as a strategic mechanism for maintaining workforce continuity while supporting employee well-being in geographically dispersed multinational organizations. The two proposed relationships provide a basis for future empirical investigation of the role of remote work utilization in geopolitical crisis contexts.

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for providing the resources and support during the completion of this research. The Faculty of Business Management and the Faculty of Law colleagues and peers are especially thanked for their insights and constructive feedback, which significantly improved the scientific quality of this paper.

Funding Statement: This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest Statement: There are no conflicts of interest or personal relationships to be disclosed. All the authors have engaged in this research and have approved the submission of the final version of the manuscript to the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management (IJEMP).

Ethics Statement: This research is a conceptual paper that started from synthesising existing literatures and from theoretical analysis. No ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) was required for the research since it involved no Human Participants, Animal Subjects, or collection of Sensitive Primary Data. In developing this manuscript, the authors have followed the rules of academic honesty and ethical reporting.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. N.M. conceptualized, methodologically designed, and supervised the study. N.N.M. gave expert advice, confirmed the HR strategies and did critical revision of the article manuscript. S.R. provided the legal viewpoint and analysis of the geopolitical context and N.A.A. did the literature review and formatted the final manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript for publication in International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management (IJEMP).

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EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 495-507

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