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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025
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ANDREA KENDALL-TAYLOR AND MICHAEL KOFMAN on thwarting Putin's aims
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WILL TRUMP CHANGE THE WORLD?

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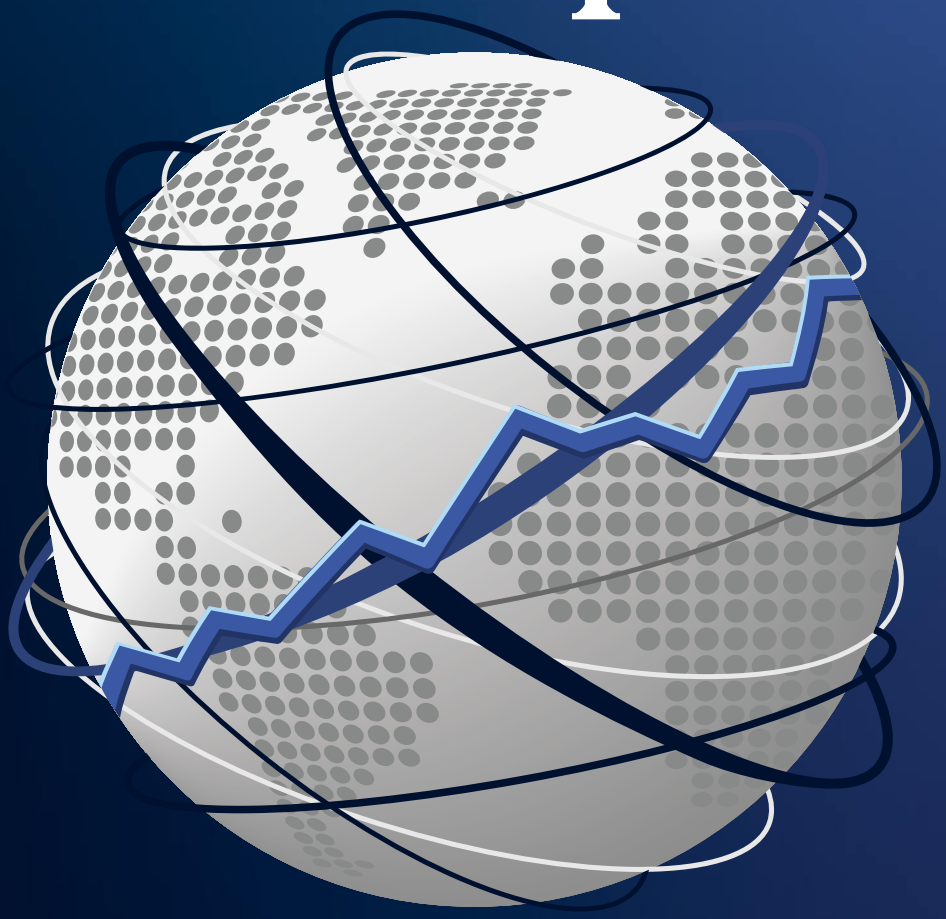

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Will Trump Change the World?

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Essays

"LIBERATING GAZA"
A ROADMAP TOWARD A NEW MIDDLE EAST

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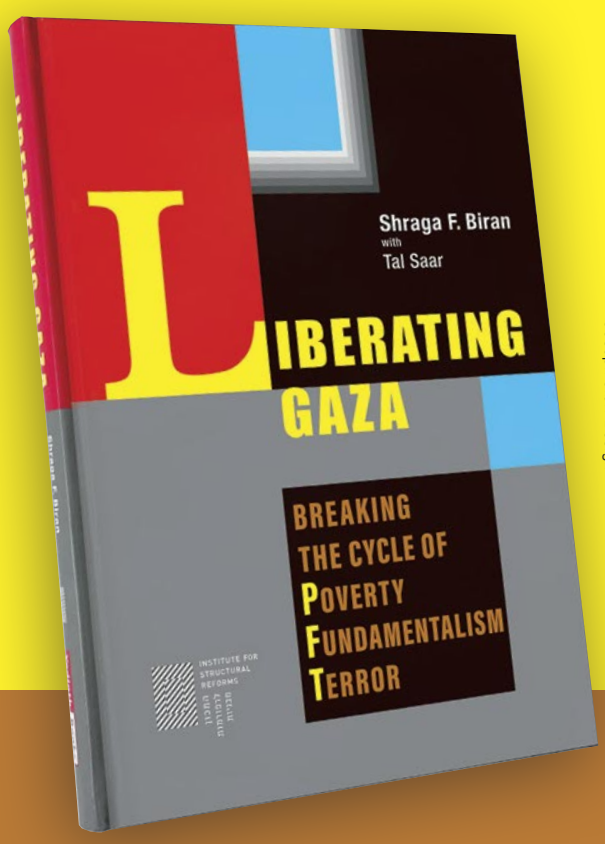
"At a time of uncertainty about how the Gaza conflict can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion, *Liberating Gaza* offers a clear path forward. This is indeed a book for the times." – *The Jerusalem Report*



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Drawing upon historical precedents, geopolitical considerations, and expert analysis, *Liberating Gaza* presents the doctrine of poverty, fundamentalism and terror, while underscoring the necessity of **collaboration between the United States and China**. The book examines how these superpowers can jointly address the challenges of stabilizing the region, neutralizing Iran as a primary sponsor of terrorism, and reconstructing Gaza, by drawing on Biden's and Xi Jinping's counterterrorism doctrines, as well as on Trump's peacemaking legacy.

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Yedioth Books

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Reviews and Responses

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Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor
Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025 · VOLUME 104, NUMBER 1

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

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WILL TRUMP CHANGE THE WORLD?

Stress Test

Can a Troubled Order Survive a Disruptive Leader?

MARGARET MACMILLAN

Historians are skittish about predicting the future, and not only because there are too many variables and possibilities. It is also not always easy to grasp the significance of events when you are in the middle of them. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, people grasped at once that a new era had started. But few Europeans foresaw that the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 would precipitate a terrifying, continent-spanning war in which more than 16 million people would be killed, and even tech experts did not understand the significance of the iPhone when Apple's CEO, Steve Jobs, unveiled it in 2007.

Since Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election last November, it has been hard not to think of Isaac Asimov's classic science fiction trilogy, *The Foundation*, published just at the end of World War II. In it, humanity's future has been largely tamed by a brilliant mathematician who uses statistical laws to control human behavior and protect against catastrophic events, ensuring what is supposed to be benevolent and stable rule for centuries. But these assumptions are shattered by the appearance of the Mule, a mutant with extraordinary powers and millions of devoted followers, who threatens to overturn the order and bring back unpredictability.

Is Trump the Mule of our times? He, too, likes to see himself as the destroyer of conventions and rules and the breaker of institutions. And he, too, rose to power on the back of a personal mass following, raising the question of whether he has the potential to change the course of events and create a different United States in a different world. The presidential contest went off calmly, much to the relief of many, but if Trump and his supporters mean what they say, Republican control of the presidency and Congress, along with a pliant Supreme Court, will bring major changes to the way the United States is governed—including to the rule of law. The president-elect has threatened to do away with independent government agencies he doesn't like,

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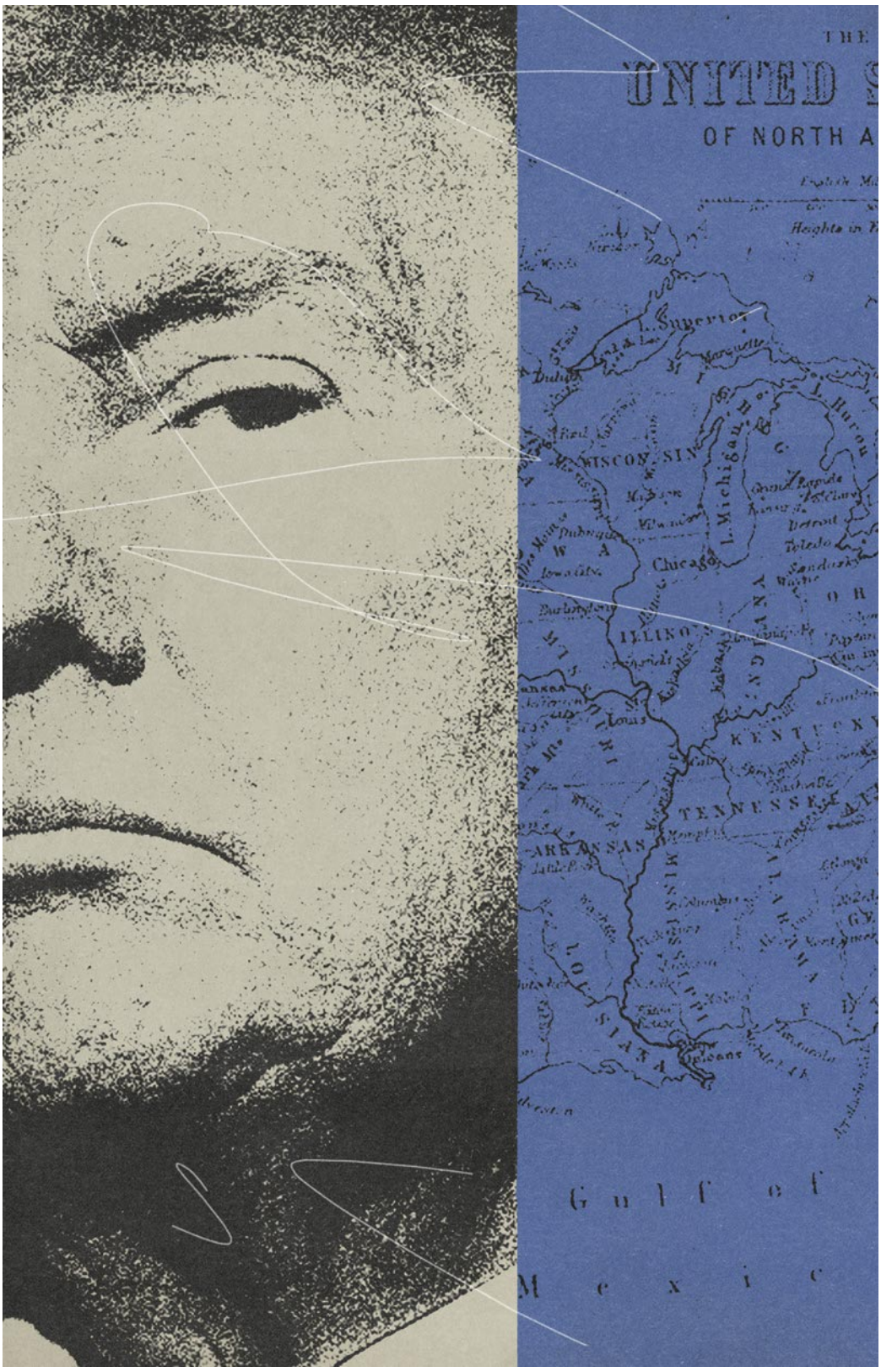

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Illustrations by Tyler Comrie

turn others into his own fiefdoms, politicize the military, and bypass Congress with term appointments if it refuses to approve his nominations. He has criticized American allies publicly and, worse, to their adversaries. And he sees no value or benefit to the United States in international law, rules, or institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, or the World Health Organization, and he denigrates even bedrock U.S. alliances such as NATO.

Asimov was a scientist, but he was dealing with one of the central questions about individuals' capacity to change the course of history—specifically those who have the power and the drive to shatter an existing order. And he was also raising a related question: Was the old order doomed anyway, and if so, are such individuals merely agents of the external forces that shaped them? The answer may lie somewhere in the middle. It is unlikely that the young Napoleon Bonaparte, from a modest background, would have been able to rise to power without the upheavals of the French Revolution of 1789. Russian President Vladimir Putin might not have been able to seize the levers of power had the nascent political system of post-Soviet Russia been more established. Like Chinese President Xi Jinping, he has built a highly personal rule, reshaping his powerful country around himself and bringing about major shifts in the global order.

As observers try to gauge what the second Trump presidency will mean for the United States and the world, a more important question may be how well American democracy, and the international order, can withstand the stress. In the face of the Great Depression, the democratic systems of the United Kingdom and the United States proved resilient, but those of Germany and Japan collapsed, and the world descended into the worst military conflict of the modern era. In the United States today, the roots of its democracy run deep, and the dispersal of power between the federal government and the states limits what any one administration can do.

But the experience of the past is a reminder that the strength of institutions can be very hard to assess before they are directly challenged. That holds true for the international order, as well. Although today's order appears to be stronger and more resilient than its 1930s counterpart, in recent years, norms that were long considered inviolable have been flouted. As of now, it is unclear whether Trump will be able to achieve his often stated goal of massive change to usher in a new age or will find himself constrained—by existing laws and structures of government, by the political opposition at home, or by others abroad. What ultimately happens is likely to depend as much on the balance of forces around him as on his own use of power.

DELUSIONS OF RUPTURE

Scholars have long been divided on the question of whether leaders shape or are shaped by larger forces. Political scientists are generally wary of studying individual actors, preferring to focus on what can be counted and aggregated. Their literature on leaders and leadership is sparse—surprisingly so perhaps, given how much attention

and public debate there is over the motivations and probable actions of those in power today. Historians, by contrast, have found it easier to write about key figures, as, for example, Ian Kershaw did in his masterful biography of Adolf Hitler and Stephen Kotkin in his of Joseph Stalin. Yet historians are constantly aware of the challenge of finding the right balance between individuals and the social and political forces around them. Of course, all leaders are products of their times, whether in their ideas and values or in their assumptions about how the world works. Yet those who possess exceptional power—whether political, ideological, or financial—can use it to take their societies and sometimes larger parts of humanity down one road rather than another.

The experiences leaders bring with them will affect the ways in which they look at the world and the decisions they make. Putin was humiliated at the end of the Cold War when, as a young intelligence officer in East Germany, he went from being a representative of the Soviet empire to someone who barely had enough to live on. He witnessed firsthand the collapse of the Soviet Union, as its subject states such as Ukraine seized the opportunity for independence—traumatic events that doubtless fed his obsession with gaining back what he sees as lost Russian territory and making Russia great again. Personality counts, too. With Putin, one cannot ignore his determination and ruthlessness and his belief that he is a direct heir to past Russian and Soviet leaders such as Peter the Great and Stalin, who built and maintained a huge empire and made Russia respected and feared by its neighbors.

That conviction—that they have been chosen, whether by destiny, fate, or the gods—has motivated and sustained political leaders, great thinkers, generals, and revolutionaries, but it has often made them unwilling or unable to take advice or admit they are wrong. And this has sometimes led to mad policies that have resulted in disaster for their peoples. Hitler destroyed Germany in his quest for Aryan dominance, and Mao Zedong killed tens of millions of his own people in pursuit of his utopian fantasies.

Subtract certain people from the violent history of the twentieth century, and it is not possible to fully explain what happened. If Hitler had been killed in the trenches in World War I, it is unlikely that another German nationalist, with the same combination of ideology and a conviction that he was right, would have had a similar impact. If Winston Churchill had been killed when a car knocked him down in New York City in 1931, it is doubtful that anyone else who might have been in power in London in 1940 would have had the determination to fight on after the fall of France; certainly, it is hard to imagine Neville Chamberlain, who was succeeded by Churchill as prime minister in May of that year, or Chamberlain's otherwise likely successor, Lord Halifax, doing so. Whereas Stalin and Mao were indifferent to the hideous losses they inflicted on their peoples in their attempts to change the very nature of their societies, their colleagues, who were also ideologues, nevertheless had qualms about the costs. As Kotkin observed of the collective farms in

the Soviet Union, "If Stalin had died, the likelihood of forced wholesale collectivization—the only kind—would have been near zero."

In the case of Trump, he has announced plans to deport 11 million unauthorized immigrants, emasculate the civil service, and impose sky-high tariffs while alienating or abandoning American allies. But it is unclear how much of what he has promised he will actually carry out. Are his threats more provocations and taunts to his enemies than parts of a coherent vision to create a transformed United States in a world divided into transactional power blocks? If many of those close to him have their way, it will be the latter. What is clear is that his attack on the status quo resonates with a large number of Americans and his many supporters elsewhere. Whether or not Trump intends it, his legacy may well be a lasting change in the way the world works.

TRUST BUST

To accept that certain kinds of leaders can divert the course of history does not mean that they do so on their own; they ride the changing currents in societies. Great political and social changes often come as institutions are losing authority because people simply stop believing in their legitimacy. At the start of the sixteenth century, for example, the Catholic Church was a rich and powerful institution that seemed set to dominate Christianity for centuries to come. In practice, however, it was losing its monopoly on learning, thanks to the printing press and the spread of literacy, along with its moral authority, as a result of growing and visible corruption within its hierarchy. When Martin Luther wrote his famous theses in 1517 to condemn the Church's lucrative practice of selling indulgences, he set in motion the movement that, over the next few decades, transformed the political structures of Europe.

The leaders of the French Revolution faced a failing regime that was burdened by debt and increasingly unpopular—and not just with those who suffered from its inequalities but also among the aristocrats who had benefited from it. In a similar way, even most of those who worked for the Soviet regime had stopped believing in Marxism by the 1980s. Predicting the timing of the end, however, was another matter.

In the United States, Trump's appeal suggests that this is not just politics as usual but a result of a widespread disillusionment with existing institutions. Under President Joe Biden, the economy was doing well, unemployment was down, and the government was making progress on controlling the southern border, but the perceptions of many voters were different. More important, in much of the country, the federal government was seen as ineffective and corrupt, or even tyrannical. Democracies depend on trust, and that was eroding. Trump was adept at giving voice to Americans' concerns and resentments.

Building on discontent in troubled times to gain power takes a certain sort of genius and a willingness to ignore conventional wisdom and customs. As the founder of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin was lucky in his times, but he also made his own

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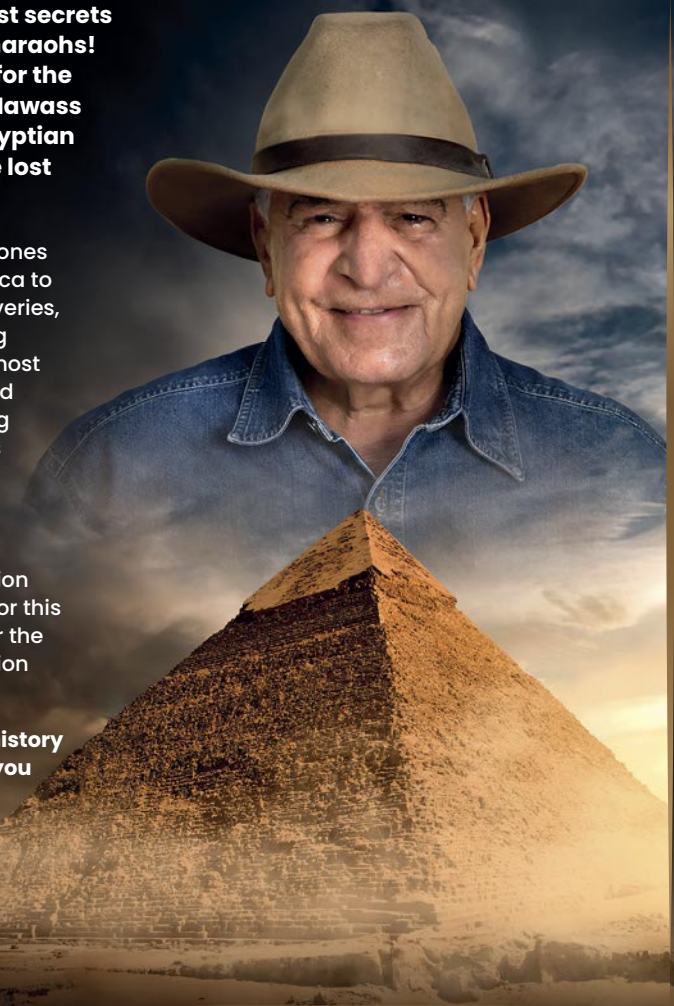

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luck. With his simple but brilliant slogan of "Peace, Bread, Land" and his single-minded fixation on gaining power, his Bolshevik Party was able to win support in key areas of the country. In November 1917, it seized power, with long-lasting consequences for what became the Soviet Union and for the world. Hitler managed to persuade enough influential Germans—including businesspeople, top generals, and those close to the German president and war hero Paul von Hindenburg—that he should be made chancellor in January 1933. A month later, after the Reichstag fire, Hitler was given emergency powers. He rapidly finished off what was left of the Weimar Republic and, as did Napoleon, Lenin, and Lenin's successor, Stalin, created a new regime with new institutions, new values, and new winners and losers.

Such forceful agents of change are often welcomed. In Germany in the early 1930s, many people were tired of violence, uncertainty, and a failing economy and hoped that a strong leader would heed their concerns and come up with new and effective solutions to bring better and calmer days. Western countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which might otherwise have supported the democratic forces in Germany or tried to contain the Nazis once they were in power, were struggling with the impact of the Great Depression on their own societies and fearful of the spread of communism and the rise of Japanese militarism. As with Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy, the new Nazi government, reviving the German economy and boldly pushing its interests internationally, was viewed with envy by many. Even leading Western democracies produced their own fascists and would-be autocrats, such as Sir Oswald Mosley in Britain or Huey Long or Father Coughlin in the United States.

A pressing question today is whether Trump will observe certain boundaries at home and abroad or, confident in his own power, disregard them. As wartime prime minister, Churchill had exceptional powers, but he always respected Parliament. As soon as the war ended in Europe, he agreed to dissolve the House of Commons so that a general election could be held. After years of the Supreme Court ruling against his New Deal legislation, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt contemplated a measure to enlarge the court with his own supporters, but when there was an outcry against what was seen as an unconstitutional act, he backed off. He did not attempt to challenge the democratic system again. Still, other leaders, in their pursuit of power and glory, have paid little attention to the costs of their chosen paths or the wishes of their people. Russians are paying a heavy price for Putin's ill-judged decision to invade Ukraine, with casualties now estimated to number more than 700,000, but so far he shows little sign of changing course.

ALL IS PERMITTED

How Trump chooses to deal with unwritten rules and unspoken assumptions may be crucial in determining the future of the international order. In 1804, Napoleon ignored accepted

norms when he had a leading Royalist, the Duc d'Enghien, kidnapped from the German state of Baden and executed in France after a hasty court-martial. Much of Europe was shocked, but the deed helped consolidate Napoleon's control over France. Under Lenin, the new Soviet Union promoted world revolution and rejected normal diplomacy. Hitler famously denounced Germany's endorsement of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, and one by one broke what he called its "chains"—for example, by remilitarizing the Rhineland and unveiling a German air force. That he got away with these moves encouraged others, including Japan's military leaders, who continued their unprovoked aggression in China, and Mussolini, who seized Ethiopia.

The international order today appears stronger and more resilient. After World War II, the victorious allies set up new institutions—including the United Nations and the international monetary system created at Bretton Woods—to prevent what the UN Charter called the "scourge of war" and address the forces, such as poverty, that make nations resort to armed conflict. Although the Cold War prevented the full establishment of the new order, over time the two competing alliances of NATO and the Warsaw Pact found ways to deal with each other and avoid all-out nuclear war. They signed formal treaties to limit arms, for example, and worked out informal rules and agreements to minimize the risk of misunderstandings that could lead to war. And in spite of the rhetoric, neither side tried to roll back the forces of the other on the ground.

Much of that order disappeared with the end of the Cold War, but parts of it have lived on, from institutions such as the United Nations to the treaties that govern everything from civil aviation to international trade. Crucially, a post-1945 unspoken agreement that the seizure of territory by force anywhere in the world was not the basis for sovereignty lasted until the early twenty-first century. But that understanding has now been breached, with the seizure by Russia of parts of Ukraine and the recognition by the U.S. government of Israel's claims to sovereignty over the Golan Heights taken from Syria. As in domestic politics, leaders who break the rules and pay no price for doing so can cause others to attempt the same. Prime Minister Viktor Orban's illiberal democracy in Hungary has inspired many Trump supporters in the United States, including the political strategist Steve Bannon and the tech entrepreneur Elon Musk. Putin's unprovoked attacks on a sovereign neighbor have provided a precedent—especially if they succeed in winning him territory—for other leaders such as Xi, who has long expressed the goal of bringing Taiwan back under China's rule. Norms that have held for decades can sometimes, in this way, crumble.

Americans are said to be tired of being the world's policeman, and who can blame them. But the prospect of an isolationist policy under Trump, even the possibility of a U.S. withdrawal from NATO and the further weakening of the Western alliance, confrontation with China, and a tariff war with much of the world, is unlikely to make the United States, or other countries, safer. Moreover, the continued rise of

right-wing nationalist movements in Europe may well lead to the further erosion of support for an international order that the United States has often benefited from.

It is also unclear whether the world knows how to deal with a leader who is likely to prove still more erratic and more inclined to ignore the rules than he was in his first term. In international relations, the danger that mistakes and misunderstandings can lead to confrontations, as they did in 1914, is always present, but today that risk appears to be growing. Even as the U.S. election was unfolding, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un tested a long-range intercontinental ballistic missile and drew closer to Putin, internationalizing the conflict in Ukraine by providing Russia with North Korean troops. For his part, Putin has announced a lower threshold for using nuclear weapons and has used a new kind of hypersonic missile against Kyiv. As Trump assumes office, it is difficult to guess whether his actions will lower the international temperature or raise it. In Asimov's trilogy, the Mule is eventually brought under control, stripped of his powers, and sent back to his own minor planet with the galactic order restored. But that is science fiction.

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Trump's Antiliberal Order

How America First Undercuts America's Advantage

ALEXANDER COOLEY AND DANIEL NEXON

During his campaign for president, Donald Trump promised to deliver a nationalist "America first" foreign policy. He boasted about how, in his first term, he had threatened to abandon NATO allies and claimed that in his second, if European NATO members failed to increase their defense spending, he would let the Russians "do whatever they want." His high-profile nominees and appointments have elevated MAGA loyalists who have long inveighed against "globalism" and the "liberal international order"; his administration will be staffed by a large number of contributors to the Heritage Foundation's policy wish list, Project 2025, which calls for the United States to exit the International Monetary Fund

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and the World Bank. Days after Trump tapped the Fox News personality Pete Hegseth for defense secretary, Hegseth condemned the United Nations as "a fully globalist organization that aggressively advances an anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-freedom agenda."

It should come as no surprise, then, that Trump's 2024 victory has generated headlines such as "America Chooses a New Role in the World" and "Trump Will Deliver the Final Blow to the Liberal Order." Trump's second term will, without a doubt, reorient both domestic and international politics. He fully intends to push both in illiberal directions. But his presidency will not end the so-called liberal international order, for the simple reason that it has already ended.

The liberal international order is shorthand for the international institutions and treaty arrangements that Washington took the lead in creating during the first decade after World War II, including the United Nations and NATO. These ostensibly, and sometimes actually did, promote human rights, freer trade, democracy, and multilateral cooperation. Washington—along with its most powerful allies—expanded and reworked that order after the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse left the United States the world's sole superpower; that expansion saw a wave of democratization, the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and a worldwide push for unfettered global trade and financial flows. For more than a decade, however, China and Russia have been engaged in their own international ordering projects. They have done so directly, such as by contesting human rights norms at the UN, and indirectly, by offering economic and security deals that are, at best, indifferent toward defending democratic governance and combating corruption. Meanwhile, the relative economic decline of the G-7 countries has enhanced the bargaining leverage of weaker states. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, such states now enjoy meaningful alternatives to Western markets, development assistance, and even military protection. And the rise of reactionary populism—not just in North America and Europe but also in India and in parts of Latin America—has shattered the ideological dominance that liberalism enjoyed for two decades after the end of the Cold War. U.S. President Joe Biden retained key aspects of Trump's nationalist economic approach, including Trump's tariffs, and pushed forward the first major U.S. industrial policy in decades via the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act.

References to the "liberal international order" discount the growing strength of illiberalism in global politics. The broad-brush phrase also wrongly implies that many aspects of contemporary international order—principles and practices such as state sovereignty, the rule of law, and multilateralism—are inherently or necessarily liberal, when in fact they are perfectly compatible with some nonliberal and illiberal forms of politics. Consider the fact that China and Russia—hardly liberal countries—are not seeking to destroy multilateralism. On the contrary: they are racing to expand their influence in long-existing multinational institutions and to create their own counterparts.

This is in part because they understand the power that such institutions provide to the United States. Important elements of what is known as the liberal international order are, in fact, components of the infrastructure of American power: norms, institutions, and relationships that offer Washington a still unmatched ability to influence other states, coordinate responses to emerging threats, and secure cooperation on matters it considers crucial to its national interests. Even a foreign policy solely concerned with preserving American power would invest in sustaining key elements of this system. With Trump's victory, however, self-proclaimed American nationalists now hope to wreck or upend an unrivaled network of American influence that took more than 50 years to build.

But internationalists who oppose these nationalists should also reconsider the way they talk and think about the stakes. Trump's contempt for institutionalism is the mirror image of how the Biden administration, and liberal internationalists more broadly, have justified their own foreign policy preferences, including U.S. commitments to NATO and support for Ukraine. Each of those policies, they contend, is necessary to defend immutable principles: not just support for democracies but the preservation of a liberal order worldwide. Yet this argument is increasingly out of touch with the complex realities of contemporary international politics. The Biden administration's framing of the Ukraine crisis failed to sway countries of the global South, which often associate rhetoric about a liberal or rules-based international order with Western efforts to dictate their economic policies, meddle in their politics, and disrespect their sovereign autonomy. It also exacerbated the backlash against the United States over its unwavering support of Israel's invasion of Gaza.

It is well past time to retire the understanding of international politics encapsulated by the term "liberal international order." It has become less lodestar than lodestone, saddling foreign policy debates with a surfeit of ideological, often Manichaean, baggage. It mires internationalists in nostalgia for an idealized past. And worst of all, it is now driving reactionary populists and postliberals to mistakenly support policies that weaken the United States.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

NATO was indeed founded as a defense pact among liberal democracies, one rooted in the internationalist principles that U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill laid out in the 1941 Atlantic Charter. After the end of the Cold War, the organization rebranded itself as the anchor of a liberal democratic security community rather than a defensive alliance aimed more narrowly at deterring external threats. But the rationale for the United States to sustain its commitment to NATO—as well as to support Ukraine—cannot be reduced to a principled wish to protect liberalism worldwide. NATO also owes its existence to two fundamental tenets of postwar U.S. grand strategy: that the United States cannot afford to see a rival power establish dominance over Europe and that preventing such an outcome requires a standing U.S. military presence on the continent.

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These strategic precepts first failed to prevent, and then prolonged, World War II. The United States and the rest of the world paid an unacceptable price in blood and treasure after Washington attempted to wash its hands of European power politics in the wake of World War I. NATO, by contrast, achieved key U.S. strategic goals not merely by deterring the Soviet Union but also, as its first secretary-general, Hastings Ismay, put it, by "keeping Germany down." NATO did not merely end the threat of German aggression against its neighbors. It greatly reduced the risk that any of its member states would engage in significant and sustained military conflict. The arrangement proved so successful that a war among France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom now seems inconceivable. The American architects of NATO worried about a rival power achieving dominance in Europe; instead, the United States became the dominant player in European security.

Many "America first" foreign policy hands and self-described realists believe that the United States can drastically scale back its commitments to NATO without jeopardizing its long-standing strategic goals in western Eurasia. They point to post–Cold War developments such as the apparent ease of deterring Russia from invading Europe, the lack of military friction between European nations, and the existence of a functional European Union. The problem here is straightforward: the U.S. commitment to NATO made all of these developments possible in the first place. Advocates of a U.S. drawdown claim that current trends would persist in the absence of a strong American presence. Perhaps they are right. But if they are wrong, the costs will far outweigh any possible gains the United States could win by freeing up some forces for use in the Asia-Pacific.

PHOTO SOURCE: REUTERS

The United States does not uphold its obligations to NATO out of some kind of misguided altruism. The alliance is a crucial instrument of U.S. power: NATO ensures that competition between the United States and Europe remains restricted to the economic sphere. And within that sphere, the alliance helps keep the European market—one of the world's largest, accounting for 15 percent of global trade—especially friendly toward the United States and aligned with American economic interests. If the world is entering a new, more chaotic era of great-power competition, the existence of NATO dramatically reduces the number of serious geopolitical competitors that the United States faces. Policymakers who believe that the United States can simply "pivot to Asia" must understand that Washington will need the support of all its existing allies if it intends to compete with China. Already, NATO's activities in support of Ukraine have boosted allied countries' willingness to act in concert with Washington against Beijing.

DUAL USE

In their antipathy to all things "liberal," many Trump advisers are playing into the hands of America's rivals. The irony is that the United States' authoritarian adversaries have no difficulty distinguishing between multilateralism and liberalism. Indeed, they are building out their own infrastructure of international institutions and multilateral forums. China has already made significant progress on this front, having founded or taken the lead in a large number of new institutions, including the BRICS, in which Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa were the first members; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with other Asian states, including Russia; the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation; the China-CELAC forum, a set of summits in which it meets with Latin American and Caribbean governments; and the newly established China–Central Asia mechanism. Beijing is leveraging these to promote its goals—many of them profoundly illiberal—and to explicitly counter the United States. The Astana Declaration, for example, which the Shanghai Cooperation Organization adopted in July 2024, opposed protectionist measures and "unilateral missile defense systems," thinly veiled references to the United States.

Neither China nor Russia is focusing exclusively on building its own institutional capacity. Both also seek to undermine the United States' existing influence in the international order. Rather than attacking incumbent institutions such as the UN, China and Russia have focused on expanding their sway over the organizations' staffing and policy priorities. And capitalizing on the tendency of American leaders to look at world politics through the lens of ideological shibboleths, Beijing and Moscow are playing U.S. conservatives for suckers. Consider Russia: to some degree, the American right's turn away from backing Ukraine reflects Trump's own idiosyncratic obsessions. If Trump were less enamored of Russian President Vladimir Putin—or if his worldview were less informed by the burden-sharing debates of the late 1980s, when trade tensions between

the United States and Germany and Japan were at their peak—more American conservatives would likely back aid to Kyiv. The Kremlin has also conducted a long-term effort to cultivate the U.S. right by using the same techniques that Russian intelligence used to build ties with European far-right parties, including junkets, financial support, and propaganda.

Moscow knows that its often superficial commitment to cultural conservatism gives it soft power with the American right. It uses that appeal to sell an anti-NATO, ostensibly anti-globalist vision of international order to American conservatives—a vision that just so happens to serve Russia's interests. Moscow does not want to weaken NATO because the alliance is "liberal" or "globalist." It wants to weaken NATO because doing so will enhance Russian power at the expense of the United States. And like China, it seeks to increase its influence in the kind of institutions that Trump's camp dismisses. In July, when Russia hosted the 2024 BRICS summit, it was eager to present the organization as a counterweight to Western-led multinational financial institutions and touted the attendance of the UN secretary-general, António Guterres.

China and Russia are furiously seeking new forms of multilateral engagement because they believe that doing so will only become more important. Unlike during the Cold War, when many countries chose or were coerced to align with one of two patrons, today's states want to hedge risk and maximize their leverage by establishing a diverse portfolio of security commitments, political support, and aid from rival powers. Even governments closely aligned with the United States are becoming more independent and entrepreneurial in their geopolitical allegiances. Any anxiety that India, for instance, might have initially felt about its neutrality on Ukraine quickly gave way to a confident defense of its right to strategic autonomy and to maintain dialogue with Moscow. Turkey remains part of NATO. But it has refused to join the anti-Russian sanctions regime, has applied to join the BRICS, and continues to promote its own interests in the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates' position as a major U.S. security partner has not prevented it from establishing itself as a hub for Russians who want to evade U.S. sanctions.

POWER STRIP

In the short term, if Trump withdraws from alliances and multilateral institutions, his purely transactional foreign policy may succeed in extracting greater concessions from countries that depend on U.S. security guarantees or cannot afford to lose access to American markets. But great-power competition will give many of those countries exit options. They can shift toward other export markets, find alternative sources of development assistance, or seek military protection from a rival great power.

And if the United States abandons, explicitly or implicitly, even a minimal commitment to some of the foreign policy principles it has long espoused—such as human rights, democracy, and good governance—little will set it apart from its great-power competitors. To be sure, the country has never lived up to the loftiest articulation of its values in either its domestic politics or its

international behavior. When it comes to naked power politics, the United States can give any great power a run for its money. But despite that history, the United States has also won allegiance from other countries because it has stood for ideals with widespread international appeal. It is vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy because its support for those principles is inconsistent, not nonexistent. If Trump's most transactional impulses become U.S. policy, however, the United States will lose a tarnished but nontrivial asset in its power-politics toolkit. When other governments ask themselves why they should partner with the United States instead of, say, China, the only answer will be "better compensation." That means the United States will have to spend more to get less.

There are other ways that the abandonment of liberal values—or values often coded as "liberal," such as an opposition to corruption—could damage the United States' security, impinge on its economic interests, and diminish its power, putting it at the mercy of competitors. The post–Cold War unipolar moment allowed the United States to build a huge toolbox of policy mechanisms by which it influences countries, companies, and individuals around the world. Like some of the kleptocratic regimes he mistakenly admires, Trump could easily repurpose these instruments to enrich himself and his friends. A politicized Justice Department and Treasury Department could deploy the anticorruption measures found in the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Foreign Extortion Prevention Act, and the Magnitsky Sanctions Program to persecute foreign officials who offend Trump or target foreign leaders' opponents with time-consuming corruption investigations in return for payments or favors. An illiberal American leader could selectively and arbitrarily use such tools to punish governments that refuse to transact with his cronies.

Such behavior would pose obvious dangers to U.S. national security. But it would also destroy important instruments of American power. Consider the United States' ability to impose targeted sanctions, enforce broader sanctions regimes, investigate corruption in other countries, and target terrorist groups' finances. It is able to do these things effectively in part because of the ways in which it dominates the global financial system, such as prohibiting sanctioned actors from transacting in U.S. dollars in the United States and across the international financial system. Many foreign governments tolerate their vulnerability because the United States uses these instruments in relatively predictable ways. But if an American president started deploying them for corrupt purposes, other countries would become much less willing to accept how vulnerable they are to U.S. financial pressure. And finding ways to limit the United States' influence over the global financial system—by increasing nondollar reserve holdings, including digital assets and cryptocurrency, and their use in international transactions—would become much more appealing. Although a single credible alternative to the U.S. dollar, such as a BRICS currency, is still a long way off, sanctioned countries including Iran, North Korea, and Russia are making international de-dollarization a priority.

Trump and his acolytes are poised to commit a string of unforced foreign policy errors driven by ideological opposition to a system—the liberal order—whose nature and value they clearly do not understand. The nature of this order is already shifting because of forces well outside the United States' control. To cope with urgent challenges such as interstate conflict and large-scale migration, U.S. policymakers will need a keen, nuanced sense of which powers and advantages their country possesses. Sweeping disruption is not the means to promote American power and stability. Yet to assert his vision of primacy, Trump would unilaterally destroy the very infrastructure that has helped the United States advance its core interests through previous eras of turbulent political change.

Internationalists must spotlight the real costs of such an ideologically driven project. If they cannot preserve the bureaucracies tasked with managing America's global commitments and if pragmatists in Trump's administration cannot moderate his "America first" foreign policy, the incoming president will voluntarily relinquish powerful tools that almost any interpretation of American interests would counsel him to preserve.

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How to Win the New Cold War

To Compete With China, Trump Should Learn From Reagan

NIALL FERGUSON

Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign very deliberately echoed the one that Ronald Reagan ran in 1980. "Peace through strength" and "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" are the two Reagan slogans that are best remembered today. Less well known is that in 1980, Reagan used the slogan "Make America great again," including in his convention acceptance speech.

Few commentators have paid much attention to these parallels, partly because the two presidents' personalities are so different, partly because paying tribute to Reagan has long been a vacuous ritual for Republican candidates. But the analogy is instructive—and Trump should use it to his political and strategic advantage, remembering (as others have forgotten) what exactly "peace through strength" turned out

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to mean in the 1980s. Although it has become fashionable to credit the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev with ending the Cold War, in truth it was the Reagan administration that forced Moscow down a path of reform that ultimately led to drastic disarmament and the end of the Soviet empire in eastern Europe.

Reagan opened with strength. He boldly reasserted the American rejection of communism as an ideology and Soviet expansionism as a strategy. At the same time, he initiated a major increase in defense spending that sought to exploit U.S. technological superiority. When the right time came, however, he pivoted to a series of summit meetings with Gorbachev that ultimately produced stunning breakthroughs in both disarmament and European security.

As he makes clear in his book *The Art of the Deal*, Trump lives to bargain. "There are times when you have to be aggressive," he writes of one real estate coup, "but there are also times when your best strategy is to lie back." Trump firmly believes that, in a negotiation with a strong adversary, one must open aggressively—but then seek the crucial moment to settle. Today, the United States finds itself in at least the sixth year of a second cold war, this time with China, a confrontation that has become even more dangerous under the Biden administration. In his first term, Trump recognized the American need to contain China's rise and convinced Washington policy elites, despite their initial skepticism, that this required both a trade war and a tech war. In his second term, he should once again begin by piling on the pressure with a fresh show of American strength. But this should not be an end in itself. His ultimate goal ought to be like Reagan's: to get to a deal with Washington's principal adversary that reduces the nightmarish risk of World War III—a risk inherent in a cold war between two nuclear-armed superpowers.

SAME DIFFERENCE

There are, of course, major differences between Trump and Reagan. Trump is a protectionist; Reagan was a free trader. Trump is as hostile to illegal immigration as Reagan was relaxed about it. Trump is as sympathetic to authoritarian strongmen as Reagan was keen to promote democracy. Trump's public personality is as abrasive as Reagan's was genial, as vindictive as Reagan's was magnanimous.

Also important to note is that the economic context when Reagan was elected was quite different from today: it was far worse. Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, was at 12.6 percent in November 1980. The unemployment rate was 7.5 percent and climbing; it would peak at 10.8 percent in December 1982. Interest rates were sky-high: the effective federal funds rate was 15.85 percent. The economy had emerged from recession in August 1980 and would return to recession a year later. By contrast, at the time of the 2024 election, inflation was 2.6 percent, unemployment 4.1 percent, and the federal funds rate 4.83 percent.

Nevertheless, the resemblances between Trump and Reagan—and their times—are numerous and significant. It is easy to forget, for example, how widely Reagan was feared at that

time by liberals at home and abroad, as well as by Washington's adversaries. As Max Boot shows in his new, revisionist biography of Reagan, he was seen at the time of his first election victory as "an amiable dunce," in the words of the Democratic Party grandee Clark Clifford. The liberal journalist Nicholas von Hoffman wrote in *Harper's* that it was "humiliating to think of this unlettered, self-assured bumpkin being our President." It was routine for cartoonists to depict a crazed Reagan astride a falling atomic bomb, like the character T. J. "King" Kong in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*. Trump is depicted the same way today. Reagan was mocked, belittled, and condescended to more than any other major politician of his era—and so, today, is Trump.

Consider also the strength of their political positions. On the one hand, Reagan won in 1980 by a much larger margin than Trump did in 2024. Carrying 44 states, Reagan was elected president with 489 votes in the Electoral College and a popular vote margin of 9.7 percent. Trump's win was no landslide: 31 states, 312 Electoral College votes, a popular vote margin of around 1.6 percent. On the other hand, the Republican Party, under Trump, will control both chambers of Congress, whereas under Reagan it had only the Senate. Moreover, Trump moved the Supreme Court decidedly to the right with his three first-term appointments, whereas the court during Reagan's term was distinctly more liberal.

Like Reagan—who was shot by John Hinckley, Jr., barely two months after his inauguration—Trump has survived a brush with death at the hands of an assassin. In each case, survival was accompanied by a sense of divine oversight, although neither man was especially devout. Like Reagan, too, Trump has vowed to reduce the size of the federal government. Both men were committed to supply-side reforms (in particular, deregulation), as well as spending cuts. And, like Reagan, one of Trump's first-year priorities will be to extend the tax cuts of his first term. Also like Reagan, Trump is very unlikely to balance the budget.

It is true that some of Trump's nominees are more outlandish than anyone Reagan ever considered for a cabinet-level job: consider, for example, Kash Patel, a midlevel official during Trump's first term whom Trump has tapped to lead the FBI and who has vowed to purge "the deep state" of Trump's enemies and critics, and Tulsi Gabbard, an idiosyncratic former Democrat whom Trump has tapped as director of national intelligence despite her lack of experience and her puzzling sympathetic views of Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia and Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Many remember nostalgically the stars of the early Reagan years: James Baker as chief of staff, Caspar Weinberger as secretary of defense, and the wunderkind David Stockman as director of the Office of Management and Budget. But few have any memory of James Edwards, who had served as governor of South Carolina but whose training as an oral surgeon scarcely qualified him to be secretary of energy, the post for which Reagan nominated him in 1980.

What about Trump's very un-Reaganite fondness for tariffs? On the

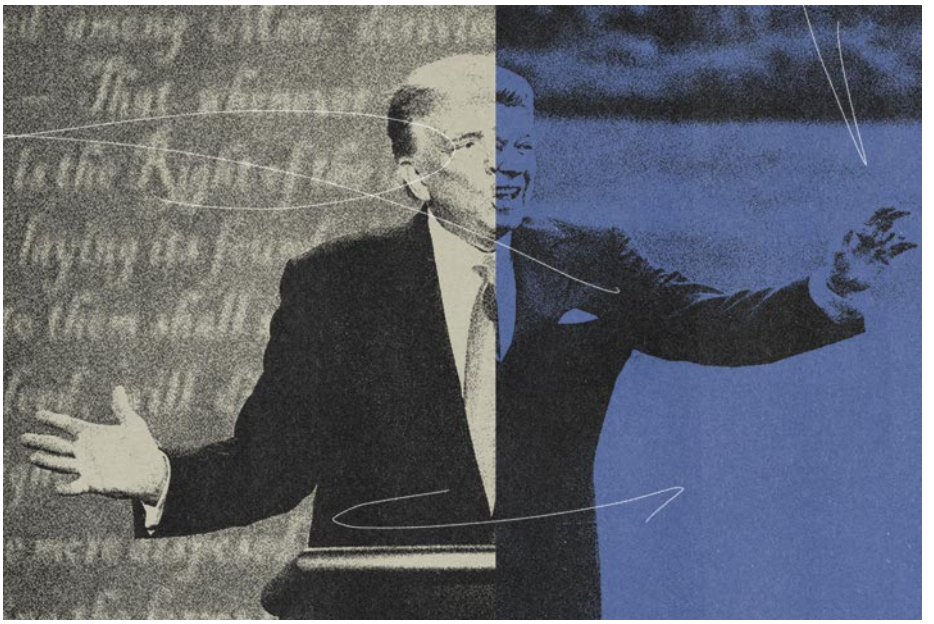
campaign trail, Trump talked about a "universal" tariff of up to 20 percent on all goods coming into the United States and a 60 percent tariff on all imports from China. Twenty-three Nobel laureate economists have warned that Trump's economic policies, "including high tariffs even on goods from our friends and allies and regressive tax cuts for corporations and individuals, will lead to higher prices, larger deficits, and greater inequality." But Trump seems more likely to deliver disinflation, as did Reagan, partly through lower oil prices and an already cooling labor market. And although Reagan was certainly in favor of free trade, it would be a mistake to caricature him as doctrinaire on the issue. He was not above pressuring Japan into imposing "voluntary" quotas on its automobile exports, which were then undercutting cars manufactured in Detroit.

Economists also worry that Trump may undermine the independence of the Federal Reserve. They might not know, however, that Reagan startled Fed chair Paul Volcker at their first meeting by saying, according to Boot's biography: "I've had several letters from people who raise the question of why we need the Federal Reserve at all. They seem to feel that it is the Fed that causes much of our monetary problems and that we would be better off if we abolished it. Why do we need the Federal Reserve?" Initially dumbstruck, Volcker recovered and explained that the Fed had been "very important to the stability of the economy." However much Trump dislikes today's Fed chair, Jay Powell, he knows—as does his nominee for Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent, a Wall Street veteran—the importance of market confidence in the independence of monetary policy.

HAWKS AND DOVES

Historians tend to judge modern presidents more by their foreign policy successes and failures than by their domestic achievements. Like Reagan, Trump will inherit several foreign policy crises from his predecessor. Back in 1980, Iran and Iraq were at war and the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. Today, Iran is at war with Israel, rather than with Iraq, and it is Ukraine, not Afghanistan, that is in the Kremlin's cross hairs. Back then, Nicaragua had just succumbed to the communist Sandinista revolution. Today, Venezuela is a failed state after 25 years of the Chavistas. All in all, the world seems more perilous than at any time since the end of the Cold War. China has supplanted the Soviet Union as the United States' principal rival—a superpower that is both economically and technologically more formidable than the Soviets ever were. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are now cooperating openly both economically and militarily. It is not hyperbole to refer to them as an axis akin to the one Washington and its allies faced during World War II.

Perhaps Trump will share Reagan's early luck. Within minutes of Reagan's first inaugural address, Iran released the 53 American hostages it was holding in Tehran. Trump may get good news even sooner, depending on the steps Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decides to take against the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities. Compared with a year ago, the strategic situation of Israel has been greatly strengthened. Iran's various proxies—Hamas and Hezbollah, in particular—have



suffered major losses, and the Islamic Republic's capabilities in both air attack and air defense have been exposed as feeble. Few other states in the region seem very sorry at the reverses inflicted on the moribund regime of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

By contrast, the news from Ukraine is unlikely to be good. Trump has repeatedly pledged that he will end the war there but without specifying how—and wars are notoriously difficult to end. More than three years passed between President Richard Nixon's opening peace initiative in 1969 and the agreement for which Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese General Le Duc Tho received the Nobel Peace Prize. The negotiations that eventually produced peace between Egypt and Israel in 1979 lasted more than five years.

In Ukraine, negotiations will be extremely difficult, partly because only one side desperately needs a cease-fire, and that is Kyiv, whose army is dangerously close to its breaking point. Outmanned and outgunned, Ukraine's military is also overstretched, thanks in part to its bold but perhaps foolhardy incursion into Russian territory. It is not obvious why Putin would enter peace negotiations when his forces seem close to a breakthrough in several areas along the frontline. The Biden administration's lifting of restrictions on what Ukraine can do with U.S.-supplied weapons has come too late to turn the tide. In terms of weapons deliveries, Russia continues to receive more support from allies than does Ukraine, and Moscow has also received additional troops from North Korea.

In facing this set of challenges, Trump should look to Reagan's example. At first, Reagan escalated the arms race with the Soviets; U.S. defense spending rose 54 percent between 1981 and 1985. He deployed intermediate-range

PHOTO SOURCE: REUTERS

nuclear missiles to Western Europe, launched the Strategic Defense Initiative missile defense system in 1983, and armed the mujahideen in Afghanistan, who inflicted heavy casualties on the Soviet forces that had invaded in 1979. More generally, Reagan did not hesitate to use U.S. military force when he saw American interests threatened. In 1983, he ordered U.S. forces to invade the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, after its Marxist-Leninist regime had descended into internecine violence. He also ordered the bombing of Libya in April 1986, in retaliation for the bombing of a discotheque in West Berlin, which had killed an American soldier.

But Reagan was not always a hawk. He did little in response to the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981. He agreed to reduce arms sales to Taiwan in 1982. And he did not retaliate when Iranian-backed Shiite militants bombed a U.S. barracks in Beirut in 1983, killing 241 members of the U.S. armed forces engaged in a doomed peacekeeping mission.

Nothing captured this flexibility more than Reagan's about-face from brinkmanship to détente with Gorbachev. In talks in Reykjavik in 1986, the two came close to agreeing to abolish all their nuclear weapons. In the end, they pledged to drastically reduce intermediate-range nuclear missiles on both sides of the Iron Curtain. So radical were the steps Reagan took in his second term that he was criticized for going too far by the original architects of détente, Nixon and Kissinger. Indeed, Kissinger privately called the Reagan-Gorbachev agreement the "worst thing since World War II."

The most impressive thing about Reagan's apparent turn from brinkmanship to deep disarmament is how little resonance these criticisms found outside the pages of conservative journals such as the *National Review*. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was ratified in the Senate, 93 votes to 5. The peace that ended the Cold War enjoyed widespread legitimacy more than a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall provided Reagan with symbolic vindication.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

At the beginning of his first term, Trump's most important foreign policy priority was competing with China. But competition quickly evolved into containment and ultimately confrontation. Trump did not intend to start a second cold war. But his strategy revealed that one had already begun, owing in no small part to the logic of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's strategy of achieving parity with and then superseding the United States.

Today, the new cold war is being waged unremittingly in multiple domains, from Ukraine to the Middle East, from space to cyberspace. But the biggest risk to world peace is surely in East Asia, where Chinese military exercises suggest that Beijing is preparing for a blockade—or a more ambiguous "quarantine"—of Taiwan at some point in the coming years. At present, the United States has few good options for such a contingency. In an interview last June, Admiral Sam Paparo, the head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, spoke of his intention, in the event of a Chinese blockade, "to turn the Taiwan Strait into an

unmanned hellscape using a number of classified capabilities . . . so that I can make their lives utterly miserable for a month, which buys me the time for the rest of everything." But the United States does not yet have the maritime drones and other weapons Paparo has in mind. Even if it did, using them against Chinese naval forces would risk a fearful escalation into full-blown war, with the potential to culminate in a nuclear exchange. Whatever "the rest of everything" means, it does not offer the least clarity about how such a showdown would end.

Trump's commitment is to avoid entangling the United States in more "forever wars" and, above all, to prevent a third world war. In his memoir, John Bolton, who served as Trump's third national security adviser, describes how the president repeatedly deviated from planned talking points when meeting with Xi because of Trump's desire to strike "the big deal" with Beijing—"the most exciting, largest deal ever," as Trump described it. To that end, he was willing to cut China slack in the U.S.-Chinese tech war by relaxing measures against Chinese firms such as ZTE and Huawei. And for the same reason, as Bolton relates, Trump was unwilling to press China on issues such as its crackdown on Hong Kong pro-democracy protests ("I don't want to get involved. We have human-rights problems too.") and China's repression and large-scale imprisonment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (which Trump explicitly approved of during a conversation with Xi).

In Trump's view, a "big deal" might be the only way to avoid having to start a war that the United States might not win. "One of Trump's favorite comparisons," Bolton recalls, "was to point to the tip of one of his Sharpies and say, 'This is Taiwan,' then point to the Resolute desk [in the Oval Office] and say, 'This is China.'" It was not just the discrepancy in size that bothered him. "Taiwan is like two feet from China," Trump told one Republican senator. "We are 8,000 miles away. If they invade, there isn't a fucking thing we can do about it."

Whatever members of his national security team may imagine, a deal with Xi should remain Trump's ultimate objective in his second term. The close involvement of the high-tech entrepreneur Elon Musk in the Trump transition also points in the direction of détente with China, as a strategy of confrontation is not in the interests of Musk's electric vehicle company, Tesla.

Such a deal could not be a giveaway, in which Beijing enjoyed tariff reductions without having to dismantle its extensive system of industrial subsidies. Nor could it allow China to resume exploiting high-tech supply chains for the purposes of espionage and possibly sabotage. But it would make sense, as it did in the 1980s, for the two superpowers to pursue disarmament. The current nuclear arms race is a lopsided one in which Washington's foes expand their arsenals while nonproliferation applies only to U.S. allies.

A crucial element of any U.S.-Chinese agreement would have to be a return to the 1970s consensus on Taiwan, whereby the United States accepts that there is "one China" but also reserves the option to resist any forcible change to Taiwan's de facto autonomy. The erosion of this "strategic ambiguity" would not enhance American deterrence but

merely increase the risk of a "Taiwan semiconductor crisis" akin to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

A Trump-Xi deal, however, can come only after the United States has reestablished a position of strength. After ratcheting up frictions over trade in 2025 and 2026—which will hurt the Chinese economy more than it hurts the U.S. economy, as in 2018–19—Trump should adopt a more conciliatory stance toward China, just as Reagan dramatically softened his attitude toward the Soviet Union in his second term.

SURPRISES IN STORE?

Trump's foreign policy looks superficially more dangerous than Biden's. But it was the Biden administration's incomprehension of deterrence that set in motion a series of disasters, first in Afghanistan, then in Ukraine, and then in Israel, and created the conditions for what would be a much larger disaster: a Chinese blockade of Taiwan. In a similar way, Reagan's critics at home and abroad accused him of risky brinkmanship, whereas in fact it was during the term of his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, that the Soviets invaded Afghanistan—one of the most perilous moments in the Cold War.

In 1980, many would have scoffed at any prediction that Reagan would end the Cold War—that he really would deliver peace through strength. Today, the argument that Trump might pull off a similar feat will strike many as absurd. But historical wisdom consists partly of remembering how unlikely epochal events seemed, even just a few years before they happened. Success in foreign policy can remake a presidential reputation beyond recognition. So it was with Reagan. So it may yet prove with Trump.

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Who's Afraid of America First?

What Asia Can Teach the World About Adapting to Trump

BILAHARI KAUSIKAN

To many countries in Europe, the return of Donald Trump to the White House is seen as a momentous, almost apocalyptic, shift that is likely to disrupt alliances and upend economic relations. Meanwhile, American adversaries such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia anticipate that the incoming administration will mark an opportunity to

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advance their anti-Western agendas. Yet there is another region of the world, one that includes many U.S. allies, partners, and friends, that views Trump's return more calmly.

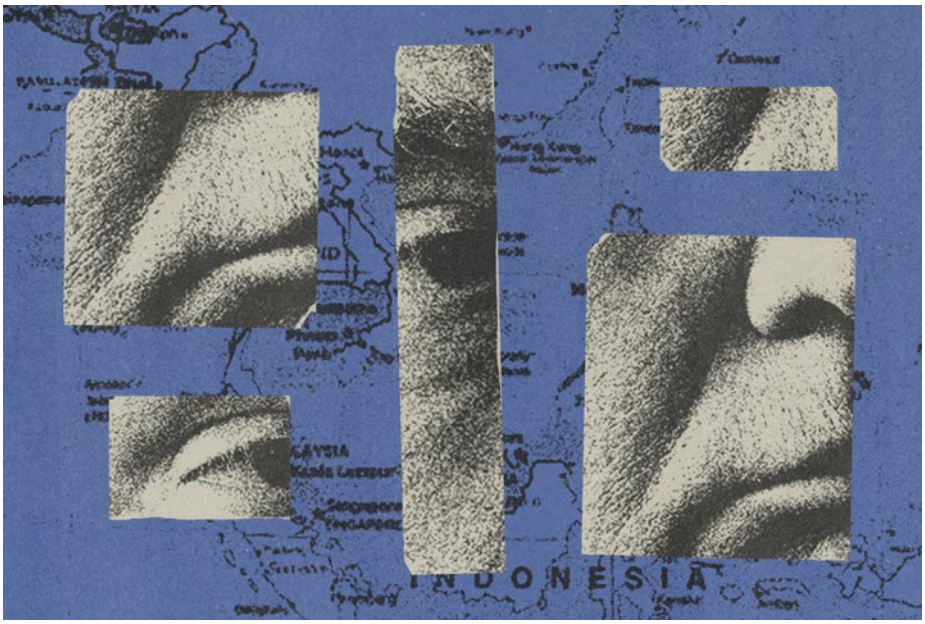
Across a large part of Asia, from Japan and South Korea in the north, through Southeast Asia—the linchpin connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans—to the Indian subcontinent in the south, a second Trump administration does not arouse the same strong emotions that it does among many in the West. For these countries, there is far less concern about Trump's autocratic tendencies and contempt for liberal internationalist ideals. The region has long conducted relations with Washington on the basis of common interests rather than common values. Such an approach fits neatly with Trump's transactional foreign policy because it involves balancing mutual benefits rather than sustaining the liberal international order. Indeed, much of Asia views the liberal order with ambivalence. When Asian countries talk about a "rules-based order," the phrase tends to carry significantly different meanings than it does in the West.

For Asia, far more than a radical deviation from existing U.S. foreign policy, Trump's return to power amplifies and accelerates a trend that has been underway since the Vietnam era. The United States is not in retreat and has not embraced isolation. Instead, it is expanding the geographic scope of the approach that U.S. President Richard Nixon first introduced in East Asia during the Cold War, by unilaterally redefining the terms of its global engagements and by becoming more circumspect about when and how it gets involved internationally. Having dealt with such a United States for almost half a century, Asia is not unduly agitated about a second Trump administration. This is not to discount important concerns in the region, including about tariff policies and Taiwan. But it does mean that Asian countries are more accustomed to Trump's transactionalism, and their experience holds important lessons for other U.S. partners and allies as they adjust to Washington's recalibration of the way it works with the world.

HESITANT HEGEMON

For many Asian states, Trump's "America first" approach echoes the strategy Washington has used toward much of Asia for more than five decades. In 1969, as he attempted to disengage the United States from an unwinnable war in Vietnam, Nixon unveiled a new strategy aimed at U.S. allies, partners, and friends in the region. "Except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons," Nixon said, in announcing that summer what came to be known as the Nixon Doctrine, "the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that [military defense] will be handled by, and responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves."

As Nixon saw it, the Vietnam War was a sobering lesson for American policy. Rather than getting dragged into other Asian quagmires, Washington would maintain stability as an offshore balancer, without deploying troops on the ground. This meant that the United States would provide a nuclear umbrella of extended



deterrence, as well as a military presence centered on air and naval bases in Japan and Guam, but countries in the region—with the partial exception of South Korea because of the unique threat from North Korea—would be expected to provide for their own security. No longer could they count on Washington to directly intervene as it did in Vietnam.

That approach has mostly characterized U.S. policy in Asia ever since. From the Asian perspective, the post-9/11 "war on terror" and the long U.S. war in Afghanistan pursued by the George W. Bush administration were stark exceptions to the general orientation of the United States in the region. Whereas critics of U.S. foreign policy see a quasi-imperialist, trigger-happy hegemon, Asian observers tend to see a fundamentally cautious power that is reluctant to deploy military power and that will calculate its own interests carefully before acting. The United States is vital for maintaining stability, but Asian countries do not consider it completely reliable because, as an offshore balancer, its decisions will always cause the region to doubt its intentions: if Washington decides to get involved, Asian leaders may worry they will be pulled into larger geopolitical struggles; if it decides not to, they may fear abandonment.

Since the early years of this century, the United States has begun to apply this approach to other regions, as well. Neither President Barack Obama nor Trump during his first term succeeded in disengaging from Bush's nation-building adventures, but President Joe Biden was able to cut the Gordian knot when he ordered the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. More recently, in the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the United States has provided overall deterrence and military support to

PHOTO SOURCE: REUTERS

allies but committed no American forces on the ground. Of course, Joe Biden has been more consultative as president than Trump ever was or will likely be, and he has taken steps to strengthen U.S. alliances in Asia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, and the AUKUS defense agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom. But Biden consults allies and partners to determine what they are prepared to do to advance the United States' agenda and has not made new U.S. security guarantees to defend them: call it polite transactionalism.

More readily than other parts of the world, Asia will accept Trump's approach to foreign policy because the region has already dealt with the United States in this way. Indeed, the distinction between offshore balancing and naked transactionalism is one of degree rather than kind. Trump will be less consultative, more unpredictable, less generous in providing assistance, and will demand that allies and partners pay more for American protection, but the result may not be so very different. There is only one United States, and it will remain vital for maintaining stability regardless of who occupies the White House. Most Asian countries will therefore accept what is possible under the incoming administration, particularly since they did not regard the pre-Trump United States with unqualified confidence. Nor did they experience the first Trump administration as all bad.

Consider the differences toward the region between Trump and his immediate predecessor, Obama. Throughout his time in office, Obama made eloquent speeches about the United States' commitments to Asia, but many leaders in the region saw him as weak when it came to confronting American adversaries, particularly China. In 2015, Chinese leader Xi Jinping stood next to Obama at the White House and publicly promised not to militarize the South China Sea. But the next year, Beijing proceeded to do exactly that—and Obama did nothing. U.S. partners across the region took note. On the other hand, in 2017, many Asian leaders quietly cheered when, at their first summit, Trump told Xi during dinner that he had ordered a cruise missile attack on Syria that night after the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons. This was in stark contrast to Obama's unwillingness to respond after Assad had used chemical weapons in 2013.

Some of Trump's actions during his first term suggest that his emphasis on peace through strength aligns with the instincts of many Asian governments. The issues that could lead to conflict in the region have no definitive solutions, but they need to be managed through firm deterrence and adroit diplomacy. When North Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatened to target Guam with his missiles in 2017, Trump responded by threatening to rain "fire and fury" on Pyongyang, effectively putting an end to North Korean testing of long-range missiles on any trajectory near Guam. In doing so, Trump restored the deterrence that had been lost during the Obama administration, when Washington let the North Korean situation fester for eight years and called it "strategic

patience." Then, in 2018, Trump met Kim in Singapore, opening a diplomatic track as well. Ultimately, that summit, and a subsequent meeting in Vietnam, did not lead to a breakthrough because Trump lacked the patience to persevere with his own strategy and failed to set realistic goals. The Trump administration was mistaken to think that North Korea would ever give up its nuclear weapons, but it was not wrong to try to manage the threat through deterrence and diplomacy. The firmness was there, but not the adroitness.

Viewing the president-elect from this perspective, leaders in East Asia and Southeast Asia have no strong reason to fear Trump 2.0. The main pieces of U.S. policy toward the region are already in place, some of them with strong bipartisan support as the Biden administration extended and expanded the approach of the first Trump administration on priority issues such as dealing with China. Any new policies in these areas are unlikely to be fundamental shifts of direction. Of course, even marginal changes can be disruptive, and this does not mean that the new Trump administration won't have a significant impact on the region or isn't cause for concern. Three issues in particular bear close monitoring: Taiwan, tariffs, and regional leadership.

THE TAIWAN CONUNDRUM

Breaking with the United States' decades-old "strategic ambiguity" policy, Biden on four occasions said that the United States would defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. Trump will not repeat such statements. During the 2024 campaign, his comments on Taiwan suggested that it falls within his general views on allies and trade: the island, he has said, is a long way away from the United States and difficult to defend and should pay more for U.S. protection, and he has accused Taipei of stealing America's semiconductor industry. The danger is that he may come to see Taiwan as a mere pawn in a larger game with China. Trump will certainly want to cut trade deals with Beijing using tariffs and the threat of a trade war as leverage. This could be extremely disruptive. But the dangers and uncertainties will multiply exponentially if he mixes trade and security by throwing Taiwan into any possible deal.

Trump has also promised to end the war in Ukraine. How he tries to do so will be closely watched throughout Asia, and particularly in China. Nevertheless, it is important not to draw a straight line from how Trump treats Ukraine to what Beijing may conclude about how he will treat Taiwan. The geopolitical circumstances of Ukraine and Taiwan are not identical, as China itself has pointed out. More crucially, Taiwan lies at the core of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimating narrative, and a failed or stalled Chinese military venture against it would shake the foundations of party rule. Precisely because "reunification" with Taiwan is so important to them, China's leaders will not gamble with it, particularly since recurring corruption scandals at the top of the Chinese military have cast doubts on its competence and capabilities. Military action is not Beijing's preferred option for "reunification," even if the Chinese

leadership continues to try to advance China's capability to use force in order to achieve that goal.

Biden's unambiguous statements in support of Taiwan have fanned a growing sense of entitlement in Taipei—the conviction that the United States and its allies will have to defend the island from Chinese aggression. It has also reinforced Taiwan's overblown assessment of its own strategic significance in the world economy, rooted in an exaggerated belief in the indispensable role of its chip industry, particularly the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. TSMC is undoubtedly a remarkable company that dominates advanced semiconductor fabrication—but it is, after all, only a contract manufacturer. The fact that it can produce chips better than any other company does not mean that no one else can produce them. In any case, TSMC has been shifting some of its activities from Taiwan to the United States and Japan and may also explore relocating some parts of its operations to India, Europe, and Southeast Asia. These moves may lessen the economic importance of Taiwan itself in the long run.

If Trump pulls back from Ukraine—for example, by conditioning further U.S. backing on Kyiv's willingness to negotiate with Moscow—or if his administration takes serious steps to improve America's own semiconductor manufacturing capabilities, it would signal to Taipei that it cannot count on unlimited support from Washington. Such steps could prevent Taiwanese domestic politics from drifting in a potentially destabilizing direction, perhaps by taking a more overtly pro-independence stance that would force Beijing to react by stepping up military exercises around Taiwan or moving against the South China Sea island of Taiping, which is occupied and administered by Taiwan.

The effect of the war in Ukraine on other countries in Asia should not be overstated. Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have taken strong and clear positions of principle against Russian aggression in Ukraine. But most of the region is ambivalent. The Muslim-majority states of Southeast Asia, in particular, see double standards at work in Washington's denunciation of Russia, pointing to U.S.-initiated or -supported wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon, among other conflicts. Many Asian states will also seek to protect their national interests by calculating costs and benefits. If that balance seems right, they will do what they must to maintain relations with the United States, with Trump's attitude toward Taiwan and Ukraine remaining second-order considerations. Of far greater concern is China. That issue alone has driven even traditionally nonaligned countries such as India, Indonesia, and Vietnam to move closer to Washington, a trend that began during the first Trump administration and grew under Biden.

LOOKING FOR A LEADER

For many Asian countries, trade policy is perhaps the most worrisome element of Trump's return. Trump has boasted that "tariff" is his favorite word, and foreign governments would be wise to take him seriously, particularly if more trade hawks, such

as Jamison Greer, whom Trump has nominated as U.S. trade representative, are given major roles in U.S. trade policy. Trump will use tariffs as leverage with China, probably starting from the premise that China had not fulfilled its commitments under the trade deal reached at the end of his first term. The Trump administration seems certain to impose new tariffs on China and very likely also on other countries that have significant trade surpluses with the United States, including Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Beijing will retaliate in some way since it will not want to appear weak. China's own troubled economic condition may constrain it, but herein lies another concern. Beijing's economic problems are essentially driven by collapsing confidence in the country's economic management. This is a political crisis, as well, because it stems from doubts among many in the Chinese business and intellectual elite, as well as its middle class, about the direction that Xi has taken the country. By privileging political control and security over economic efficiency, he has moved the state in a more Leninist direction, slowing growth and straining China's post-Mao social compact, according to which Chinese were given more space to pursue economic and other activities, as long as they did not openly defy the party.

Coupled with a new Trump trade war, the resulting economic slowdown could create a vicious circle. Across China, local governments have incurred massive debt underwritten by a real estate bubble that has now burst. The collapse of the real estate sector has eroded consumer confidence, making it difficult to boost domestic demand. As a consequence, Beijing has relied on state-directed investment to drive growth, causing overcapacity in key export sectors: Chinese companies are flooding markets with cheap electric vehicles and batteries, increasing trade tensions with the West and raising the prospect of more tariffs and geopolitical tensions. These tensions add to China's economic problems and make it more difficult for Beijing to make significant policy changes without appearing weak. By exporting its overcapacity, China also increases the likelihood that the United States and other countries will impose tough tariff regimes on it, thus further undermining consumer confidence and causing even greater reliance on state-directed investment and exports. If this cycle locks the Chinese economy into a long-term slowdown, how a frustrated Beijing chooses to react will have security as well as economic consequences across Asia and, indeed, the world.

Mutual nuclear deterrence makes it highly improbable that friction between China and the United States will lead to military conflict. But there is also little that anyone can do to mitigate Washington's intensifying competition with Beijing. Amid these rising tensions, few Asian governments see relations with the United States or China as a binary choice: they will instead try to work more closely with each other to hedge against the uncertainties generated by Xi's economic policies and Trump's return. But in doing so, they face another issue: Who will effectively lead the region?

Trump's 2017 decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership was a shock to U.S. allies and friends that still reverberates across Asia. But the region quickly adapted after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe rallied TPP members to go ahead without Washington and transform the trade pact into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Abe also moved swiftly to establish a close personal relationship with Trump, which probably also helped soften the American president's approach to Japan and other U.S. partners in East Asia during his first term.

Today, however, the three most important U.S. allies—Australia, Japan, and South Korea—all have politically weak leaders. The new Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto, wants to take Indonesian foreign policy in a more activist direction, but he has yet to establish himself regionally or internationally. When Prabowo visited the United States in November after the election, he spoke with Trump by telephone. "Wherever you are, I'm willing to fly to congratulate you, personally, sir," Prabowo gushed. Trump responded positively to this display of deference, but no meeting occurred. The region clearly needs someone to step forward and lead as the late Abe did, but there is no obvious candidate.

AMERICA WAS ALWAYS FIRST

Asia's long experience with Washington suggests that Trump is not sui generis. Large, continent-sized countries such as the United States tend to look inward more than outward. Trump's reluctance to involve the country in foreign commitments reflects a strand of thinking that has been present in U.S. foreign policy since George Washington warned against permanent alliances in his 1796 Farewell Address. Before World War II, the United States engaged in external affairs only episodically, and none of those episodes lasted very long. It took a direct attack on American soil at Pearl Harbor in 1941 to force Washington to confront the threats posed by fascism in Europe and militarism in Japan; after World War II, the existential threat posed by the Soviet Union led the United States into the Cold War. The 50 years between 1941 and 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded, was the longest period of sustained external engagement in U.S. history.

Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, the United States has not faced such an existential threat. China is a formidable peer competitor and Putin's Russia is dangerous, but neither poses the same kind of threat that the Soviet Union did. So why should Americans, in the famous formulation of President John F. Kennedy, "bear any burden or pay any price" to uphold international order? Consequential as it was, the half century when the United States had no choice but to consistently and continually engage itself abroad—and the era of the "war on terror" in the early years of this century—may be exceptions rather than the rule. Indeed, with the Nixon Doctrine, U.S. policy toward much of Asia had already reverted to a less interventionist stance

even during the later decades of the Cold War.

Rather than hankering after the imagined common values of a bygone age, then, U.S. allies and partners would do well to regard the foreign policy of Trump's second administration as a return to the natural position of the United States. Emulating their Asian counterparts, Western countries should learn to deal with Washington not as a superpower with almost unlimited willingness to defend them but as an offshore balancer that will use its forces discriminatingly to advance American interests first.

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Rise of the Nonaligned

Who Wins in a Multipolar World?

MATIAS SPEKTOR

The global South has been a net winner from the shifts in global power over the last two decades. The growing influence of emerging economies, the rise of China as a great power, tensions between the United States and its European allies, and increasing great-power competition have given these countries new leverage in global affairs. They have taken advantage of these shifts by building new coalitions, such as BRICS (whose first members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa); strengthening regional alliances, such as the African Union; and pursuing a more assertive agenda at the UN General Assembly. From championing the Paris agreement on climate change to taking Israel to the International Court of Justice, the global South—the broad grouping of largely postcolonial countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—has shown a greater willingness to challenge Western dominance and redefine the rules of the global order.

An "America first" foreign policy would seem to put those gains at risk. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised to hit developing countries where it hurts most: raising tariffs that will throttle exporters in developing countries; normalizing the mass deportation of migrants, whose remittances are essential for the economies of many countries in the global South; and withdrawing from global environmental agreements that provide crucial support to those people disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. His proposed economic

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policies will probably lead to inflation at home, with devastating knock-on effects for developing countries as interest rates rise globally and credit becomes more expensive for economies already burdened by debt. His commitment to targeting China may make it harder for Beijing to continue serving as an alternative market and source of investment for much of the world.

But even if Trump follows through on his promises (and he may not), the bigger story for the global South should be one of opportunity. Trump has exhibited little interest in, and often contempt for, the non-Western world, but his return could paradoxically help countries in the global South advance their own interests. His hostility to certain international norms will push these countries to work together more effectively, while his transactional approach will give them the chance to play the great powers off one another.

And if Trump winds up accommodating Russia to pry it away from China, that would indicate that the United States must now navigate a multipolar world—exactly the understanding of geopolitics that the global South has come to embrace. Indeed, many governments in the global South welcome his departure from the U.S. foreign policy tradition of liberal internationalism that purports to make the world "safe for democracy" but has, since its inception under President Woodrow Wilson, applied one standard to Europeans and another to everyone else. By contrast, Trump borrows from another tradition, that of the likes of President William Taft, whose "dollar diplomacy" used economic influence to extend American power abroad without moral pretense. Both approaches are forms of hegemonic reassertion—attempts to cement U.S. primacy on the world stage—but one cloaks itself in moral superiority, and the other does not. Some developing countries will feel Trump's amoral pragmatism as a breath of fresh air, as well as an opening to promote their own interests, whatever the declared aims of Washington.

THE PENDULUM SWINGS

The global South is a capacious category, encompassing a wide variety of countries that have differing levels of wealth, influence, and aspiration. The interests and needs of a country with the economic heft of Brazil are very different from those of a poorer one such as Niger. Not all countries in the global South pull in the same direction: Indonesia, for instance, increasingly resists taking sides in the competition between China and the United States, while Argentina, under its Trump-admiring president, Javier Milei, has reoriented its foreign policy to hew more closely to American positions. Meanwhile, India is balancing its traditional solidarity with postcolonial countries against its desire to become a major military player loosely in the U.S. camp—a shift that has elevated its global standing as a counterweight to China.

Yet despite its diversity, the global South has over the decades managed to form effective coalitions to reshape those international rules long crafted to serve the interests of the powerful. Its countries have united on occasion to make international norms more equitable. In the mid-twentieth century, under the banner of the Non-Aligned

Movement, the global South coalition aimed to dismantle Western imperial legacies—fighting for sovereignty, racial equality, economic justice, and what it saw as cultural liberation from Western influence. By the 1970s, the global South had organized under various groupings, including the G-77 at the UN, to achieve significant victories: decolonization became enshrined in international law and the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states emerged as a global norm. Organizations such as the oil-trading cartel OPEC used economic leverage to assert greater non-Western control over natural resources. Crucially, the advocacy of countries in the global South began influencing rules on nuclear proliferation, trade, energy, and the environment, codifying in international law the need for forms of redistributive justice to compensate countries that had emerged from the ravages of colonialism.

Consider the global nonproliferation regime: in the 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union colluded to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and technological know-how, aiming to curb proliferation. That rankled many countries in the global South that sought greater access to peaceful nuclear technology and feared that an agreement between the superpowers would effectively entrench nuclear weapons, making it virtually impossible to eliminate them in the future. These countries banded together and, through years of hard-nosed negotiations, secured a compromise with the superpowers. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, signed in 1968, still favored states that already possessed nuclear weapons, but it included provisions that encouraged disarmament in powerful countries and incentives for weaker countries to develop peaceful nuclear energy.

There were reverses, too. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States dismissed the global South as obsolete, insisting that all countries embrace domestic reforms to align with a liberal order under American primacy. Structural adjustment programs from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank enforced financial deregulation and austerity, while the United States used the extraterritorial application of domestic law—notably through the stipulations of Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act—to pressure countries to dismantle protective tariffs and subsidies. Yet globalization unfolded in unexpected ways. It generated new wealth for many postcolonial countries, propelled China into a position of rising power, and fueled potent transnational movements such as political Islam. Although globalization also encouraged a wave of democratization across the developing world, that outcome did not always benefit the United States and its Western allies.

U.S. President Bill Clinton reopened opportunities for the global South. Rhetoric about the so-called liberal international order appealed to the notion of an interconnected world where prosperity could be more evenly distributed, including to developing countries. Clinton was not immune to violating these norms, such as when he bypassed the UN Security Council to launch NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The Helms-Burton Act in

1996 penalized foreign companies engaged in business with Cuba, even when such activities were legal in their own countries and lawful in the eyes of the World Trade Organization.

But Clinton's emphasis on a "rules-based order" allowed countries in the global South to use international institutions to their own advantage. The World Trade Organization provided a platform for developing countries to negotiate favorable deals, including the ability to legally challenge stronger economies, helping level the playing field in international trade. The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing spotlighted gender issues, unleashing an era of progressive change across the developing world by galvanizing international support for gender equality initiatives and pressuring governments to better secure women's rights. The Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change provided a mechanism through which developing countries could receive financial and technological support for environmental policies while taking industrialized countries to task for failing to curb carbon emissions. The World Bank reformed to prioritize programs that reduced poverty and promoted sustainable development across the global South. A world of institutionalized global norms, despite its imperfections, allowed developing countries to hold great powers accountable and extract meaningful concessions through multilateral mechanisms.

The pendulum swung after the 9/11 attacks, in whose aftermath U.S. President George W. Bush insisted, "There are no rules." This proclamation heralded an era of unrestrained use of force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, resulting in the direct and indirect deaths of millions of people across the global South. The United States tortured detainees from developing countries in clandestine facilities.

PHOTO SOURCE: REUTERS

In many Western countries, Muslims and their religion in general became the subjects of racialized scrutiny. The humanitarian doctrine of "responsibility to protect"—that sanctioned intervention to prevent crimes such as genocide—facilitated invasions and violations of national sovereignty, such as the NATO-led attack on Libya in 2011, that seemed motivated more by strategic interests than concerns about the welfare of people. U.S. President Barack Obama challenged international law by turning Yemen into a proving ground for drone warfare, causing a fragile state to spiral into chaos. This interventionism bred instability and triggered mass migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, especially during the Syrian civil war in the 2010s.

The financial crisis of 2008 would force the pendulum back in the other direction. It delivered a devastating blow to the West, exposing the rot within the pillars of the liberal international order. For the first time in decades, the West found itself needing the global South. The G-20, which brought emerging economies such as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa to the table alongside traditional Western powers, replaced the G-7 as the primary forum for global economic governance. Non-Western countries won a greater say in crafting global recovery plans, such as coordinated stimulus measures and reforms to financial governance. For example, the G-20 oversaw the expansion of representation in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to include more voices from emerging economies. Concurrently, a range of non-Western institutions—including the African Union, BRICS, OPEC+ (the expanded version of the cartel), and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—became vibrant arenas of collective action for the global South.

Trump's arrival in the White House in 2017 slowed the global South's progress. His sidelining of the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and disregard for trade rules by unilaterally imposing tariffs outside the World Trade Organization framework had devastating effects. International institutions had offered the global South some modest protections—without them, weaker states were left vulnerable to the law of the jungle. In 2020, he announced his administration's intention to withdraw from the World Health Organization, for instance, temporarily freezing U.S. funding for key programs in Africa, undermining efforts to combat polio and malaria. Trump's disregard for international institutions also weakened the extent to which global South countries could influence global governance. Trump's demonization of nonwhite migrants from global South countries further deepened the divide, promoting xenophobia and racist hostility that has reverberated far beyond U.S. borders.

Not much changed under U.S. President Joe Biden. His stance on trade largely mirrored Trump's. Although Biden initially rolled back some of Trump's hard-line positions on immigration, he would tack back toward them in the second half of his presidency. He returned the United

States to the Paris agreement, but his legislation devised to combat climate change—including the Inflation Reduction Act—risks becoming a tool for protectionism, making it harder, not easier, for global South countries to transition to green economies.

It is unsurprising that many developing countries have turned to China in recent years. China's transformation from a relatively poor country to a much more powerful and prosperous one in just a half century helps it speak to governments and publics in the global South. It has been a major financier for these countries, trading loans and investment for commodities, raw materials, energy, and port access to fuel its rapid growth. Beijing capitalized on Washington's self-inflicted wounds—such as its calamitous invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Trump's disdain for international agreements and institutions—to become a major player in multilateral organizations, in which it often claims to represent the interests of the developing world.

But there are growing signs of trouble. As China becomes more powerful, it increasingly treats other countries not as a partner might, but as a great power would. Many see its actions as neocolonial, including its imposition of draconian conditions on trade and investment deals and its heavy-handed diplomacy across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, China has shifted from partner to aspiring hegemon, pressuring countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Even within BRICS—which is now expanding beyond its founding members—some worry that China sees the grouping as a vehicle to project influence rather than a shared platform for collective action benefiting developing countries. Trump's return to the White House will not make it any easier for the global South to balance China with the United States; his trade protectionism will hurt developing countries across the board.

DELUSIONS OF HEGEMONY

Trump's campaign pledges on trade, climate, migration, and taxation are often understood as a retreat from the world. From the perspective of the global South, however, these commitments suggest the opposite: they augur an attempt to reassert U.S. hegemony. When Trump threatens to withdraw from international agreements, he is actually insisting that the United States can go it alone—and that others should just fall in line if they know what's good for them. By sowing uncertainty about the credibility of American commitments, Trump incentivizes countries to align more closely with the United States or risk losing out. His proposed tax cuts and tariffs will fuel inflation, leading to higher U.S. interest rates. This, in turn, will raise borrowing costs globally, especially for countries with significant debt, and will drive investors away from emerging markets toward safer returns in the United States. The resulting currency depreciation will make imports more expensive, increasing inflation while reducing productivity in many developing countries. Rather than signaling isolation, Trump's campaign pledges are interpreted in the global South as a calculated strategy of revisionism—a

bid to restore U.S. primacy by making other countries pay heed, align with Washington, or be left vulnerable in an increasingly uncertain order.

Leaders across the global South will have little option but to find ways to shield their countries from the consequences of Trump's policies. Domestic publics in many developing countries are far more politically mobilized and technologically empowered than they were in previous eras, making their demands louder and harder to ignore. The poor and middle classes in much of the global South benefited significantly from the economic opportunities that came with globalization and that Trump threatens. They will expect their leaders to hold the line.

Many governments will, for instance, continue to explore alternatives to the U.S. currency, experimenting with nondollar payment systems, digital currencies, and trade mechanisms in local denominations to blunt the White House's capacity to coerce rivals through sanctions and other restrictions. They may seek new, creative strategies to maintain international trade flows and sidestep the restrictions imposed by the incoming U.S. administration. Anticipating such moves, Trump posted to social media in November threatening to impose 100 percent tariffs on BRICS countries should they pursue an alternative currency "to replace the mighty U.S. dollar."

If Trump does indeed conduct mass deportations, they will hurt his country's standing in much of the global South because they vindicate the belief that Trump holds profound disdain for the non-Western world. This will deepen the divide between the global North and South on issues of race and cultural difference, straining the West's diplomatic relations with countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America while provoking broader resentment toward Western countries seen as perpetuating racial hierarchies. Such actions could exacerbate tensions within the United States, widening the gap between communities over issues of race and immigration and further undermining the country's moral authority on the global stage.

One subject that has won broad solidarity among the countries of the global South is the Palestinian cause. South Africa, for example, has taken steps to challenge Israel's actions in Gaza at the International Court of Justice, accusing it of committing acts of genocide. Many governments across the global South view this as emblematic of broader Western hypocrisy, pointing to how the West largely tolerates the killing of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians by Israel, even as it vociferously condemns Russian aggression and the killing of Ukrainian civilians. This double standard has deepened skepticism in the global South about the impartiality of the liberal international order. The plight of the Palestinians will serve as a flash point, a symbol of inequities in the prevailing international order and, in the eyes of many across the developing world, the unfinished work of decolonization. The issue will continue to underscore the persistent tensions between Western and non-Western countries. Even as Trump gives freer rein to Israeli ambitions, developing countries will

keep using the UN General Assembly and international law to challenge not only Israel but also the United States.

On climate action, Trump's approach promises to embolden interest groups within the global South that are dedicated to high-carbon industries and the extraction of fossil fuels. That will shift the domestic balance of power away from proponents of the green transition. High-carbon interest groups are bound to resist necessary reforms and make it costlier and slower to effect the green transition globally. Trump's relative indifference to climate action could embolden loggers, ranchers, and miners around the world, leading to further deforestation and unsustainable agricultural expansions that will exacerbate climate change, threatening global food security by disrupting ecosystems and reducing crop yields in both the global South and the global North.

At the same time, Trump's foreign policy could have some curious consequences. Instead of reasserting American primacy, Washington could come to see that the world has shifted under its feet. If Trump follows through on his campaign pledge to lower tensions with Russia while still seeking to pressure China, he may unintentionally accelerate the drift toward a multipolar world. By easing hostilities with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump would tacitly acknowledge that Russia cannot be subdued and that Moscow's quest for regional hegemony is legitimate—that Russia is entitled to strive to maintain a sphere of influence. This would vindicate many countries in the global South that have argued for years that the international system is no longer defined by unchallenged American hegemony but by a more balanced order, in which the United States must increasingly eschew the impulsive foreign policy of unipolarity for calculated restraint. Developing countries will continue treating both China and Russia as pivotal centers of power, seizing opportunities to extract economic, security, and technological concessions through platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a China-led multilateral group. In a fragmented global order marked by competition and pragmatic transactionalism, Trump's policies could increase the global South's leverage, enabling it to play great powers off one another.

To be sure, the global South lacks the unity and resources to fully blunt the sharper edges of Trump's foreign policy. The United States under Trump will still wield unmatched influence, setting agendas and shaping international rules. Washington retains the capacity to employ economic coercion, diplomatic isolation, and even military force to quash serious efforts by developing countries to challenge U.S. preferences. But the rising agency of the global South and the expanding geopolitical consciousness among its peoples have fundamentally altered the dynamics of global power. The U.S. government, whether under Trump or his successors, will find it increasingly difficult to ignore the growing political relevance of those countries once consigned to the margins. Trump's bid to reassert American hegemony will run into a world that is far less pliant than he imagines it to be.

International Education: At the Center of Addressing Global Challenges

By Allan E. Goodman, CEO, Institute of International Education (IIE)

As global leaders come together in Davos for the 2025 Annual Meeting of The World Economic Forum, populations across the globe are experiencing historic levels of disruption and opportunity. Nowhere can these forces be seen more clearly than in international education.

The number of students seeking education outside their home countries has climbed to record highs, with today's 6.9 million projected to increase to more than 10 million by 2030. Much of this unprecedented global student mobility is driven by forced displacement due to wars, natural disasters, political persecution, and climate change, as well as the extraordinary life and career opportunities created by breakthroughs and innovation in science and technology.

10 million

The number of students crossing borders for education is projected to reach more than 10 million by 2030.

Along with daunting humanitarian and geopolitical challenges, these dynamic push/pull factors have created an environment of robust international exchange among students and scholars, which, if embraced and supported, will propel the world community closer to achieving the commitment to "Collaboration for the Intelligent Age" chosen as the theme of this year's WEF gathering.

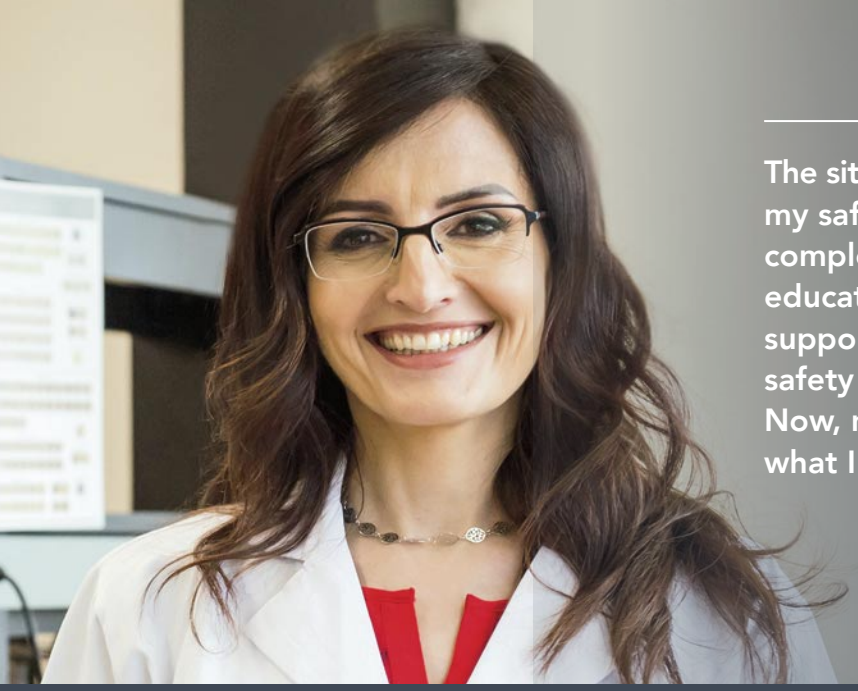
Over the more than 100 years since IIE's founding, we've witnessed the lasting collaboration that takes hold when students are given the opportunity to share learning, culture, and friendship. And we know that understanding and empathy are advanced by educational exchange and contribute to prosperity and peace.

So, how can we respond to the world's accelerating challenges and opportunities?

International educational exchange is central to innovation, economic prosperity, diplomacy, and national security. IIE's signature programs like the Odyssey Scholarship, Artist Protection Fund, and Scholar Rescue Fund help students, academics, and artists displaced by war, persecution, political turmoil, and other crises, continue their work in safer environments — and contribute to global solutions. The programs have never been more in demand than today. To date, IIE has issued more than 2,300 scholarships, fellowships, and grants to displaced students, scholars, and artists from around the world. These changemakers are critical to preserving hope for a brighter future and more interconnected world.

We collaborate with governments across the globe to design and facilitate programs to maximize the opportunities created by social change and innovation. Our Quad Fellowships — an initiative of the Quad governments of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S., administered by IIE — provides the opportunity for exceptional master's and doctoral students from the Indo-Pacific region to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at U.S. colleges and universities. In 2024, the Quad Fellowship expanded to support students from Southeast Asian countries. And, last year, IIE launched our Global Community for Women's Leadership, a collaborative global network providing mentorship, resources, and skills development opportunities to help women step into and thrive in positions of leadership.

Assessing the state of the world as we close the first quarter of the 21st century, we need people-to-people interactions more than ever. Collaboration, a proven contributor to world prosperity and peace, has always been at the heart of international educational exchange. Now is the time for governments and corporate leaders to support its growth and invest in making the world we share a more secure place.



The situation in Syria threatened my safety and my life, and completely disturbed the educational system. With support from IIE, I relocated to safety to continue my career. Now, my focus has turned to what I can do for others.

DR. RANA MUSTAFA
IIE Scholar Rescue Fund Fellow
Food Scientist

With support from IIE, Dr. Mustafa was able to continue her research to reduce hunger and increase global food security.

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The Strange Triumph of a Broken America

Why Power Abroad Comes With Dysfunction at Home

MICHAEL BECKLEY

By all appearances, the United States is a mess. Two-thirds of Americans believe the country is on the wrong track, and nearly 70 percent rate the economy as "not good" or "poor." Public trust in government has fallen by half, from 40 percent in 2000 to just 20 percent today. Love of country is fading, too, with only 38 percent of Americans now saying patriotism is "very important" to them, down from 70 percent in 2000. Congressional polarization has reached its highest point since Reconstruction, and threats of violence against politicians have surged. Former U.S. President Donald Trump faced two assassination attempts en route to reclaiming the White House, winning the popular vote even though many Americans believe he's a fascist. Some scholars draw parallels between the United States and

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Illustration by Zoë van Dijk

Weimar Germany. Others liken the United States to the Soviet Union in its final years—a brittle gerontocracy rotting from within. Still others argue that the country is on the brink of civil war.

Yet such undeniable American dysfunction has had remarkably little effect on American power, which remains resilient and, in some respects, has even grown. The country's share of global wealth is about as large as it was in the 1990s, and its grip on global arteries—energy, finance, markets, and technology—has strengthened. Internationally, the United States is gaining allies, whereas its main adversaries, China and Russia, are increasingly embattled. Inflation, massive debt, and sluggish productivity remain serious concerns, but they pale in comparison to the economic and demographic headwinds facing other great powers.

American dysfunction has had remarkably little effect on American power.

This is the paradox of American power: the United States is a divided country, perpetually perceived as in decline, yet it consistently remains the wealthiest and most powerful state in the world—leaving competitors behind.

How can such dominance emerge from disorder? The answer is that the United States' main assets—its vast land, dynamic demographics, and decentralized political institutions—also create severe liabilities. On the one hand, the country is an economic citadel, packed with resources and blessed by ocean borders that shield it from invasion while connecting it to global trade. Unlike its rivals, whose populations are shrinking, the United States enjoys a growing workforce, buoyed by high levels of immigration. And despite political gridlock in Washington, the country's decentralized system empowers a dynamic private sector that adopts innovations faster than its competitors. These structural advantages keep the United States ahead—even as its politicians squabble.

Yet these same strengths also create two major vulnerabilities. First, they deepen the divide between prospering urban hubs and struggling rural communities, intensifying economic disparities and fueling political polarization. Although cities have largely benefited from an increasingly globalized, knowledge-based economy powered by immigration, many rural areas have been left behind as manufacturing and public-sector jobs have dwindled, breeding resentment and fraying national unity. Second, geographic insulation and wealth foster a sense

of detachment from global affairs by shielding the country from external threats, leading to chronic underinvestment in military and diplomatic capabilities. At the same time, its vast power, diverse population, and democratic institutions drive the United States to pursue an array of ambitious interests abroad. This tension between detachment and global engagement results in a hollow internationalism in which the United States seeks to lead on the world stage but often lacks the resources to fully achieve its goals, inadvertently fueling costly conflicts.

Together, these vulnerabilities—domestic fragmentation and strategic insolvency—threaten the United States' stability and security, creating dualities that define its power. An economic boom coexists with a civic bust. Unmatched material strength is often squandered by a feckless foreign policy. Trade and immigration enrich the country yet strain its social fabric and devastate working-class communities. The challenge for American leaders is to navigate these contradictions. If the United States can balance its ambitions with its resources and bridge its internal divides, it could not only preserve its power but also contribute to a more stable world order. Otherwise, the paradox of American power may one day bring it all crashing down.

STILL THE ONE

The United States remains an economic powerhouse, accounting for 26 percent of global GDP, the same as during the "unipolar moment" of the early 1990s. In 2008, the economies of the United States and the eurozone were nearly equal in size, but today, the American economy is twice as large. It is also roughly 30 percent larger than the combined economies of the so-called global South: Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. A decade ago, it was just ten percent larger. Even the Chinese economy is shrinking relative to that of the United States in current dollar terms—the clearest gauge of a country's purchasing power in international markets—and that measure flatters China, since Beijing inflates its numbers. In reality, China's economy is smaller than the Communist Party claims, and it is barely growing. That dismal performance is backed up by the behavior of China's citizens, who increasingly vote with their money and their feet. From 2021 to 2024, Chinese citizens illicitly moved hundreds of billions of dollars out of China and became the fastest-growing migrant group crossing the U.S. southern border, with their numbers surging 50-fold over this period.

The United States is also widening its lead in per capita wealth. In 1995, Japanese citizens were, on average, 50 percent wealthier than Americans, measured in current dollars; today, Americans are 140 percent richer. If Japan were a U.S. state, it would rank as the poorest in average wages, behind Mississippi—as would France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. From 1990 to 2019, U.S. median household income rose 55 percent after taxes, transfers, and adjusting for inflation, with income in the bottom fifth seeing a 74 percent gain. Although most major economies have suffered declining wages since the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. real wages have kept rising, showing a modest gain of 0.9 percent from 2020 to 2024. Many Americans, especially renters and citizens without stock holdings, feel they are losing ground because of persistently high housing and food prices, but the majority are wealthier than before the pandemic, with low-income workers seeing particularly strong gains. Since 2019, wages for the lowest-paid decile have grown nearly four times as fast as for middle earners and over ten times as fast as for top earners, helping reverse about a third of the wage inequality accumulated over the past 40 years. Today, American millennials earn roughly $10,000 more on average than previous generations did at the same age (adjusting for inflation) and are similarly likely to own homes. Many U.S. middle-class households rank within the richest one to two percent of global income earners.

This combination of individual wealth and sheer economic size sets the United States apart. Unlike China and India (which are populous but poor) or Japan and western European countries (which are small but wealthy), the United States combines scale with efficiency, generating unrivaled material power. Size alone can yield vast output, but without high per-person productivity, much of that output will be wasted or consumed domestically, leaving little for global influence. History has proved this: in the nineteenth century, China had the largest population and economy in the world, and Russia had the largest in Europe, yet both were bested by more efficient powers such as Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

Although the United States has economic weaknesses, they are generally less severe than those of other major economies. For example, U.S. total factor productivity growth (which measures how efficiently a country translates all its resources—labor, capital, and technology—into economic output) has been sluggish over the past decade, but it remains positive, unlike the negative rates plaguing China and European

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countries, according to data from the Conference Board, an economic research organization. Total U.S. debt, including government, household, and business debt, is massive, at 255 percent of GDP in 2024, with interest payments on the federal debt climbing to 14 percent, approaching the 18 percent spent on the country's defense budget. But it still falls below the average for advanced economies, remains well under China's ballooning debt of over 300 percent of GDP, and has declined by nearly 12 percent from its peak in 2021. Meanwhile, other major economies are seeing their debt burdens continue to mount.

The United States has also expanded its military alliances and its control over financial systems, energy markets, consumer bases, and technological development, increasing its ability to shape the system in which other countries operate. Consider the dollar. The currency now accounts for nearly 60 percent of global central bank reserves—down from 68 percent in 2004 but equivalent to its 1995 share. It is used in roughly 70 percent of both cross-border banking liabilities and foreign currency debt issuance—up from 2004—and almost 90 percent of global foreign exchange transactions. The dollar's dominant role allows Washington to impose sanctions, secure lower borrowing costs, and bind other countries' fates to its own. Foreign governments holding large dollar reserves are effectively vested in a system in which the economic health of the United States underpins their prosperity, making them hesitant to take actions—such as currency devaluations or sanctions—that could ultimately harm their own interests.

The U.S. energy transformation has further bolstered Washington's global influence. Once the world's largest energy importer, the United States is now the leading producer of oil and natural gas, surpassing Russia and Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, it has adopted energy efficiency and renewable technologies, bringing per capita carbon emissions down to levels not seen since the 1910s. This energy boom has kept U.S. oil and gas prices low, even during international conflicts. European companies, for example, currently pay two to three times as much for electricity and four to five times as much for natural gas, prompting some foreign manufacturers to relocate to the United States. Energy production has also helped Washington insulate itself and its allies from foreign coercion. After Russia invaded Ukraine, for instance, the United States was able to help Europe, heavily reliant on Russian energy, make up its shortfall by sending it oil and gas. Meanwhile, the huge American consumer market, equivalent to China's and the eurozone's combined,

pressures foreign companies and governments to align with U.S. trade policies to maintain access to the world's most lucrative revenue source.

The United States' lead in global innovation further strengthens its structural power. U.S. firms generate over 50 percent of the world's high-tech profits, whereas China captures only six percent. This innovation edge positions U.S. companies at critical points in supply chains, enabling Washington to twist production networks, as demonstrated by its coordination of multinational semiconductor restrictions on China. Additionally, the United States has expanded its military alliances, strengthening its ability to encircle rivals and project power across Eurasia. NATO has welcomed Finland and Sweden, while in the Indo-Pacific, initiatives such as AUKUS and the Quad, or Quadrilateral Dialogue, have deepened ties among Australia, India, and Japan. Previously strained relationships—such as those between Japan and South Korea or between the United States and the Philippines—are improving, paving the way for greater defense cooperation and U.S. military base access.

BUILT TO LAST

Critics contend that the United States is a house of cards, its towering strength masking a faltering foundation. They point to government gridlock, eroding public trust, and deepening societal divides as cracks spreading through the civic bedrock—fractures they claim will inevitably undermine the pillars of U.S. wealth and power.

Yet U.S. history shows no straightforward link between internal turmoil and geopolitical decline. In fact, the United States has often emerged stronger from political crises. The Civil War was followed by Reconstruction and an industrial boom. After the financial panics of the 1890s, Washington became a world power. The Great Depression spurred the New Deal; World War II marked the beginning of the "American century," an era of unprecedented U.S. primacy. The malaise of the 1970s, marked by stagflation, social unrest, and defeats in Vietnam and Iran, eventually gave way to a resurgence in economic and military strength, a Cold War victory, and the tech boom of the 1990s. In the early years of this century, disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the Great Recession, fueled predictions of U.S. decline. Yet nearly 20 years later, the American century rolls on.

The uncanny resilience of U.S. power lies in its structural strengths. Geographically, the United States is both an economic hub and a military fortress. It boasts abundant resources, with plentiful natural

navigable rivers and deep-water ports. These features keep production costs low and stitch together a vast national market, linked to the wealthiest parts of Asia and Europe via ocean highways that also serve as protective moats. This geographic insulation shields the United States from foreign threats, allowing its military to roam abroad while enhancing the country's appeal as a safe haven. Consequently, capital tends to flow into the country during global crises—even when those crises were made in America, as was the 2008 financial crash.

The United States also attracts human capital, drawing thousands of scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs from around the world each year. Although the immigration of low-skilled workers has depressed wages in some sectors, it has also helped staff essential industries such as retail, food services, agriculture, and health care, ensuring that these sectors continue to operate during supply chain disruptions and public health crises. Coupled with higher birthrates, the average annual influx of over a million immigrants makes the United States the only great power whose prime working-age population is projected to grow throughout this century. In contrast, other leading powers face steep declines: by the end of the century, China's population of workers between the ages of 25 and 49 is projected to drop by 74 percent, Germany's by 23 percent, India's by 23 percent, Japan's by 44 percent, and Russia's by 27 percent.

Although the U.S. political system often seems gridlocked, its decentralized structure—distributing authority across federal, state, and local levels—empowers a workforce that is more educated than those of China, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom. Unlike most liberal democracies, which developed strong states before democratizing, the United States was born a democracy and only began building a modern bureaucracy in the 1880s. The American constitutional system, designed to maximize liberty and limit government, constrains state capacity but facilitates commerce. The mainstream media focus on presidential horseraces but often overlook the dynamism of local economies and the private sector. The United States consistently ranks at or near the top globally in innovation and in the ease of doing business, requiring roughly half the steps and time needed to register property or enforce contracts compared with European countries. Consequently, Americans start businesses at two to three times the rate of France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia and one and a half times the rates of China and the United Kingdom. They also

work 25 percent longer than German workers, produce 40 percent more output per hour than Japanese workers, and hire and fire more frequently and productively than any other major labor force. This industrious, adaptable labor market helps the United States recover from crises: for instance, the U.S. unemployment rate bounced back to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 and has remained at around four percent—the longest sustained period of low unemployment since the 1960s—while the G-20 average lingers near seven percent.

The decentralized U.S. system also excels at adopting and scaling innovations across industries, a capability more crucial for long-term growth than invention alone. Compared with their counterparts in other developed countries, American localities—like American businesses—face fewer constraints from central government red tape. Federal agencies set broad guidelines, allowing states to tailor regulations to local needs, experiment with different approaches, and compete for investment. As a result, successful ideas tend to spread quickly. This diffusion advantage is reinforced by the United States' deep venture capital markets, which account for about half the global total. Close partnerships between businesses and universities enhance this ecosystem, with the United States hosting seven of the top ten universities worldwide and about a quarter of the top 200.

An economic boom coexists with a civic bust.

As the political scientist Jeffrey Ding has shown, the dynamic U.S. system has consistently gained more from new technologies than even the countries that invented them. During the First Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom developed the steam engine, but Americans applied it more extensively in factories, railroads, and agriculture, creating what became widely known as the "American system" of mass production—a model that propelled the United States' economy past the United Kingdom's in the 1870s. In the Second Industrial Revolution, Germany led in chemical research, but the United States excelled in chemical engineering, applying advancements across industries such as petroleum, metallurgy, and food processing. Overall, the United States' economy grew 60 percent faster than Germany's from 1870 to 1913 and was 2.6 times as large as Germany's on the eve of World War I. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union invested a larger share of its GDP in research and development and employed nearly twice as many scientists and engineers as the United States. Yet the hulking

communist system drained resources and stifled innovation. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union was still stuck in the analog age, producing only a few thousand computers annually, while American firms were manufacturing millions and spearheading the digital revolution. Likewise, Japan led in semiconductors and consumer electronics, but the United States integrated these innovations more broadly across its economy, boosting productivity while Japan stagnated in the 1990s.

Today, the United States continues to set itself apart when it comes to innovation. Although the U.S. government sometimes engages in industrial policy—for example, through recent investments in semiconductor manufacturing and renewable energy—it generally relies on incentives and public-private partnerships rather than direct control, allowing new discoveries and technologies to spread organically across sectors. By contrast, China's subsidy-driven, authoritarian model creates isolated pockets of innovation without enhancing productivity across the economy. China prioritizes what it thinks of as internationally important sectors, such as the electric vehicle and renewable energy industries. But these two industries make up only 3.5 percent of the Chinese economy, too little to offset declines in the bloated property and construction sectors, which account for roughly 30 percent of GDP and have erased $18 trillion in household wealth since 2021. China's tech industries have also failed to create sufficient jobs for millions of recent college graduates, leaving nearly one in five young adults unemployed.

The costs of China's subsidy-heavy model are enormous. The electric vehicle sector alone has received $231 billion in subsidies since 2009, with government support composing a significant portion of its revenue. This spending has propped up politically connected firms, but it, too, has drained household wealth, as well as stifled consumption and fueled overcapacity, debt, and corruption—all at the expense of investments in China's citizens, particularly in education and health care. In rural areas, where a little less than half the population lives, this neglect has left around 300 million people without the education or skills needed to work in a modern economy, as the economist Scott Rozelle has shown. Heavy regulations and political crackdowns have further limited innovation, with new tech startups dropping from over 50,000 in 2018 to just 1,200 by 2023. As a result, China's high-tech revenues remain a fraction of those in the United States, highlighting the limitations of its centralized model.

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ONE COUNTRY, TWO SYSTEMS

Despite its exceptional prosperity, the United States has significant socioeconomic disparities. Although the U.S. poverty rate fell from 26 percent in 1967 to ten percent in 2023, it remains higher than in western Europe, and violent crime is four to five times as common. Social Security and Medicare help seniors, but working-age Americans receive far less support, with the United States spending only one-fourth of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average on job training and just over one-third on childcare and early education. This disparity creates a stark contrast: the wealthiest Americans are the richest people in the free world, yet the poorest Americans are among the most likely to go hungry. Even with the recent narrowing of economic and racial inequality (the wages of Black and Latino workers are rising faster than those of white workers), the disparities remain pronounced and have engendered bitter political divisions.

The most contentious of these divides is the urban-rural split, which is, ironically, driven by the same factors that have created U.S. prosperity overall: continental scale, decentralized institutions, and immigration-fueled growth. Urban centers have largely reaped the benefits of globalization, immigration, and the shift to knowledge- and service-based industries. In contrast, most rural areas have been left behind. Many still rely on shrinking sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and public-sector jobs. Yet despite this declining economic base, rural regions still wield political power disproportionate to their population and economic output through the Senate and the Electoral College. The U.S. system has thus impoverished rural areas and empowered them politically, threatening the stability of American democracy.

This urban-rural rift, the widest among rich democracies, has roots that reach deep into the United States' past. In the nineteenth century, a schism between the industrial North and the agrarian, slaveholding South culminated in the Civil War. The New Deal and World War II temporarily lessened these divisions by spreading manufacturing across town and country. But in the late twentieth century, globalization and technological change sparked a divergence in fortunes. The North American Free Trade Agreement of the 1990s and what academics call the "China shock" in the subsequent decade, which both sent jobs overseas, hollowed out American manufacturing towns. From 2000 to 2007, the United States lost 3.6 million manufacturing

jobs, followed by another 2.3 million during the 2008 financial crisis and the recession that followed. Rural towns, often reliant on a single factory for commerce and tax revenue, were hit hardest. As jobs disappeared, blue-collar workers were forced into lower-paying fields, such as construction, agriculture, warehousing, and retail. In these industries, immigration reduced the earnings of the least-skilled native-born workers by 0.5 to 1.2 percent for each one percent rise in immigrant labor supply, according to an exhaustive review by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Making matters worse, rural areas depended heavily on local government jobs, which accounted for around 20 percent of employment, compared with ten percent in urban areas, and more than 30 percent of rural Americans' earnings. As tax revenues fell, local governments eliminated many of these public-sector positions, such as those at schools and police departments, to balance the books. Whereas urban areas with diversified private-sector economies were able to recover within a few years of the financial crisis, nearly half of the country's rural counties still hadn't regained pre-recession employment levels by 2019: from 2000 to 2019, 94 percent of new U.S. jobs were created in urban areas. Rural Americans have also suffered in other ways. Because rural Americans must drive longer distances to reach even limited options for food and health care and are thus more exposed to high fuel prices and local monopolies, costs for such goods and services rose nine percent faster in rural areas than in urban ones from 2020 to 2022.

The toll of these hardships is highly visible. All across rural America, there are empty main streets, closed schools, and shuttered hospitals. Rural counties have fewer births and more funerals. In 1999, urban and rural regions had similar mortality rates. By 2019, however, prime-age adults (aged 25–54) in rural areas were 43 percent more likely to die from natural causes such as chronic diseases. By 2018, rural Americans were 44 percent more likely to die from suicide, and by 2020, they were 24 percent more likely to die from alcohol-related causes. Today, life expectancy in rural areas lags two years behind that of urban areas, and 41 percent of rural regions are depopulating as young, educated workers relocate to cities in search of better opportunities.

These economic shifts are visible on the electoral map. During most of the Cold War and into the early 1990s, the partisan gap between rural and urban areas was relatively small; in the 1992 presidential election, for example, rural voters leaned Republican by just

two percentage points over urban voters. In the decades that followed, however, that gap widened dramatically. By 2020, rural voters favored Republicans by a margin of 21 percentage points over urban voters—a tenfold increase. The 2022 midterms underscored this trend: 68 percent of urban voters supported Democrats, while 69 percent of rural voters backed Republicans. In the 2024 presidential election, exit polls suggest that Trump doubled his 2020 margin of victory among rural voters from 15 to 30 percentage points.

The United States has often emerged stronger from political crises.

Sectional partisanship overlaps with race, age, education, and religion, transforming a political divide into a cultural clash. Rural areas are still largely home to white, older, less educated, Christian voters, a demographic strongly aligned with the Republican Party. Working-class men without college degrees now constitute a pillar of the Republican base, which remains primarily white but increasingly includes Latino men, a majority of whom voted for Trump in 2024. Working-class men have been hardest hit by reductions in decent-paying blue-collar jobs and wages over the past two decades. As the economist Nicholas Eberstadt has shown, prime-age men currently suffer unemployment levels comparable to those of the Great Depression, with even higher rates among the least educated men. Meanwhile, Democrats primarily draw on a base of urban support from highly educated whites, racial minorities, women, younger voters, and secular individuals.

The cultural fissure between the parties increasingly threatens the United States' democratic stability. Sensing demographic and economic shifts working against them, some Republicans introduced restrictive voting measures after the 2020 election, citing concerns over election integrity. Some Democrats, frustrated by what they viewed as an unfair countermajoritarian system, pushed for sweeping reforms—such as abolishing the Electoral College, reforming the filibuster, and expanding the Supreme Court. Instead of seeking compromise, each party adopted strategies to sideline the other, undermining national unity and democratic norms.

Trump's 2024 victory, propelled by the emergence of a multiethnic working-class coalition, could realign party priorities. Republicans may now attempt to increase voter turnout, as Democrats might find themselves defending countermajoritarian institutions. More

important, this shift could pave the way for Republicans to pursue policies aimed at helping working-class communities and bridging the urban-rural divide, such as expanding high-speed Internet in rural areas to enable remote work, building roads and clinics to boost commerce and health-care access, offering tax incentives to attract businesses, and establishing job-training centers tailored to local industries. But the urban-rural divide itself remains a powerful obstacle to reform, because it fuels political polarization and gridlock. This fault line is likely to define American society for years to come, threatening national cohesion in a dangerous world.

LOUD VOICE, BRITTLE STICK

The United States' geographic, demographic, and political advantages create another vulnerability: a tendency to pursue global interests without committing sufficient resources to prevent conflict. President Theodore Roosevelt advised leaders to "speak softly and carry a big stick," but Washington today often does the reverse: it talks tough but then underprepares, falling back on blunt tools such as sanctions or missile strikes when challenged. This "chicken hawk" approach demoralizes allies, provokes adversaries, and escalates conflicts that might have been contained with stronger engagement or avoided with better judgment. Worse, after being too passive in peace, the United States sometimes overreacts in war, plunging into quagmires, as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks.

These tendencies stem from the same qualities that make the United States strong. Americans often overlook global affairs because oceans shield their country from foreign threats and because the U.S. economy is largely self-sufficient. Exports account for just 11 percent of GDP, compared with a global average of about 30 percent. Most trade is discretionary for the United States because it leads the world in the production of vital goods such as food, energy, and technology. In addition, the country's decentralized institutions give rise to a diverse array of priorities, making national mobilization rare unless a clear and present danger compels unity. As a result, foreign policy frequently becomes a partisan football, with issues tossed around to score political points—and serious threats ignored until they erupt.

Yet the same security, wealth, and freedoms that allow the United States to deprioritize foreign policy also drive it to assert global interests. With unrivaled power, the United States feels compelled to have

a policy on everything. This impulse is amplified by the decentralized American system—especially its free media and raucous Congress—which empowers voices, including those of diaspora populations, businesses, human rights organizations, and the national security bureaucracy, to advocate for various actions overseas. Meanwhile, weaker countries lobby the United States for protection from stronger autocratic neighbors that in turn view the United States—and the example it sets as a prosperous democracy—as a threat to their rule and spheres of influence. In response, autocracies such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia militarize against the United States and try to divide its alliances and subvert its democracy. Even when Americans want to stay out of foreign conflicts, these forces often pull them in.

The structure of American power thus creates competing pressures for detachment and engagement. The result is a hollow form of internationalism that has sometimes resulted in disastrous failures of deterrence. In the 1920s, for instance, the United States opposed German and Japanese expansion but outsourced enforcement to treaties such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which outlawed war, and the League of Nations, which Washington then refused to join. The United States withdrew its forces from Europe while demanding debt payments from allies, who passed the costs on to Germany, worsening its financial turmoil and hastening its slide into Nazism. At the same time, in Asia, the United States abandoned plans for naval modernization and regional fortification but imposed increasingly severe sanctions on Japan, intensifying Tokyo's perception of Washington as both hostile and vulnerable—thereby paving the road to the attack on Pearl Harbor. A similar pattern played out in the 1990s and the early years of this century. While nearly doubling NATO's membership to include 12 new countries, the United States halved its troop presence in Europe and shifted NATO's focus to counterterrorism operations in the Middle East. In 2008, the United States suggested that Georgia and Ukraine might eventually join the alliance but offered no concrete path to membership, thus provoking Russia without effectively deterring it.

In other cases, hollow internationalism led the United States to neglect deterrence entirely. On several occasions, it convinced itself and its adversaries that it had little interest in a region, only to respond massively to aggression there, with catastrophic consequences. In

1949, for instance, the United States excluded the Korean Peninsula from its defense perimeter and withdrew its troops. Yet when North Korea invaded South Korea, the United States intervened forcefully, pushing up to the Chinese border and provoking a ferocious Chinese counterattack. This shock heightened Cold War fears of communist expansion and solidified the domino theory: the idea that if one state falls to communism, its neighbors will, too. This notion in turn propelled Washington's disastrous involvement in Vietnam. Similarly, in 1990, the United States made no serious effort to deter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait but then took up arms to repel the attack after the fact. The result was the Gulf War and a prolonged U.S. military presence in the Middle East, which in turn mobilized jihadi groups such as al Qaeda—an outcome that culminated in the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The world now faces converging threats: China is carrying out the largest peacetime military buildup since Nazi Germany's, producing warships, combat aircraft, and missiles five to six times as fast as the United States can. Russia is waging Europe's biggest war since World War II. Iran is trading blows with Israel, and North Korea is sending thousands of troops to fight for Russia in Ukraine while preparing for war with South Korea and developing nuclear missiles that can reach the U.S. mainland. Despite treating these regimes as enemies, the United States spends only 2.7 percent of GDP on defense, a level comparable to that of the post–Cold War 1990s and the isolationist 1930s and well below the Cold War range of six to ten percent. A military recruitment crisis compounds the shortfall, with 77 percent of young Americans ineligible for service because of obesity, drug use, or health issues and just nine percent expressing an interest in enlisting. In a potential conflict with China, U.S. forces would blow through their munitions inventory in a matter of weeks, and it would take years for the U.S. defense industrial base to produce replacements. Rising personnel costs, along with an endless array of peacetime missions, are stretching U.S. forces thin.

By pairing diplomatic hostility with military unreadiness, the United States is once again sending the world a mixed signal, a yellow traffic light. Yellow lights, of course, often prompt aggressive drivers to speed up. American ambiguity won't matter—until it does, when China, Iran, North Korea, or Russia decides it's time to take what it has long claimed by force.

THE DANGERS OF DECLINISM

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, experts have urged policymakers to prepare for multipolarity, expecting the United States to be challenged or overtaken by rising powers. But reality has taken a different course. The United States remains economically dominant while other contenders—both adversaries and allies—are slipping into long-term decline. Shrinking populations and stagnant productivity are eroding the strength of once dominant Eurasian powers. Meanwhile, populous countries such as India and Nigeria struggle to ascend global value chains because of poor infrastructure, corruption, and weak education systems. Automation and the commodification of manufacturing are shutting off traditional growth paths, leaving many developing countries mired in debt, youth unemployment, and political instability. Rather than triggering a rise of the rest, current trends are solidifying a unipolar world with the United States as the sole superpower, surrounded by declining great powers and a periphery of middle powers, developing countries, and failing states.

In the long run, a world without rising powers could foster stability by reducing the risk of hegemonic wars. Over the past 250 years, the Industrial Revolution caused economies, populations, and militaries to double or more in size within a generation, sparking intense competition for resources and territory. But that era is winding down. Shrinking populations, stagnant economies, and the concentration of wealth in the United States make the rise of new great powers unlikely. Some analysts characterize China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia as an "axis," but the world is unlikely to see a repeat of 1942, when Germany, Japan, and Italy seized half of the world's productive capacity. Today's fading challengers lack the strength to overrun Eurasia quickly, and once a great power falters, it no longer has the population growth to rebound, as Germany did between the world wars and the Soviet Union did after World War II. It's hard to imagine Russia, for example, rising from the ashes of Ukraine to conquer large swaths of Europe. As rising powers fade, the world may become more stable.

But right now, several threats loom. Declining powers may resort to desperate wars of irredentism to reclaim what they believe are "lost" territories and avoid slipping permanently into second-tier status. Russia has already done this in Ukraine, and China might take similar actions in Taiwan or against the Philippines in the South China Sea. Although these conflicts may not match World War II's scale,

they could still be ghastly, involving nuclear threats and attacks on critical infrastructure. China, North Korea, and Russia face economic and demographic decline, but so do their most likely targets—South Korea, Taiwan, and the Baltic states—ensuring that Eurasia's military balances will remain hotly contested. Even without sparking massive wars, China and Russia could gradually transform into gigantic North Koreas, relying increasingly on totalitarianism and military extortion to undermine an international order they can no longer hope to dominate.

Another threat is rampant state failure, particularly in debt-ridden countries with rapidly growing populations. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is expected to add one billion people by 2050, yet most of its economies are already in fiscal crisis. Manufacturing no longer provides mass employment, and governments are slashing social spending to pay foreign loan interest. According to the United Nations, an estimated 3.3 billion people live in countries where interest payments exceed investments in either education or health care. The stagnation of major economies is worsening the situation. A slowing China, for instance, has halted most of its foreign lending while reducing its imports from poor countries and flooding their markets with subsidized exports, delivering a triple blow to their economies.

Hollow internationalism has sometimes led the United States to neglect deterrence.

A spiral of state failure could magnify a third threat: the continued rise of antiliberalism in democratic countries. Many democracies are already struggling with demographic decline, sluggish economic growth, soaring debt, and ascendant extremist parties. A surge of refugees from failing states could further strengthen these antidemocratic movements. After the Syrian civil war sent more than a million refugees to Europe, for example, authoritarian parties made substantial gains across the continent. Liberal democracy has flourished in times of economic expansion, population growth, and social cohesion, but it's uncertain whether it can survive an era of stagnation and mass migration.

The United States must contain these threats while continuing to harness its geographic, demographic, and institutional advantages. A crucial first step is rejecting the misperception that the country is doomed to decline. Nearly four decades ago, the political scientist

Samuel Huntington argued in these pages that Americans must fear decline to avoid it. But fear risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. An exaggerated sense of decay is already starting to destabilize democracy, as some Americans lose faith in the system and turn to antiliberal solutions. Some are rallying behind white nationalism, propelled by fears of demographic shifts and "great replacement" conspiracy theories, which falsely claim that political elites encourage mass immigration to replace white Americans with minorities. Others are stoking minority grievances to mobilize voters along ethnic lines. Such cynical strategies have fostered harmful policies, such as defunding the police or mass deportations, eroding trust in democracy and potentially enabling demagogues to dismantle the republic's checks and balances.

Fearing decline, the United States might lean toward protectionism and xenophobia, walling itself off rather than competing internationally, which would undermine its core strengths. The country has thrived on the free flow of goods, people, and ideas, soaking up foreign talent and capital like a sponge and building a global commercial order that attracts allies. But if the United States embraces a false narrative of decline, it risks becoming a rogue superpower, a mercantilist behemoth determined to squeeze every ounce of wealth and power from the rest of the world. Tariffs, sanctions, and military threats could replace diplomacy and trade, alliances might become protection rackets, and immigration could be sharply restricted. This nativist turn might yield short-term gains for Americans, but it would ultimately hurt them by making the world they inhabit poorer and less secure. Trade and security networks could collapse, sparking resource-driven conflicts and killing off any possibility for cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation, climate change, pandemics, and other global challenges—accelerating a descent into anarchy.

The most immediate danger is that the United States will convince itself—and its adversaries—that it lacks the will or the capacity to counter large-scale aggression. To avoid asserting its interests without backing them up (thereby provoking aggressors without deterring them) or prematurely withdrawing from regions (forcing a rushed and costly reentry), the United States must rigorously reassess its core interests and determine where containing aggression is essential. The U.S. national security establishment believes this means preventing China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia from destroying their neighbors.

This conviction—that powerful revisionist tyrannies should be contained—is as straightforward as it is hard learned. After World War I, the United States withdrew from Eurasia, a decision that contributed to the outbreak of World War II. In contrast, after World War II, the United States maintained peacetime alliances in Eurasia, ultimately defeating Soviet communism without triggering World War III, and providing the security foundation for an unprecedented surge in global prosperity and democracy. The key to success, then as now, is blending strength with diplomacy: building a credible military presence to deter aggression while offering revisionist powers a path to reintegration with the West if they renounce military conquest.

During the Cold War, the United States contained the Soviet Union until internal weaknesses forced Moscow to retreat. A similar strategy could work today. China's economy is stagnating, and its population is shrinking. Russia is bogged down in Ukraine, and Iran has been battered by Israel. Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei are aging heads of state whose reigns will likely end within the next decade or two. The United States doesn't need to contain their regimes indefinitely—perhaps just long enough for current trends to play out. As their power declines, their imperial dreams may seem increasingly unattainable, potentially prompting successors to chart a new course. In the meantime, Washington should sap their strength by welcoming their brightest people to the United States through immigration and by strengthening connections with their societies through student visas, diplomatic exchanges, and nonstrategic trade.

China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, however, are unlikely to mellow overnight. The United States' struggle against these countries may not last forever, but Washington must prepare for a contest that could last years. In this competition, domestic unity will be essential. Investing in jobs, infrastructure, housing, and education in neglected areas—and rekindling a spirit of civic duty—will be crucial not only to mend national fissures but also to fortify the United States against foreign threats. Calling on Americans to stand up to autocratic aggression doesn't mean rushing into war; it means creating a future in which peace is secured through sustained investments in military strength and diplomatic outreach. It means rallying a nation to recognize its immense power and accept the responsibility to wield it, not in frenzied reaction but before the storm—with purpose and prudence.

Putin's Point of No Return

How an Unchecked Russia Will Challenge the West

BY ANDREA KENDALL-TAYLOR AND MICHAEL KOFMAN

On August 6, 2024, Ukrainian forces launched a surprise cross-border offensive into Russia's Kursk region—the biggest foreign incursion into Russian territory since World War II. Russian President Vladimir Putin's response was telling. Days after Ukraine's offensive, Putin railed against the United States and Europe. "The West is fighting us with the hands of the Ukrainians," he said, reiterating his view that Russia's war in Ukraine is in fact a proxy battle with the West. But he initiated no immediate military counterattack. Putin was unwilling to divert substantial numbers of troops away from their operations in eastern Ukraine even to recover territory back home. Three months later, with Ukrainian forces still in Kursk, Moscow instead brought in North Korean troops to help push

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Illustration by Diego Mallo

them out—the first time in more than a century that Russia has invited foreign troops onto its soil.

Moscow's actions underscore how, after almost three years since Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor, Putin is now more committed than ever to the war with Ukraine and his broader confrontation with the West. Although the conflict is first and foremost an imperial pursuit to end Ukraine's independence, Putin's ultimate objectives are to relitigate the post–Cold War order in Europe, weaken the United States, and usher in a new international system that affords Russia the status and influence Putin believes it deserves.

These goals are not new. But the war has hardened Putin's resolve and narrowed his options. There is no turning back: Putin has already transformed Russia's society, economy, and foreign policy to better position the Kremlin to take on the West. Having accepted the mantle of a rogue regime, Russia is now even less likely to see a need for constraint.

The stage is set for the confrontation with Russia to intensify, despite the incoming Trump administration's apparent interest in normalizing relations with Moscow. The war is not going well for Ukraine, in part because the limited assistance the West has sent to Kyiv does not match the deep stake it claims to have in the conflict. As a result, Russia is likely to walk away from the war emboldened and, once it has reconstituted its military capacity, spoiling for another fight to revise the security order in Europe. What's more, the Kremlin will look to pocket any concessions from the Trump administration for ending the current war, such as sanctions relief, to strengthen its hand for the next one. Russia is already preparing the ground through the sabotage and other special operations it has unleashed across Europe and through its alignment with other rogue actors, including Iran and North Korea. European countries are only slightly more prepared to handle the Russian challenge on their own than they did three years ago. And depending on how the war in Ukraine ends, the possibility of another war with Russia looms.

The question is not whether Russia will pose a threat to the United States and its allies but how to assess the magnitude of the danger and the effort required to contain it. China will remain the United States' primary competitor. But even with much of its attention called to Asia, Washington cannot ignore a recalcitrant and revanchist adversary in Europe, especially not one that will pose a direct military threat to NATO members.

The Russian problem is also a global one. Putin's willingness to invade a neighbor, assault democratic societies, and generally violate accepted norms—and his seeming ability to get away with it—paves the way for others to do the same. The Kremlin's provision of military equipment and know-how to current and aspiring U.S. adversaries will amplify these threats, multiplying the challenges that Washington will face from China, Iran, North Korea, and any other country that Russia backs.

The United States and Europe, therefore, must invest in resisting Russia now or pay a far greater cost later. The incoming Trump administration, in particular, does not have the luxury of shoving Russia down its list of policy priorities. If Putin sees Washington doing so, he will grow only more brazen and ambitious in his efforts to weaken the United States and its allies, both directly and through the axis of upheaval that Russia supports. To prevent that outcome, Washington and its allies must help Ukraine strengthen its position ahead of negotiations to end the current war. The United States is right to prioritize China, but in order to effectively compete with Beijing, it first needs to set European security on the right path. Washington must remain the primary enabler of that security for now, while making sure that Europe ramps up the investments required to better handle its own defense in the years ahead. By taking the steps necessary to counter Russia today, the United States and Europe can ensure that the threat they face tomorrow will be a manageable one.

IN TOO DEEP

Putin has changed Russia in ways that will ensure it remains a challenge to the West as long as he is in power and likely well beyond. Confrontation is now the hallmark of Russia's foreign policy, with Putin citing his country's "existential struggle" with the West to justify his regime and its actions. This idea of a Russian civilization in constant conflict with its Western foes strengthens the ideological foundation of his rule—a source of legitimacy he now needs to safeguard his hold on power.

Putin's increased reliance on repression has generated risks to the stability of his regime. Political science research shows that repression is effective in the sense that it increases autocrats' longevity in office. But depending too heavily on it, as Putin has done, can raise the prospect that leaders will make destabilizing mistakes. Heavy-handed tactics compel people to mask their private views and avoid sharing anything

but what the government wants to hear, which means the autocrat, too, loses access to accurate information. High levels of repression also create a rising reservoir of general dissatisfaction, so that even a small outburst of discontent can quickly spiral into trouble for the regime. To mitigate these risks and reinforce his hold on power, Putin has used his control over the information environment to convince the Russian people that their country is at war with a West that wants to break it apart.

Putin has also reoriented the Russian economy around his war. Russia's defense spending is set to reach its highest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with $145 billion allocated in the 2025 budget—the equivalent of 6.3 percent of GDP and more than double the $66 billion Russia budgeted for defense in 2021, the year before the invasion. And the true amount of such spending will likely be higher, possibly exceeding eight percent of GDP, once other, unofficial forms of defense-related expenditures are accounted for. (When also adjusting for considerable differences in purchasing power parity between Russia and the United States, Russia's actual defense spending is much higher than $145 billion, exceeding $200 billion.) Russian factories producing military equipment have added shifts to increase production; workers have moved from civilian to military sectors, where the wages are higher; and payouts for military service have skyrocketed. The war has become a wealth transfer mechanism channeling money to Russia's poor regions, and many economic elites have moved into the defense sector to cash in on lucrative opportunities. Elites have, by now, adjusted to the system's current configuration, enabling them not just to survive but to profit from it.

Having gone through the pain of shifting the economy to a wartime footing and feeling the pressure of new vested interests, Putin is unlikely to undo these changes quickly. After the fighting in Ukraine ends, he will probably instead look to justify the continuation of the wartime economy. Such was the inclination of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who, after the Allied victory in World War II, soon began to speak of Moscow's new five-year plans as necessary preparation for the next inevitable war.

Russian foreign policy is also transforming in ways that will be difficult to undo. The invasion of Ukraine has made it impossible for Russia to build ties with the West, and Moscow has had to look for opportunities elsewhere. Its deepening partnerships with China, Iran, and North Korea may have been driven largely by necessity: Russia

needs their help to sustain its economy and warfighting machine. But Moscow also understands that by working with these countries, it is in a better position to sustain a long-term competition with the United States and its allies. Not only does their support make Russia less isolated and less vulnerable to the United States' tools of economic warfare; Russia also benefits from having cobelligerents working in tandem to weaken the West. The Kremlin has gone all in on these partnerships, having abandoned caution in cooperating with North Korea, overcome its concern with overdependence on China, and elevated relations with Iran beyond transactional engagement. All of this amounts to a new strategy for Moscow, one that will not simply disappear after the fighting in Ukraine subsides or ends.

RUSSIA RELOADS

Russia's military threat is not going away, either. The question of Russian military reconstitution is not an if but a when. Even if Russia cannot sustain its current wartime spending, the defense budget is likely to remain substantially above prewar levels for some time to come. The Russian military, too, is unlikely to shrink back to the relatively small army Russia fielded before the war. One lesson that Russia's military brass took from Ukraine is that the Russian army was not "Soviet" enough in that it lacked mass and the capacity to replace losses. In reality, the Russian military was stuck in a halfway state, having acquired some advanced or modernized capabilities but also retaining some Soviet-era characteristics, including conscription and a culture of centralized command that discouraged initiative. Now, Russia is likely to maintain a large overall force with an expanded structure and greater manpower allocation, although it will still depend on mobilization in the event of war to reduce the cost of its standing army.

Reconstitution is about not just materiel but also the capacity to conduct large-scale combat operations. The Russian military has shown that it can learn as an organization; it is capable of scaling the deployment of new technology such as drones and electronic warfare systems onto the battlefield, and it will be a changed force after its experience in Ukraine. Despite its initial poor showing, the Russian military has demonstrated staying power and the ability to withstand high levels of attrition.

Russia's military reconstitution will face headwinds, especially from the country's limited defense industrial capacity and skilled labor shortage. Russian industry has not been able to significantly scale the production of

major platforms and weapons systems. Labor and machine tools remain major constraints because of Western sanctions and export controls. Russia has still been able to significantly increase the production of missiles, precision-guided weapons, drones, and artillery munitions, and it has set up an effective repair and refurbishment pipeline for existing equipment. But it is also drawing from aging stocks that it inherited from the Soviet Union for much of its land force equipment. Thus, as it expands its forces and replaces losses, it is depleting its resources.

From now on, the Russian military will have a duality to it, with areas of strength but equally prominent weaknesses. On the one hand, it has become much better at dynamic targeting, precision strikes, the integration of drones in combat operations, and more sophisticated methods of employing long-range precision-guided weapons. Russia has adapted to—and in some cases developed effective tactics to counter—the Western capabilities it confronted in Ukraine. Over time, Russian forces reorganized logistics and command and control, coming up with ways to reduce the efficacy of Western equipment and intercept Western munitions, and they have learned to operate with the presence of Western long-range precision-guided weapons, intelligence, and targeting.

The war has hardened Putin's resolve and narrowed his options.

For NATO, this ought to set off alarms. Some analysts argue that the way Ukraine is fighting now is not the way NATO would fight in a potential future war with Russia. They contend specifically that NATO would quickly earn and maintain air superiority, changing the nature of the conflict. Although this may be true, airpower will not solve every battlefield challenge NATO might face. And most European air forces lack munitions for a sustained conventional war. The time it would take to deplete their arsenals can best be measured in weeks and in many cases days.

On the other hand, a substantial percentage of the Russian ground force will likely continue to field dated Soviet equipment, and it will take years to rebuild force quality and replace the officers lost in Ukraine. The outlook for Russia's defense capacity will also depend on whether its economy is running flat out and the defense sector has already maximized production or if there is still room for production to increase as new and refurbished plants and facilities come online. Overall, the Russian military

will remain a patchwork, with some parts more advanced and capable than they were at the start of 2022 and other parts still using equipment from the middle of the Cold War, if not earlier. But the chances of the Russian armed forces being decisively knocked out and unable to pose a major threat for a prolonged period are low.

A GROWING GAP

The risks from the reconstitution of Russia's military are compounded by the West's lackluster response to rising Russian aggression. Europe still has a long way to go before it is prepared to handle the threat from Russia on its own. European defense production is insufficient to meet rearmament goals, despite Europe's advantages in capital, machine tools, and labor productivity. European countries have substantially depleted their stocks by transferring older equipment to Ukraine, limiting their militaries' mobilization potential. These countries will soon face the dual pressure of funding Ukraine's war effort and recovery while replacing their own expended war materiel. Given how limited their arsenals were to begin with, if they want to be equipped to handle Russian belligerence, they will need to build well beyond 2022 levels—not just restore what was lost.

Current trends suggest that although European defense spending is likely to rise, the increases may not be enough to significantly expand military capability. There are exceptions, such as Poland and the Baltic states. But many countries with large budgets, such as Italy and Spain, are lagging behind. Many have yet to meet the commitment made by all NATO allies to spend the equivalent of two percent of GDP on defense. Across Europe, defense production is constrained by industrial capacity, the slow pace of finalizing contracts, and competing budgetary imperatives. All these issues can be overcome with sufficient political will, but European leaders first have to be clear-eyed in their assessment of the security environment. The United States is not going to significantly expand its presence in Europe; at best, Washington's commitment to European security will remain constant as it pushes Europe to do more, and there is a real risk that it will turn its focus elsewhere. Europe must prepare to foot more of the bill to ensure that Ukraine is in a position to defend itself and to deter future Russian aggression against both Ukraine and Europe as a whole.

American leaders, for their part, will have to be realistic about Europe's capabilities. Even those countries that are now investing

heavily in equipment and procurement are still having issues recruiting, retaining, and training sufficient forces. And defense spending does not easily translate into the ability to conduct large-scale combat operations. Modern operations are complex, and European countries generally cannot execute them without U.S. support. Most militaries on the continent have coevolved to complement the U.S. military rather than to operate independently.

European militaries and NATO have made some progress matching their defense investments with the requirements of regional defense plans. But the forces active on the continent are not capable of handling a large-scale war on their own. They would find it difficult to agree on who would lead such an operation and who would provide the necessary supporting elements. European militaries would struggle to defend a fellow NATO member, or Ukraine, without U.S. help—a dependence that Washington has, to some extent, perpetuated. Thus, although the United States should continue to press its European allies to take on more of the security burden, Washington must appreciate that it will take a long time for Europe to get there.

THE RISING RISK OF WAR

Europe and the United States are not preparing for some far-off threat. Moscow is already waging an unconventional war against Europe. Within the past few years, suspected Russian-backed actors have set fire to warehouses in Germany and the United Kingdom that were full of arms and ammunition for Ukraine, tampered with water purification centers in Finland, pushed migrants from the Middle East and North Africa crossing through Belarus and Russia to the borders of Poland and Finland, targeted railway infrastructure in the Czech Republic and Sweden, assassinated a Russian military defector in Spain, and even plotted to assassinate the German head of a major European arms manufacturer. The Kremlin's goal with these measures is to show European governments and citizens that Russia can retaliate for their support for Kyiv.

Yet once the war in Ukraine ends, Russia's efforts won't subside. Moscow's broader aim in pursuing these tactics is to degrade the West and its ability to counter Russia. It wants to weaken Western societies, drive wedges between the United States and Europe, reduce Europe's capacity for collective action, and convince Europeans that it's not worth the trouble to push back against Moscow. Part of its strategy is to use nuclear intimidation, such as the recent changes to Russian

nuclear doctrine that seem to lower the threshold for nuclear use, to heighten Western fears of confronting Russia.

Russia is not in a position to challenge NATO directly. The current low-scale conflict with NATO countries is likely to persist until the Russian military rebuilds—a process that could take years. But the Kremlin will then be looking for opportunities to further undermine NATO. Moscow will still have reason for caution, not least because it considers the alliance to be a superior force, but it may be tempted if it becomes clear that the allies—the United States the most important among them—lack the resolve for collective defense. The Kremlin would be most prone to make this calculation if the United States is engaged in a major conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, which Washington has deemed its highest national security priority. Should the Kremlin calculate that Washington would not or could not come to Europe's defense and that Europe alone would not be capable of victory, then Moscow could target a country on NATO's eastern flank, daring NATO to respond.

The stage is set for the West's confrontation with Russia to intensify.

The picture is further complicated by the Kremlin's propensity for both risk-taking and miscalculation. Already, Moscow has seriously misjudged its ability to rapidly defeat the Ukrainian military and to shake Western resolve. Personalist autocrats such as Putin are the type of leader most inclined to make mistakes, in part because they surround themselves with yes men and loyalists who tell the leaders what they want to hear. Washington and its allies should thus not sleep comfortably even if NATO forces are well equipped to defeat the Russian military. Having confidence that NATO would prevail in the end is not enough, especially having observed what Ukraine is experiencing now: cities destroyed, tens of thousands killed, millions made refugees, and areas under prolonged Russian occupation. Even if Russia were defeated today, a future war with Russia could be devastating for the country it invades and for the NATO alliance. The imperative for the United States and NATO is to make sure Moscow never tries.

AIDING AND ABETTING

The confrontation with Russia will remain most intense in Europe, but the challenge from Moscow is global. Although the United States and Europe levied significant costs on Russia in the aftermath of its invasion

of Ukraine, Moscow has circumvented Western sanctions and export controls and defied predictions of international isolation. In October, Russia hosted the annual summit of BRICS (whose first five members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), with dozens of world leaders in attendance, demonstrating a growing interest in the group's role as a platform for challenging Western power and influence.

The more that Putin clashes with the United States and its allies and is perceived to get away with it, the more other countries will be emboldened to issue challenges of their own. Russia's war in Ukraine is exposing not only a gap between the West's rhetoric and its practical commitment but also the limits of Western military capacity. This is not to say that a seeming Russian success in Ukraine would automatically prompt Chinese leader Xi Jinping to invade Taiwan; other factors, such as the military balance of power in the region and political imperatives in Beijing, will be more decisive in shaping Xi's calculus. Yet China is taking notes, as are onlookers around the world. Would-be Western adversaries are assessing the price of using force and considering what they might expect were they to launch a similar gambit. Likewise, the inadequate response to Russian sabotage in Europe might encourage other potential foes to get in the game.

Not content to simply inspire, Moscow is also actively aiding opponents of the West. Russia has lent support to rogue actors across the Sahel region of Africa, dispensing materiel and diplomatic backing that enabled military officials to forcibly seize power in Mali in 2021, in Burkina Faso in 2022, and in Niger in 2023 and subsequently curtail ties with the United States and Europe. Russia is also sending arms into Sudan, prolonging the country's civil war and the resulting humanitarian crisis, and has lent support to the Houthi militias in Yemen, who have attacked vessels in the Red Sea, disrupting global trade, and have fired missiles at Israel, a close U.S. ally.

Although the consequences for the United States of any one of these developments may be limited, in aggregate, Russia's actions are magnifying the challenges facing Washington. In Niger, Russian support eased the new government's decision to force the United States to abandon a base it used to launch counterterrorism missions in the Sahel. If Russia were to ramp up its support for the Houthis and provide them with antiship missiles, the militant group would be better able to strike commercial vessels in the Red Sea and raise the threat to the U.S. and European warships defending them. Once

the fighting in Ukraine ends, Russia could devote significantly more resources and attention to the Houthis and other groups or countries that threaten U.S. interests.

Some observers have held out hope that China's concern for its economic interests will induce it to rein in Russia. But Beijing's actions so far indicate no such effort. China did not object to Russia's support for the Houthis, despite the risks to global shipping. Even if Beijing is wary of Russia's deepening relations with North Korea, it is unlikely to intervene, not least because it does not want to spoil its long-standing relationship with Pyongyang. Instead, China seems content to let Russia roil the international system and take advantage of the resulting disorder to further its own rise. If there is to be any check on Russia's destabilizing activities, then, it will have to come from the West.

THE AXIS OF UPHEAVAL

Russia's effort to support China, Iran, and North Korea is among the most pernicious problems posed by Moscow. Russia's war in Ukraine has spurred a level of cooperation among those countries that few thought was possible, and the Kremlin has operated as the critical catalyst. The arrival of North Korean troops in Russia is a worrisome reminder that with highly personalized authoritarian regimes at the helm in Russia and North Korea and with the regimes in China and to a lesser extent Iran moving in this direction, cooperation can evolve rapidly and in unpredictable ways.

A body of political science research shows that this particular type of regime tends to produce the most risky and aggressive foreign policies. Countries with personalist authoritarians at the helm are the most likely to initiate interstate conflicts, the most likely to fight wars against democracies, and the most likely to invest in nuclear weapons. Russia's growing military and political support for China, Iran, and North Korea will only facilitate these tendencies. And Moscow, by now having shed its concern with its international reputation, is likely to become even less constrained in its willingness to aid even the most odious of regimes.

Russian support for fellow members of this axis of upheaval, therefore, could bring disorder to key regions. Take the Chinese-Russian relationship. Although Moscow has supplied Beijing with arms for years—including advanced fighter aircraft, air defense systems, and antiship missiles—their defense ties have deepened at an alarming

rate. In September, for example, U.S. officials announced that Russia had provided China with sophisticated technology that will make Chinese submarines quieter and more difficult to track. Such an agreement was hard to imagine just a few years ago, given the sensitive nature of the technology. With Beijing and Moscow working together, the U.S. military advantage over China could erode, making a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific more likely if China believes it has the upper hand.

Russia's support for Iran is similarly troubling. Moscow has long sent tanks, helicopters, and surface-to-air missiles to Tehran, and it is now supporting the Iranian space and missile programs. Since Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 to shore up the rule of President Bashar al-Assad—joining Iran in that effort—Moscow and Tehran's increased interaction has enabled them to overcome a historic distrust and build the foundations of a deeper and more durable partnership. A decade ago, Russia participated (if warily) in the international negotiations that led to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. But today, Moscow seems far less interested in arms reduction or nonproliferation. As the wars in the Middle East degrade Iran's proxies and expose the limits of its ability to deter Israel, Tehran's interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon may grow—and it may turn to Russia for help. That help could be overt, with Moscow offering the expertise needed for weapon miniaturization, for example, or it could be indirect, with Russia shielding Tehran from UN action. Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon, in turn, could send other countries in the region, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, scrambling to nuclearize, effectively ending the current era of nonproliferation in the Middle East.

In the case of North Korea, Russia's support raises the risk of instability on the Korean Peninsula. According to South Korean officials, Pyongyang has requested advanced Russian technologies to improve the accuracy of its ballistic missiles and to expand the range of its submarines in return for North Korea sending its troops, ammunition, and other military support to Russia. And it is not just advanced equipment that could make North Korea more able and, perhaps, more willing to engage in a regional conflict. North Korean troops deployed to Russia are now gaining valuable battlefield experience and insight into modern conflict. Moscow and Pyongyang also signed a treaty in November establishing a "comprehensive strategic partnership" and calling on each side to come to the other's aid in case of

an armed attack—an agreement that could potentially bring Russia into a fight between North Korea and South Korea.

It is tempting to imagine that if the United States presses Ukraine to end the war and pursues a more pragmatic relationship with Russia, Moscow's cooperation with members of this axis could lessen. Yet this is wishful thinking. The growing ties among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are driven by incentives far deeper than the transactional considerations created by the war in Ukraine. If anything, concessions made to Russia to end the war would only enhance the Kremlin's ability to help its partners weaken the United States.

ORDER OF OPERATIONS

Russian ambitions may not stop at Ukraine, and in the absence of Western action today, the costs of resisting Russian aggression will only rise. Russia is a declining power, but its potential to stir conflict remains significant. Thus, the burden of deterrence and defense against it is not going to lighten in the near term. And because changes to defense spending, procurement, and force posture require significant lead times, Washington and its allies must think beyond the current war in Ukraine and start making investments now to prevent Russian opportunistic aggression later on. Europe must channel its rising defense spending into expanding the organizational capacity and logistical support necessary to make independent action possible if the U.S. military is engaged elsewhere. Giving in to Russia's demands will not make it any easier or cheaper to defend Europe—just look at the events of the past two decades. At every turn—the war in Georgia in 2008, Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and its deployment of troops to Syria in 2015—Putin has grown only more willing to take risks as he comes to believe that doing so pays off.

Washington undoubtedly has competing priorities that will shift its focus away from the Russian threat—China foremost among them. But to effectively address China, Washington must first set European security on the right path. The United States cannot simply hand off European security to a Europe that is not yet capable of managing the Russian threat. If Washington downsized its commitment to Europe prematurely, Moscow could take it as a sign of growing U.S. disinterest and use the opportunity to press ahead.

The prioritization of U.S. policies is important, but so is the sequencing. The Trump administration will first have to manage the war in

Ukraine. Helping Ukraine achieve an end to the war on favorable terms is the clearest way to reduce the threat of aggression from Russia and the axis of upheaval that supports it. This agreement would need to be embedded in a larger strategy to contain Russia and preserve Ukrainian security. NATO should do away with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which prohibits permanent deployments of allied forces near Russia, and station troops on NATO's eastern flank. The alliance should also raise its members' defense spending targets, increase its readiness, and improve its ability to deploy forces to defend threatened member states. Western countries should maintain and better enforce sanctions and export controls on Russia for at least as long as Putin remains in power. Western countries must also invest in Ukraine's defense sector and ensure that Ukraine can sustain its own armed forces to deter Russia from invading again. Although these measures would not end the confrontation with Russia, they would blunt Moscow's ambitions and its capacity to both stir conflict in Europe and strengthen its partners in other parts of the world.

> The costs of resisting Russia will only rise.

The Trump administration must also preserve the United States' role as the primary enabler of European security while working to reduce the burden of its maintenance. European states must become more capable of collective action that does not require U.S. aid. They may still rely on the United States in some circumstances, but the extent of their dependence can be significantly reduced. Over time, the United States will become freer to focus on China as it shifts more defense responsibilities to Europe. And in the meantime, it will avoid an overly hasty, chaotic pivot that would only encourage and embolden Moscow and could result in Russia eventually launching a reckless war, either against NATO or once again against Ukraine.

There is no easy resolution to the West's confrontation with Russia. Russian revisionism and aggression are not going away. Even if the current war in Ukraine is settled via an armistice, without some kind of security guarantee for Ukraine, another war is likely. Ignoring Russia or assuming that it can be easily managed as the United States turns its attention to China would only allow the threat to grow. It would be far better for the United States and its allies to take the challenge from Russia seriously today than to let another conflict become a more costly proposition tomorrow.

Know Your Rival, Know Yourself

Rightsizing the China Challenge

JUDE BLANCHETTE AND RYAN HASS

Ever since the United States ascended to global leadership at the end of World War II, American leaders have regularly been stricken by bouts of anxiety that the country is in decline and losing ground to a rival. The Soviet Union's 1957 launch of the Sputnik satellite prompted such fears, as did Soviet expansionism in the 1960s. In the 1980s, Washington was seized by the worry that American industry was incapable of competing with Japan's economic juggernaut. Even in 1992, just after the Soviet Union collapsed, an article in the *Harvard Business Review* asked, "Is America in Decline?"

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Today, this perception of decline is wedded to fears about new vulnerabilities in the U.S. democratic system and the burgeoning strength of China. Both of these concerns have merit. Although U.S. voters disagree on the sources of the threats to American democracy, they broadly express an anxiety that their country's democratic institutions can no longer deliver on the American dream's promises. An October Gallup poll found that three-quarters of Americans were dissatisfied with their country's trajectory.

Meanwhile, the story goes, China is powering ahead, pairing ambitious economic and diplomatic agendas with a massive military expansion while the United States staggers under the weight of inequality, stagnating wages, legislative gridlock, political polarization, and populism. Over the past three decades, China has indeed established itself as the factory of the world, dominating global manufacturing and taking the lead in some advanced technology sectors. In 2023, China produced close to 60 percent of the world's electric vehicles, 80 percent of its batteries, and over 95 percent of the wafers used in solar energy technology. That same year, it added 300 gigawatts of wind and solar power to its energy grid—seven times more than the United States. The country also exerts control over much of the mining and refining of critical minerals essential to the global economy and boasts some of the world's most advanced infrastructure, including the largest high-speed rail network and cutting-edge 5G systems.

As the U.S. defense industry struggles to meet demand, China is producing weapons at an unprecedented pace. In the past three years, it has built over 400 modern fighter jets, developed a new stealth bomber, demonstrated hypersonic missile capabilities, and doubled its missile stockpile. The military analyst Seth Jones has estimated that China is now amassing weapons five to six times faster than the United States.

To some observers, such advances suggest the Chinese system of government is better suited than the American one to the twenty-first century's demands. Chinese leaders often proclaim that "the East is rising and the West is declining"; some U.S. leaders now also seem to accept this forecast as inevitable. Arriving at such a broad conclusion, however, would be a grave mistake. China's progress and power are substantial. But it has liabilities on its balance sheet, too, and without looking at these alongside its assets, it is impossible to evaluate the United States' real position. Even the most formidable geopolitical rivals have hidden vulnerabilities, making it crucial for leaders to more keenly perceive not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of their adversaries.

And although China will continue to be a powerful and influential global player, it is confronting a growing set of complex challenges that will significantly complicate its development. Following a decade of slowing growth, China's economy now contends with mounting pressures from a turbulent real estate market, surging debt, constrained local government finances, waning productivity, and a rapidly aging population, all of which will require Beijing to grapple with difficult tradeoffs. Abroad, China faces regional military tensions and increasing scrutiny and pushback by advanced economies. Indeed, some of the foundational conditions that drove China's remarkable growth over the past two decades are unraveling. But just as these new difficulties are emerging, demanding nimble policymaking, Chinese leader Xi Jinping's consolidation of power has stifled political debate and sidelined technocrats, yielding a policymaking process that is brittle, reactive, and prone to missteps. Chinese young people now lament the narrowing space they have to achieve their goals, a trend that won't change unless their country's leadership does. But that event appears distant.

Even with its many shortcomings and vulnerabilities, the United States continues to command a strategic depth that China fundamentally lacks: a unique combination of economic vitality, global military superiority, remarkable human capital, and a political system designed to promote the correction of errors. The resilient and adaptable U.S. economy has the world's deepest and most liquid capital markets and unparalleled influence over the global financial system. The United States continues to attract top global talent, including many Chinese nationals now fleeing their country's autocratic political environment.

Put plainly, the United States still has a vital edge over China in terms of economic dynamism, global influence, and technological innovation. To highlight this fact is neither triumphalism nor complacency. It is the root of good strategy, because Washington can easily squander its asymmetric advantages if excessive pessimism or panic depletes its will, muddies its focus, or leads it to overindulge nativist and protectionist impulses and close America's doors to the rest of the world. For despite its problems, China is still making headway in specific domains that challenge U.S. national security and prosperity, such as quantum computing, renewable energy, and electric vehicle production. A political-economic system such as China's can remain a fierce rival in key areas even as it groans under the weight of its pathologies.

China most often gains primacy in areas in which the United States is dramatically underinvested. China's greatest assets in its competition with the United States are not its underlying fundamentals but its hyperfocus and willingness to expend enormous resources, and tolerate enormous waste, in the pursuit of key objectives. That means that Washington cannot afford to retreat from sectors vital for competing in the twenty-first century's economy, as it did in the case of 5G technology in the previous decade.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric relied particularly heavily on the specter of American decline. The United States does face its own daunting array of problems abroad and at home, but these pale in comparison to those China faces. And Washington's tendency to stress its rivals' power and underestimate its own strengths has often backfired, becoming a trap that leads to serious policy errors. Even Trump's most pessimistic advisers should understand this history—and recognize that U.S. leaders risk making costly missteps by adopting a reactive posture toward China instead of capitalizing on the United States' comparative advantages to push forward its interests at a moment when Beijing is struggling.

CONFIDENCE GAME

Throughout the last century, the United States has consistently overestimated the strength of its rivals and underestimated its own. This habit became particularly evident during the Cold War, when U.S. officials and analysts were consumed by fears that the Soviet Union had grown superior in military might, technological advancement, and global political influence. In the late 1950s, for instance, U.S. officials came to believe that the Soviets had a much larger and more sophisticated stockpile of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Intelligence gathered by U-2 spy planes and other sources, however, later revealed that the so-called missile gap had been mostly imaginary. As the Cold War drew to a close, it became clear that the Soviet economy was crumbling under the weight of military expenditures, and much of the feared Soviet superiority was exaggerated or based on misinterpretations.

The tendency to underappreciate the United States' strength is driven by a difference in how democracies and autocracies perceive and present their weaknesses. Democratic systems are more transparent and foster more debate about their own flaws. This can lead to a heightened focus on domestic shortcomings, making weaknesses appear more significant

than they are. A democracy's vulnerabilities can seem even more alarming when compared with the apparent strength of authoritarian regimes, which, conversely, punish criticism and disseminate propaganda in order to present a brighter picture than the reality. The Soviet Union strove to maintain a veneer of invincibility by censoring its press and mounting military parades. Its efforts to mask its economic stagnation, political infighting, and failure to innovate often fooled U.S. policymakers; the United States' tendency toward self-criticism, meanwhile, obscured its own advantages.

Sometimes, this dynamic redounds to the United States' benefit. The prospect of a rival's ascendancy can mobilize American resources and political will: for instance, although the claim that the United States lagged the Soviet Union in its production of ballistic missiles was largely erroneous, the warning served as a powerful motivator for the U.S. government to boost its defense spending and accelerate its technological research. To some extent, the misperception that the United States was losing its comparative advantage helped it maintain that advantage. Similarly, the Soviet Union's early space-race victories—and the fear that the United States would fall behind in a crucial, symbolic contest—prompted the U.S. government to create NASA, renew its investments in science education in American schools, and increase funding for scientific research. In this case, the worry that the Soviet Union was outstripping the United States was valuable, catalyzing beneficial investments that undergirded a subsequent half century of American technological superiority.

Underestimating geopolitical threats also comes with costs, as it did in the case of Nazi Germany's rise in the 1930s, al Qaeda's growth in the 1990s, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The chaos that these underestimates unleashed can make it seem as if it is generally safer to overestimate the threat posed by a potential adversary. But in many cases, developing an outsize fear of a rival has led the United States to misallocate government resources, lose sight of the need to nurture its own sources of strength, become distracted by peripheral threats, or even become mired in unnecessary wars. The United States' immense financial and human investments in the Vietnam War, for example, were inspired in part by the so-called domino theory, which held that if the United States allowed Soviet-backed communism to take hold in Southeast Asia, communism would inexorably come to dominate the globe. That belief led the United States to fixate on

winning a costly, protracted war that ultimately drained its resources, hurt its reputation worldwide, and eroded Americans' trust in their own government. Decades later, a similar mobilization against an exaggerated threat—Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq—led to a disastrous and drawn-out conflict, domestic turmoil, and the further decline of the United States' international credibility.

The United States' tendency to point to a rival's strength to spur domestic action has thus been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, perceived threats can mobilize resources, drive innovation, and foster unity in the face of potential challenges, as seen with the space race and military advancements during the Cold War. A useful overestimate is one that galvanizes constructive action without leading to paranoia or unsustainable commitments. Overestimates become damaging when they dramatically skew government priorities and distract leaders' finite attention from other pressing issues. Recognizing the difference requires both a nuanced understanding of a rival's capabilities and the development of a well-calibrated and sustainable response to them.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Today, many in the United States fear that China will eclipse its power. On the surface, evidence for this prediction is abundant. In a variety of key capabilities, from hypersonic missiles to shipbuilding, China is increasingly powerful, if not dominant, which appears to demonstrate that China's state-driven political-economic model remains more than capable of "concentrating power to do big things," as Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping put it.

Yet the foundations of China's strength are strained by mounting challenges. The country's growth rate has steadily declined from its 2007 peak; the past five years, in particular, have ushered in stark structural problems and economic volatility. The real estate market, a core driver of China's growth and urban development, is experiencing a historic correction with far-reaching implications. In August 2024, the International Monetary Fund estimated that roughly 50 percent of Chinese property developers are on the brink of insolvency. Their woes are driven in part by a persistent decline in housing prices, which as of October 2024, were falling at their fastest pace since 2015. Because more than 70 percent of Chinese household wealth is tied up in the property market, steep drops in the value of housing hurt not only developers but nearly all Chinese citizens.

The real estate crisis is affecting the finances of China's local governments, too. These municipalities were long reliant on land sales to fund investment in public services and infrastructure. As property values and land sales falter, these municipalities are becoming strapped for revenue, preventing them from servicing their debt and providing essential services. In an April 2024 analysis, Bloomberg estimated that China's local governments had, that month, generated their lowest revenue from land sales in eight years. To compensate, they have resorted to collecting arbitrary fines from local companies, clawing back bonuses paid to local officials, and even seeking loans from private firms to cover payroll.

Even Chinese citizens' faith in Beijing's economic stewardship is eroding. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, as much as $254 billion may have quietly flowed out of the country between June 2023 and June 2024—a clear signal of domestic disillusionment. Young people are turning to a posture they call "lying flat," a quiet rebellion against societal expectations that demand relentless effort in exchange for increasingly elusive rewards. With youth unemployment surging to record levels, young Chinese people face a bleak reality: advanced degrees and grueling work no longer guarantee stable employment or upward mobility.

The external environment that formerly supported China's meteoric rise is also characterized by wariness. Foreign companies that once rushed to tap the potential of China's vast market are now approaching it with

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caution, and some are even seeking the exits. Foreign direct investment into China plunged 80 percent between 2021 and 2023, reaching its lowest level in 30 years. Beijing's 2021 crackdown on the tech sector wiped out billions of dollars in value, and the country's unpredictable regulatory and political environment has forced multinational corporations to rethink their China strategies. In September, a survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai revealed a grim outlook: fewer than half of foreign firms expressed optimism about China's five-year business prospects—the lowest levels of confidence in the survey's 25-year history.

Washington's tendency to focus on its rivals' strength has often backfired.

In the years following its accession into the World Trade Organization, China was warmly welcomed into global markets, with countries eager to benefit from its manufacturing prowess and seemingly limitless appetite for foreign investment. China remains deeply reliant on access to the world's markets, but many foreign governments are growing ever more concerned about the strategic implications of China's economic reach and military might. Many developing countries that initially embraced its Belt and Road Initiative as a pathway to infrastructure development, for example, are scrutinizing the project's impact, worried about its negative effects on the environment and on local labor practices. Advanced economies such as Australia and Canada have erected new investment screening mechanisms to better protect their economies from national security risks stemming from Chinese investment. In March 2019, in a "strategic outlook" report, the European Commission formally labeled China a "systemic rival," marking a shift from the traditional view that the country offered a market opportunity with few downsides. The EU subsequently moved to impose stricter regulations on Chinese investments in Europe's critical infrastructure, technology, and digital sectors and tariffs of up to 45 percent on Chinese-made electric vehicles.

Xi, meanwhile, has ushered in a governance style characterized by reactive, opaque decision-making, which often exacerbates China's domestic and international tensions. By consolidating his authority within a small circle of loyalists, Xi has weakened the internal checks and balances that might otherwise temper policy decisions. Beijing's handling of the initial COVID-19 outbreak is a striking example: the suppression of critical information, along with the silencing of whistleblowers, caused delays in the global response to the virus, contributing to its rapid spread

beyond China's borders. What might have been a well-coordinated local response metastasized into a global health crisis, exposing China to international condemnation and illustrating the pitfalls of a system that punishes dissent and cuts off sources of feedback.

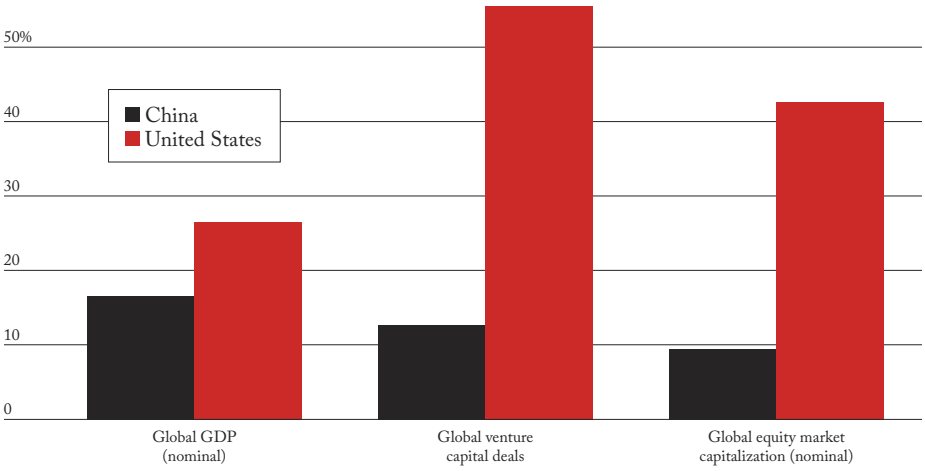
Xi's attempts to reduce economic inequality and curb the excesses of China's booming private sector have followed a similarly opaque and erratic course. Policy missteps by the central government—such as its reluctance to bail out local governments and rein in shadow banking and capital markets—have intensified the fiscal pressure on the Chinese economy, triggering liquidity crises for giant real estate developers. Sudden and aggressive regulatory crackdowns in sectors such as technology and private education have sent shock waves through China's business community and unsettled international investors. With his push to institutionalize what he calls a "holistic national security concept"—in which Beijing's economic and political decision-making is guided by concerns about regime security—Xi has begun to erode the very sources of dynamism that propelled China's rapid ascent. Since Deng began to open China's economy in the late 1970s, Chinese leaders have striven to offer the country pragmatic, pro-market policies and to afford local politicians the flexibility to address their areas' specific challenges. But hamstrung, now, by rigid and top-down directives that prioritize ideological conformity over practical solutions, local politicians are ill equipped to tackle the mounting pressures of fiscal insolvency and unemployment.

Entrepreneurs, once key engines of China's economic miracle, now operate in a climate of fear and uncertainty, unsure of what Beijing's next policy shift might be. The lack of transparency or legal recourse in government decision-making reveals the deeper flaws of centralized governance: policies are developed and carried out with little consultation or explanation, leaving citizens and businesses to navigate the fallout. Xi's consolidation of power may offer short-term control and a capacity to achieve certain strategic and technological outcomes through brute force. But it risks rendering China's policymaking apparatus increasingly tone-deaf, out of touch with both domestic realities and global expectations.

GOOD BONES

The extreme attitudes of either fatalism or triumphalism can easily obscure a more nuanced perspective that recognizes China's expanding global influence while appreciating the United States' unique and enduring strategic advantages: its resilient economy, innovative capacity, robust

Chinese and U.S. comparative economic performance



Sources: GlobalData, Deals Database, Q1–Q3, 2024; International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2024; Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association, 2024 Capital Markets Factbook, *July 2024.*

alliances, and open society. In dollar-adjusted terms, the U.S. economy remains not only larger than China's but also larger than the next three biggest economies combined, and it is on track to grow faster than any other G-7 economy in 2024 and 2025, according to International Monetary Fund estimates. During President Joe Biden's tenure, the United States more than doubled its GDP lead over China, and its share of global GDP remains near the level it was in the 1990s. Analysts such as the Rhodium Group's Logan Wright have predicted that China's share of global GDP peaked in 2021 and will likely remain below that of the United States for the foreseeable future. Even observers who think the outlook for China's economy is less dire agree that its growth is slowing and will be constrained by structural challenges and a clumsy policymaking process.

American companies dominate global markets: as of March 2024, nine of the world's ten largest firms by market capitalization were American; China's largest firm, Tencent, ranked twenty-sixth. And the United States continues to attract the most foreign capital of any economy, in stark contrast to China's increasing capital outflows. The United States also has more high-skilled immigrants than any other country; China, meanwhile, struggles to attract any significant amount of foreign-born talent.

As the artificial intelligence revolution accelerates, the United States is particularly well positioned to become the global epicenter of AI innovation and diffusion. According to Stanford University's Global AI Power Rankings, the United States leads the world in artificial intelligence, possessing a substantial lead over China in areas such as AI research, private-sector funding, and the development of cutting-edge AI technologies. Over the past decade, the United States' tech sector has consistently outpaced China's in AI, creating more than three times as many AI-focused companies. In 2023, U.S. companies developed 61 significant AI models compared with China's 15, reflecting the strength of the United States' AI ecosystem. That same year, U.S. investors poured nearly nine times more capital into AI than China did, funding the launch of 897 AI startups, far surpassing China's 122. This success stems in no small part from a decentralized, market-driven approach that China, as it is currently governed, cannot emulate. The United States' relatively flexible regulatory framework, the free collaboration it permits between private companies and academia, and its ability to attract talent give it an edge.

As the world's largest oil importer, China relies on imports for over 70 percent of its oil needs, leaving it vulnerable to global disruptions. Geopolitical tensions, supply-chain bottlenecks, or regional conflicts could severely jeopardize China's energy security. The United States, by contrast, has nearly achieved energy independence and has emerged as a leading global producer of oil and natural gas. Its energy dominance is driven in part by strong innovation in areas such as advanced fracking and horizontal drilling, and the United States uses its preeminence to shape global energy markets and strengthen its geopolitical leverage. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted Europe's energy supply, for example, the United States quickly increased its exports of liquefied natural gas, reducing Europe's dependence on Russian energy.

The dollar's status as the world's primary reserve and settlement currency gives the United States unparalleled financial leverage, although it also has downsides. In 2023, nearly 60 percent of global foreign exchange reserves were held in dollars, far outpacing the euro (around 20 percent) and the yuan (less than three percent). That gives the United States advantages such as lower borrowing costs, greater flexibility in managing its debt, and the ability to impose sanctions. At the same time, the dollar's global status imposes costs on the U.S. economy, such as a persistent trade deficit and pressure on manufacturing when it makes American exports less competitive. But these are problems Beijing wishes it had: it is actively

promoting alternatives to the dollar and has unveiled a digital currency to try to blunt the United States' ability to weaponize its financial system.

China's investments in aircraft carriers, stealth-capable submarines, and AI-driven systems are reshaping the Indo-Pacific's military balance and creating an undeniably challenging operating environment for the U.S. force posture there. Beijing's defense industrial base now produces fifth-generation fighter jets, hypersonic weapons, and sophisticated missile systems at scale. Its development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities reflects a strategic focus on limiting the U.S. military's freedom of action in the western Pacific. Despite these advancements, however, China's military also faces serious obstacles. It is grappling with corruption, which could undermine its operational efficiency and readiness. Its lack of combat experience means that it is uncertain whether it could execute complex operations under the pressures of modern warfare. And any conflict within or near China's territorial waters would likely have a disproportionate impact on the Chinese economy, which relies heavily on maritime trade and trade with its immediate region. The U.S. military's ability to project power on a global scale, by contrast, remains unmatched, supported by extensive combat experience, a vast alliance network, and forward-deployed forces stationed across the world.

Perhaps most significantly, however, China cannot yet match the United States' greatest force multiplier: its global alliance system. The United States' partnerships with NATO and close treaty allies in the Pacific such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea allow it to form a united front in the face of natural disasters, technological competition, and adversarial ambitions. These alliances are more than symbolic. They enable real-time coordination that allows the United States to pre-position forces far from its shores, thus amplifying its military effectiveness and readiness. A superpower is a country capable of projecting force and exercising influence in every corner of the world. The United States meets this definition. China does not, at least not yet.

The decentralized nature of the United States' democratic system, in which significant governance responsibilities remain vested with state and local authorities, remains an American advantage, too. Unlike in China, the United States' regular electoral cycles and peaceful transfers of power enable citizens to insist on change when they become dissatisfied with the country's trajectory. And although the United States must urgently address the many threats to its democratic norms from extreme polarization and institutional erosion, it still boasts serious

checks on presidential power from a free media, an independent legislature, and a transparent legal system.

FALSE CEILING

It is vital to remember that Beijing's greatest wins have tended to occur not in spite of American efforts, but in their absence. Take 5G telecommunications: China developed and deployed next-generation wireless networks at breakneck speed, cornering markets in Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe. This did not happen because the United States lacked the capacity to compete, but because it was slow to invest in domestic alternatives and unwilling to mobilize resources to scale a national strategy at China's pace.

China's especially rapid advancements in quantum communications and satellite networks underscore the extent to which it has prioritized leadership in technologies that the United States has been slower to embrace or fund at scale. This success has been driven by government subsidies, aggressive industrial policies, and a singular focus on securing critical raw materials, often at a high geopolitical and environmental price. These gains come with other costs, too. The Chinese government's laser focus on specific strategic domains has diverted its attention and resources from projects that would drive longer-term economic growth, such as reforming the social safety net and boosting domestic consumption.

As China struggles, the United States should press its advantages. To do so, U.S. policymakers must make significant investments in areas in which the United States appears strong, boosting funding for research and development and cutting-edge industries, attracting global talent through targeted immigration reform, fortifying alliances in Asia and Europe, and rebuilding the U.S. defense industrial base. If American leaders continue to wring their hands over China's ascendancy instead of taking these crucial steps, Washington's strategic advantage could quickly erode.

It is undeniable that the United States faces serious challenges. But it is equally undeniable that it retains extraordinary strengths—and that its democratic institutions, albeit stressed, possess a unique capacity for renewal. Competition between the United States and Beijing will be a defining feature of the coming decades. But although China's centralized governance may deliver rapid advancements in key areas, its gains are fragile. The real peril for the United States may lie not in the unmatchable rise of a new rival but in its own unwillingness to acknowledge and build on its own unmatched potential.

The Middle East's Dangerous New Normal

Iran, Israel, and the Delicate Balance of Disorder

SUZANNE MALONEY

On October 3, 2023, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei addressed a large crowd of government officials and international visitors in Tehran. As he approached his conclusion, Khamenei's remarks turned to Israel—the Islamic Republic's self-proclaimed nemesis. Invoking a verse from the Koran, Khamenei insisted that the Jewish state would "die of [its] rage." He reminded the audience that the Iranian theocracy's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, had described Israel as a cancer. And he ended his speech with a prediction: "This cancer will definitely be eradicated, God willing, at the hands of the Palestinian people and the resistance forces throughout the region."

Four days later, sirens sounded as rockets flew out of Gaza and into southern Israel. More than 1,000 Palestinian militants followed, breaching the border barricade on motorcycles and jeeps, swarming from boats on the sea, and paragliding in from the air. In less than 24 hours, the militants

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killed 1,180 Israelis and captured 251 more. The massacre committed by Hamas and other Palestinian fighters was the deadliest act of anti-Jewish violence since the Holocaust. It precipitated a ferocious Israeli military response that has wiped out Hamas's leadership and eliminated thousands of the group's fighters, while also killing tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians and devastating Gaza's infrastructure.

Although Tehran was not directly involved in the October 7 attack, Iran's leaders were eager to exploit its aftermath in hopes of fulfilling Khamenei's prophecy. At first, Iran entered the war by following its well-honed playbook: posturing diplomatically against escalation while rallying its proxy militias to assault Israel. But on April 13, Iranian leaders shifted course, launching a massive barrage of missiles and drones at Israel—the first time that Iran had directly attacked Israeli territory from Iranian territory.

Israel was spectacularly successful in working with the United States and its Arab partners to blunt those strikes. It then retaliated against Iran and its proxies without prompting more attacks, containing escalation. And the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime only strengthens Israel's upper hand over Iran. Still, history suggests that the Islamic Republic is unlikely to be chastened. Instead, the normalization of direct military conflict between Iran and Israel is a seismic shift that creates a profoundly unstable equilibrium. By lowering the threshold for direct strikes, the tit for tat has boosted the odds that the two most powerful states in the Middle East will fight a full-scale war—one that could draw in the United States and have a devastating effect on the region and the global economy. Even if such a war does not break out, a weakened Iran may seek to insulate itself by acquiring a nuclear weapon, causing a wider wave of proliferation. Preventing such a future will thus be an essential challenge for U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who must leverage his penchant for chaos to forge a regional deal.

A RISING POWER

Iran and Israel were not always mortal enemies. Under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the monarch who ruled Iran for decades until the 1979 revolution, Tehran cultivated a cooperative and mutually beneficial security and economic relationship with the Jewish state. Israeli leaders, in turn, courted Iran to ease their international isolation and counter the hostility of their Arab neighbors.

The Iranian Revolution turned that relationship on its head. Iran's new rulers—who came from the Shiite clergy—despised Israel. Some, steeped

in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, even viewed Israel as an infidel transgressor. (The ties between the shah and Israel were, in fact, one of the factors that helped galvanize religious opposition to his rule.) Before the revolution, in an infamous 1963 sermon that precipitated his expulsion from Iran, Khomeini inveighed against Israel as the enemy of Islam and the religious class in Iran. He continued to weave similar themes throughout his speeches after the revolution elevated him to head of state.

Under Khomeini's leadership, the Islamic Republic fused this deep-seated ideological antipathy toward Israel with a determination to upend the regional order and assist oppressed peoples, especially the Palestinians. Tehran began this process by intervening in Lebanon, which was in the throes of its long civil war when Iran became a theocracy. After Israel's 1982 invasion of the country, Iran offered Lebanese Shiite groups such as Hezbollah military and technical aid, developing a model for terrorizing its adversaries through suicide bombings, assassinations, and hostage taking. Tehran also began championing the Palestinian cause as a way to win the hearts and minds of the Middle East's many Sunni Muslims, who otherwise had little reason to side with a fundamentalist Shiite regime.

Accustomed to dealing with the shah, Israel initially sought to forge quiet connections with Iran's revolutionary state, which it viewed as anomalous and impermanent. Israeli officials even maintained a sizable arms pipeline to Tehran after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran, in hopes of strengthening moderate Iranian leaders and prolonging the conflict against Baghdad. (The Israelis saw Iraq as a more serious threat.) But this gambit ended badly after the involvement of U.S. officials, who sought to use the sales of American weapons to Tehran—including those sold by Israel—to induce Tehran's help in freeing U.S. hostages in the Middle East and to covertly fund Nicaragua's contra rebels. The result was an embarrassing scandal for the Reagan administration and a further hardening of Iran's revolutionary regime. In this way, the Iran-contra debacle helped put to rest any Israeli illusions that revolutionary Iran was ephemeral or nonthreatening.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, meanwhile, gave Iran the capacity to more seriously challenge Israel. The Islamic Republic may have emerged from that conflict battered and impoverished, but the fighting helped the clerical regime consolidate its grip on power. It also meant the Iranian military needed a new mission. Even as Israel and the Palestinians took hesitant steps toward conflict resolution and a two-state solution in the 1990s, Tehran expanded its investments in violent opposition to the

peace process and to Israel overall. It also accelerated the revival of Iran's pre-revolutionary nuclear program.

Events in the following decade further bolstered the Iranian regime. The U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq dethroned two of Tehran's most proximate adversaries, the Taliban and Saddam, giving Iran more room to maneuver. Those U.S. operations also intensified paranoia in Tehran that Washington was trying to strangle the Islamic Republic, stoking the regime's determination to drive U.S. troops out of the region. The result was an Iran both more able and more willing to arm its proxy network, including by funneling weapons to Palestinian militants.

During this same period, the full scope of Iran's nuclear ambitions began to come into view. In 2002, an Iranian opposition group exposed previously undisclosed nuclear sites intended to produce fuels that could be used for weapons, in violation of Tehran's obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. For Israel, Russia, the United States, and other leading powers, these revelations confirmed that the theocracy was developing the infrastructure to acquire nuclear arms and potentially transfer them to its surrogates and partners. Ultimately, the International Atomic Energy Agency referred the issue to the UN Security Council, resulting in an unprecedented suite of multinational economic sanctions on Iran.

Those restrictions hit Tehran's pocketbook, but they did not disrupt its regional rise, which was further aided by the Arab Spring in 2010–11. At first, the spread of revolutions and civil war across the Middle East challenged the Islamic Republic, especially when the unrest threatened one of Iran's most valuable partners—Assad. But with help from Hezbollah and Russia, Iran managed to prop up Assad for more than a decade. By improving its position in Syria, Tehran was also able to ensure that Hezbollah remained the dominant force in Lebanon, expanding the group's arsenal of precision-guided missiles and rockets as well as the means to produce them. And Iran further seized on growing regional chaos, such as the civil war in Yemen, to expand its reach and enhance the capabilities of its partners. By the end of the 2010s, Tehran had developed the ability to project power across the Middle East and coordinate its network of militias.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Israel watched warily as Iran grew more capable. But for years, and despite many threats, it avoided directly attacking the country. The Obama administration succeeded in dissuading Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu from launching strikes on Iran's nuclear program in 2012. Tehran, Washington, and five other world powers later inked an agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program in 2015, despite ferocious lobbying from Israeli leaders.

Instead, Israel contented itself with creative and reasonably effective alternatives to direct military action. Through clandestine operations and cyberattacks, the country sabotaged key Iranian nuclear facilities. It assassinated nuclear scientists and military officers, and it stole archival records that demonstrated the true extent of Iran's nuclear activities, which the regime had tried to hide. Perhaps most important, Israel built a potent intelligence network that kept the Iranian regime off balance.

Israel also sought to turn up the heat on Iran by directly attacking Tehran's allies and striking its resources outside the country. What began in 2013 as opportunistic bombings of Hezbollah supply lines within Syria had transformed by 2017 into a systematic military campaign against Iranian assets and proxies across the region. This campaign scored significant successes, including a series of strikes in the summer of 2019 on Iranian weapons depots in Iraq, missile production facilities in Lebanon, and Iranian-backed fighters in Syria. But by remaining below the threshold that would provoke Iranian retaliation, Israel fell short of achieving decisive setbacks against Hezbollah or Iran.

Israel's escalation in Iran and Syria coincided with Trump's first term, in which Washington assumed a much harsher stance toward the Islamic Republic. Trump pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 and imposed what he called "maximum pressure" economic sanctions on Iran in hopes of extracting far-reaching concessions. Tehran's response offers a case study in its cagey calculus. For the first year of those sanctions, Iranian leaders exhibited remarkable restraint, only to pivot dramatically and launch a series of counterattacks, including strikes on Persian Gulf shipping and Saudi oil facilities. This was not wanton violence: Iranian leaders hoped that confrontation might change Washington's cost-benefit analysis and force an end to maximum pressure. They did not succeed—but from Tehran's point of view, the maneuver did not fail, either. To Tehran, the best defense is often a good offense, and its aggressive actions signaled to the world that the regime was willing to impose real costs on countries that bucked it.

Recent tit-for-tat exchanges between Iran and Israel betray a similar logic, and they have moved the war between the two states into new territory. After Israel bombed an Iranian consulate building in Syria in

The day after: sifting debris following an Israeli strike on Tyre, Lebanon, November 2024

ADNAN ABIDI / REUTERS

April, Iran launched its unprecedented direct attack, firing more than 350 ballistic and cruise missiles and drones straight at its enemy. This attack, like past ones, was calculated and clearly designed to send a message. Iran, after all, telegraphed the attack well in advance. And Israel, thanks in no small part to the help of neighboring Arab states, was able to repel Iran's bombardment. But the coordinated volley of missiles and drones was not simply performative. "This wasn't a small-scale or a chest-thumping show of force," noted Major Benjamin Coffey, one of the U.S. Air Force pilots who helped thwart the Iranian barrage. "This was an attack designed to cause significant damage, to kill, to destroy."

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a May 2024 helicopter accident briefly distracted the theocracy and appeared to disrupt the escalatory spiral. But it was not long before the conflict flared again. In August, Israel assassinated the Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh at an official Iranian guesthouse in Tehran, only hours after Haniyeh had met with Khamenei and attended the inauguration of the country's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian. Less than two months later, Israel escalated in Lebanon, laying waste to decades of Iranian investment in Hezbollah in an abrupt and humiliating fashion. Via remote control, Israel detonated tiny explosives it had secretly implanted in thousands of pagers used by Hezbollah operatives, disrupting the group's command

and control. Israeli forces then killed nearly the entire upper echelon of Hezbollah's leadership, including its longtime chief, Hassan Nasrallah, and destroyed much of the group's weaponry.

This onslaught produced not just a much weaker Hezbollah but a much weaker Iran. For more than 40 years, Hezbollah had been Tehran's ace in the hole: the country's inaugural franchise and the nucleus in its loose network of partners and proxies. Its arsenal of missiles was intended to be the first line of defense for Iran. Crippling such a key asset, even if only temporarily, severely undercut Iran's stature and power in the region. The loss of Nasrallah was especially devastating for Iran's leadership. Nasrallah and Khamenei had known each other since Hezbollah's earliest days. Nasrallah spoke Persian, had lived for a time in Iran, and was the only major figure in the region who considered Iran's supreme leader to be his spiritual guide.

It was thus entirely predictable—and perhaps even inevitable—that Tehran would respond to his death with force, as it did with another salvo of missiles on October 1. Yet once again, U.S. and Israeli preparation and coordination prevented casualties and any serious physical damage. After some brief suspense, Israel undertook an elegant and effective set of strikes that significantly weakened Iran's air defenses and its missile, drone, and nuclear program without provoking retaliation. This strike, together with the subsequent collapse of Assad's brutal government, has shattered Iran's existing regional strategy.

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

For now, the direct attacks between Iran and Israel have provided the latter with the upper hand. Iran's capabilities—defensive and offensive alike—have been degraded. Israel, after the catastrophic failure of October 7, looks stronger than ever. And by galvanizing Arab states to help repel Iran's April attack, the Israelis have shown that Arab governments are willing to join the Jewish state in deterring Iran, despite the sympathy for the Palestinians among Arab populations.

Yet Iran and Israel—and the region as a whole—are facing a difficult predicament. Israel has achieved a significant victory, but both Iranian and Israeli leaders believe that the threat posed by the other remains existential and unyielding. In their public posture and rhetoric, both governments seek to portray the other as being on the ropes. After Israel's October strike on Iran, Netanyahu boasted, "Israel has greater freedom of action in Iran today than ever before. We can reach anywhere in Iran as needed." But for Khamenei, the setbacks of Iran's proxies are meaningless;

in his telling, Hamas and Hezbollah are victorious simply because they survived, and Israel's destruction is only a matter of time. "The world and the region will see the day when the Zionist regime will be clearly defeated," he said in early November.

Given Iran's losses and its newly heightened vulnerability at home, this posture may be bravado. And if Tehran is serious, its leaders may be gravely miscalculating. Still, over the past 45 years, Iran's leadership has navigated many significant setbacks with surprising agility. Two of the secrets to the regime's success are its tendency to embrace aggression under pressure and its readiness to play the long game: to retrench or pivot as necessary, to creatively deploy its limited resources and relationships, and to engage in asymmetric attacks to achieve leverage over more powerful adversaries. It could do so again today.

For more than 40 years, Hezbollah had been Tehran's ace in the hole.

Consider the record. In January 2020, the Trump administration assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force—the branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in charge of managing relations with Iran's allies and proxies. At first, the killing seemed like a symbolic and operational disaster for Tehran, given just how key Soleimani was to its foreign policy. Yet his death ultimately had little enduring effect on the strength, durability, or efficacy of Iran's axis of resistance. Similarly, in 1992, when Israel killed Abbas al-Musawi, Hezbollah's leader at the time, it paved the way for the ascension of Nasrallah, who proved to be a far more effective and deadly adversary. A month later, Hezbollah retaliated by orchestrating the deadly bombing of Israel's embassy in Argentina.

The evisceration of Tehran's most valuable assets, Hezbollah and the Assad regime, is a catastrophic blow for the Islamic Republic. But a weakened Iran is not necessarily a less dangerous Iran. Iran is "staring you in the eye" and "will fight you to the end," Hossein Salami, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, declared to Israel in November. "We will not allow you to dominate the fate of Muslims. You will receive painful blows—keep awaiting revenge." This may be garden-variety Iranian bluster, but it would be a mistake and out of step with historical precedent to presume that even a massive strategic reversal will induce Iranian quiescence.

There is another sign that Iran may be upping the ante to counterbalance its new vulnerabilities. For the first time in two decades, important voices within the country are openly calling for Tehran to embrace

nuclear weapons. In the past, several senior Iranian officials—including a previous foreign minister and a previous head of the country's atomic energy agency—had hinted that they had achieved the ability to produce a weapon but had opted not to. In November 2024, however, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that influential officials in the regime view that restraint as self-defeating. Hard-liners in Iran's parliament have publicly asked Khamenei to reconsider his religious decision that forbids the development of nuclear weapons. If the fundamental rules of the game have been transformed since October 7, then Iran's defense doctrine may undergo a similar evolution. A truculent Trump administration that supports an unleashed Israel could, in particular, accelerate Iran's nuclear timeline and prompt Tehran to openly embrace weaponization, something the Iranian regime has spent decades dodging.

CHAOS AGENT

Trump's second administration will take office determined to get tough on Tehran, just as his first one did. His incoming team has promised to ratchet up economic pressure on the Islamic Republic. The president-elect himself warned the Iranians that he would "blow your largest cities and the country itself to smithereens," if they sought to assassinate him, as multiple news outlets reported.

Meanwhile, the incoming national security adviser, Mike Waltz, has lambasted President Joe Biden for imposing restrictions on Israel as it prosecutes its war in Gaza. Unlike the Biden administration, then, the Trump team may have little regard for the potential blowback from a sustained attempt to erode the capabilities of the Houthis in Yemen and Iraq's Shiite militias. If so, the region could be headed for more bloodshed. Should Israel or the United States take off their gloves in Iraq and Yemen, they could destabilize Iraq and prompt the Houthis to target U.S. partners in the Middle East: Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). That could complicate the planned phase-down of U.S. troops in Iraq and leave a precarious power vacuum in the heart of the Arab world that Tehran and other extremists would seek to exploit. So could uncertainty regarding the future of Lebanon and Syria. Yet Trump's policy may prove more nuanced than unwavering confrontation. For starters, the new administration will find that the tools at its disposal are less effective than when Trump deployed them during his first term. His maximum pressure sanctions, for example, succeeded in slashing Iran's oil exports and revenues thanks to cooperation from China, which Beijing may not be willing

to repeat. The smuggling networks that enable Iranian oil to reach China have become more elaborate and more difficult to counter through sanctions designations alone. Any significant new economic coercion could also face headwinds from Washington's crucial Gulf allies, whose leaders now prefer to co-opt rather than confront Tehran.

Then there are Trump's own views on Iran. The president-elect has suggested there is a method to his madness—and that he desires a deal. During his 2024 campaign, Trump disavowed regime change and declared that he wanted Iran "to be a very successful country." He has recently suggested that had he won in 2020, he would have concluded an agreement with Tehran "within one week after the election." And Trump appears to have greenlighted early engagement with Iranian officials this time around, having sent one of his closest confidants, the billionaire Elon Musk, to meet with the country's UN ambassador in November.

The new administration will surely take a permissive approach to Israeli territorial ambitions. But Trump also says he wants to end the war in Gaza and to expand the Abraham Accords by adding Saudi Arabia. He wants to avoid further U.S. military commitments while lowering energy prices, creating a more docile China, and terminating Iran's nuclear program. These aims require difficult tradeoffs, and they will necessitate a more sophisticated strategy than merely attacking Iran and its proxies.

If past is prelude, Trump's resulting approach will likely be highly disruptive—especially since some of his goals are mutually incompatible. That may not seem like the best recipe for stability in the Middle East. Yet this may be just the moment for the unconventional, unpredictable, and unintentional chaos that appears to be on order from a Trump presidency. A dexterous Washington, unencumbered by any fidelity to principles or predictability, might just succeed by brandishing American muscle alongside a transparent infatuation with dealmaking. Trump's grand ambitions and his transactional approach to foreign policy are surprisingly well suited to today's Middle East, where regime interests and opportunistic investments are the lingua franca.

To succeed, Trump will have to manage the competing views and priorities of his own administration's staffers. But an unsentimental assessment of the regional landscape offers some sense of how Trump could proceed. He might start, as he did in his first term, in the Gulf. The Gulf states desperately want an end to the war in Gaza, which would serve their own economic and security interests as well as Israel's. The UAE has been in discussions with Washington about helping establish a postwar

Palestinian government in Gaza and obtaining security and reconstruction funding. Trump could continue these conversations and use them to help end Israel's war. The Gulf states could also help Trump forge a new deal with Iran. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have strong channels of communication with Tehran, which Trump could tap into. The Arab world would certainly welcome an agreement that prevents a full-scale war, which would have catastrophic consequences.

This confluence of interests is useful but hardly sufficient to achieve the outcomes Trump desires. That is where the president-elect's volatility and ruthlessness could be an unexpected asset. If Trump reinstates meaningful economic pressure on Iran and gives Israel some additional leeway for military action, he might better demonstrate U.S. capabilities and thus force Iran to reverse its current, uncompromising policy positions. A muscular U.S. approach has paid dividends in the past with an Iranian leadership whose foremost interest is in regime survival. Such an approach would likely be an improvement over that of the Biden administration, which relied almost exclusively on conciliation that Iran saw as weak and desperate. The result of the shift could be a real deal of the century: an abatement of the multipronged conflicts raging in the Middle East, a political horizon and reconstruction for the Palestinians and the Lebanese, and some nominal concessions from Tehran on its nuclear program and regional malfeasance.

Forging this deal will still be extremely difficult to achieve. During his first term, Trump's unconventional diplomacy with another recalcitrant nuclear power, North Korea, ultimately went nowhere, and overall his administration achieved few notable breakthroughs in dealing with adversarial powers. Even if realized, a deal would not likely endure for very long. Iran's leadership is steeped in antagonism toward both Israel and the United States, and the regime's investment in its nuclear program and proxy network has been key to its survival strategy. Netanyahu, for his part, has found that a maximalist military approach yields spectacular strategic dividends along with domestic political benefits. And there is no shortage of other spoilers in this combustible region.

But even an ephemeral set of understandings could reduce the temperature in the Middle East. That would, in turn, enable Washington and the world to turn their attention to more daunting challenges—especially China and Russia. And any deal that stanches some of the bloodshed and reduces some of the risks, if only temporarily, just might earn Trump his much-desired Nobel Peace Prize.

Why South Korea Should Go Nuclear

The Bomb Is the Best Way to Contain the Threat From the North

BY ROBERT E. KELLY AND MIN-HYUNG KIM

South Korea has long relied on the United States to keep the North Korean nuclear threat at bay. Pyongyang began taking fitful steps toward a nuclear weapon during the Cold War, tested its first bomb in 2006, and today regularly issues nuclear threats against its southern neighbor. Seoul, meanwhile, shelters under the American nuclear umbrella that came with the defense alliance it signed with Washington in 1953, just after an armistice effectively ended the Korean War. For decades, this arrangement provided South Korea sufficient security assurance. But today, that assurance appears increasingly fragile.

South Korea's problem is twofold. First, North Korea's capabilities are growing. Pyongyang has developed an intercontinental ballistic missile, which raises doubts about whether the United States would

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honor its alliance commitment and fight for South Korea, because North Korea can now strike American cities with a nuclear weapon. Second, Donald Trump, who has harshly criticized the U.S.–South Korean alliance in the past, is set to begin his second term as U.S. president. Under Trump, the likelihood that Washington would intervene in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula will drop further still.

In such a conflict, Pyongyang would almost certainly threaten nuclear attacks on American targets to deter U.S. participation. U.S. bases in the Asia-Pacific, Guam, or Hawaii would be threatened first, and then the U.S. mainland. This raises the potential cost of American assistance to South Korea far higher than it has ever been. And it is likely enough to make the United States hesitate before getting involved. Consider the war in Ukraine, where Russian nuclear threats have successfully limited U.S. support for Kyiv. If Moscow's threats worked against the alliance-friendly President Joe Biden, then Pyongyang's will very likely restrain the nationalist, transactional Trump. South Korea would then be left to fend for itself. To close this glaring gap in its security, Seoul is now considering a step that, until recently, was discussed only on the country's political fringe: building its own nuclear weapons.

In South Korea, this proposal has gone mainstream. According to a Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll conducted in 2021, 71 percent of South Koreans support nuclearization, an increase from the 56 percent support the Seoul-based Asan Institute for Policy Studies found in a survey in 2010. Other polls by South Korean think tanks have found similarly decisive levels of public support. Political elites remain divided but are more sympathetic to the idea now than at any point in South Korean history.

Today, the biggest obstacle to South Korean nuclearization is not a domestic constituency but a foreign one: the United States. There is a deep, decades-old bipartisan opposition in Washington to nuclear proliferation, even among U.S. allies. In recent years, the Biden administration has tried to keep Seoul satisfied with statements reaffirming U.S. security commitments. American pressure is likely the primary reason South Korea still participates in the international Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which forbids its nuclearization.

The United States has learned to live with nuclear partners before, however. The United Kingdom and France were both U.S. allies when they conducted their first nuclear tests, in 1952 and 1960, respectively, and Washington retained close ties with Israel after it developed a

nuclear program in the 1960s, despite U.S. entreaties. South Korea's anxiety over the dependability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella is also nothing new; U.S. allies had similar worries during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union threatened nuclear strikes against the U.S. mainland. But Washington's refusal to let Seoul act on its concerns now sets the allies up for an unnecessary confrontation.

American opponents of South Korean nuclearization exaggerate the policy's downsides, underappreciate its benefits, and ignore the United States' own liberal values that call for Washington to tolerate a democratic partner's national security choices, even when it dislikes them. If Seoul took this step, it would not trigger the breakdown of the international nonproliferation regime, as critics fear. North Korea's nuclear capabilities undermine U.S. deterrence, but a South Korean nuclear arsenal can help fill the gap. A nuclear South Korea would be more self-sufficient, reducing the potential harm if Trump draws back from U.S. alliances and calming Seoul's obsessive anxiety about the U.S. nuclear commitment.

With South Korea better able to handle the North Korean problem on its own, the United States could devote more attention to its top priority in East Asia—competition with China. But first, Washington needs to stop getting in its ally's way and start letting Seoul make its own decisions. A South Korean decision to nuclearize could, on balance, be good not just for South Korea but also for the United States.

SAN FRANCISCO FOR SEOUL?

North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have rapidly expanded since Kim Jong Un assumed leadership, in 2011. Four of the six nuclear tests Pyongyang has conducted have taken place under his leadership. Since 2017, North Korea has test-fired multiple intercontinental ballistic missiles that can hit the U.S. mainland, as well as many short- and medium-range missiles that could blanket South Korea. Pyongyang is pursuing further advances, too. It seeks to make its missiles hypersonic and its nuclear bombs smaller, perhaps with technological assistance from Russia to accelerate its progress. To improve the survivability of its nuclear forces, Pyongyang has announced its intention to put them on submarines. And it is integrating small nuclear weapons into its army, including frontline units.

North Korean strategy reflects these capability improvements. Pyongyang now routinely, almost casually, threatens to nuke South Korea and the United States. In September 2022, it promulgated a law

permitting the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in the early stages of a crisis. In a speech announcing the law, Kim stated that North Korea's nuclear status is "irreversible" and that its nuclear weapons are not a "bargaining chip" it would trade away in negotiations.

The current disparity between the North's and the South's nuclear capabilities destabilizes the Korean Peninsula. It encourages North Korea to bully South Korea into making concessions when crises between the two inevitably erupt. The uncertainty it generates in Seoul as to whether Washington would come to its defense in a conflict—and, in turn, Washington's refusal to tighten its commitment to Seoul—paralyzes the alliance and opens the door to miscalculation. Inter-Korean nuclear parity would end this dangerous impasse, as Seoul would be able to deter Pyongyang without relying on questionable American guarantees.

South Korea's arsenal would not have to be large: North Korea may be dangerous, but it is no China or Russia in terms of military strength. Seoul likely needs no more than 100 warheads to achieve local deterrence, given North Korea's small size and small arsenal. (By comparison, Israel is estimated to have around 90 nuclear weapons.) Even now, South Korea has fighter jets capable of delivering warheads and hardened shelters to protect them. Eventually, Seoul would place its warheads undersea to improve their survivability; it already has the necessary missiles and submarines. But South Korea's requirements end here. It does not need

the heavy bombers, long-range missiles, high-yield warheads, and huge stockpiles of great powers such as the United States or Russia.

What makes South Korea's need for a domestic deterrent so urgent is that North Korea's nuclear and missile buildup has elevated the classic dilemma of extended nuclear deterrence: Would the United States risk its own cities to protect foreign ones? In 1961, French President Charles de Gaulle famously asked U.S. President John F. Kennedy if he would "trade New York for Paris." Kennedy ducked the question. Today, South Korean journalists, scholars, and think tankers, as well as several members of the ruling party, publicly ask the same thing. A U.S. president, even one willing to risk San Francisco for Seoul, would face tremendous pressure from Congress and the American public not to endanger millions of U.S. civilians to aid a distant ally. South Koreans are well aware of this. A 2024 poll conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that only 47 percent of South Koreans believe Washington would risk nuclear strikes on the U.S. homeland on South Korea's behalf.

North Korea is not merely theoretically capable of striking U.S. targets—it almost certainly would do so if the United States joined a war to defend South Korea. Otherwise, U.S. military involvement in a second Korean war would mean the total defeat of North Korea, the unification of the peninsula, and the annihilation of Pyongyang's ruling elite. North Korea's army is large but technologically obsolete. Its nuclear forces are highly vulnerable to South Korean and U.S. airpower. The country is geographically small, leaving little space to retreat after losing a conventional battle at the inter-Korean border. Its population is also small and malnourished. North Korea's economy can hardly feed its people, much less sustain a war. And the state barely functions outside the capital. After a single major conventional defeat, the North Korean regime would likely start to unravel as allied forces advanced north.

North Korean leaders therefore have no reason to hold back if a conflict were to break out. Pyongyang would issue nuclear threats against U.S. bases in East Asia and against Guam, Hawaii, and even the U.S. mainland in a desperate attempt to keep the United States out of the war—and then, if Washington joined anyway, Pyongyang would follow through on those threats. In other words, because North Korea is badly outclassed in conventional military terms, and because any serious conflict raises existential stakes for regime elites, it is far more likely than any other nuclear weapons state to actually use its weapons. It poses a unique nuclear threat.

These circumstances differentiate North Korea from the Soviet Union during the Cold War and from nuclear autocracies such as China and Russia today. Those states may also be threatening, but they are much stronger than North Korea. Defeat in Ukraine or Taiwan would likely not mean the collapse of Russia or China. Thus, Moscow and Beijing's willingness to risk the huge uncertainties of nuclear use is much lower than Pyongyang's, as is evident in the war in Ukraine, where, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons, it is highly improbable that he actually would.

North Korea's reliance on its nuclear capabilities heightens doubts in South Korea about the United States' extended deterrence. U.S. officials know this crisis of confidence exists. The Washington Declaration, a joint statement issued in 2023, sought to alleviate South Korean concerns by establishing a U.S.–South Korean Nuclear Consultative Group to bring Seoul into U.S. nuclear planning for East Asia. The United States also agreed to rotate air and sea forces more frequently through South Korea. These steps are welcome. But because they do not address the core question of whether Washington would risk nuclear retaliation to protect its ally, they offer insufficient assurance for the South Korean public and political elites.

The coming of a second Trump presidency exacerbates South Korea's anxiety. Trump has denigrated U.S.–South Korean relations like no American president before him. During his first term, he seemed to prefer North Korea's dictator to South Korea's elected leader, and according to reporting by *Washington Post* journalists Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, Trump said privately in 2021 that he would "blow up" the alliance if reelected. He frequently talks about U.S. alliances as if they were pay-for-service protection schemes. In his 2024 presidential campaign, he said he would "absolutely not" defend any European country that did not meet NATO defense spending targets if it were invaded by Russia. Given all this, it is hard to imagine that Trump would risk San Francisco for Seoul.

Hoping for a calm four years while waiting out Trump's term is not a viable option for South Korea, either. Trump has remade the GOP such that the next leader of the party would likely share his "America first" ideology, including its rejection of binding alliance commitments. The only way South Korea can hedge against the United States' periodic swings toward isolationism, unilateralism, and transactionalism is to acquire its own nuclear defenses, thereby reducing its inordinate dependence on the United States for its security.

FALSE ALARM

Nuclearization is hotly debated in South Korea, but the think tanks, national security experts, and major media outlets that make up the country's foreign policy community support the idea more than at any time since it was first considered in the 1970s. Indeed, advocating an independent nuclear deterrent has entered the mainstream during the administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol. Seoul's official position is still to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for South Korea's security. But the main reason for the lack of change in its policy is the fear of U.S. retaliation, which could involve sanctions against South Korea and a weakening of the bilateral alliance.

Nonproliferation is deeply woven into U.S. foreign policy. In the past few years, the U.S. government has attempted to persuade and, if necessary, pressure South Korea not to seek nuclear weapons. In return for the United States' agreement to ramp up bilateral security cooperation in the 2023 Washington Declaration, Seoul reaffirmed its commitment to the NPT. Outside government, too, a network of U.S. scholars, think tank researchers, activists, and former officials that support nonproliferation have engaged in parallel Track II dialogues with South Korean elites in an attempt to dissuade them from nuclearization.

The U.S. government has long maintained that the spread of nuclear weapons should be aggressively resisted. And Seoul, understandably, is wary of provoking a major breach with Washington. If South Korea is to both make progress toward a nuclear program and avoid fracturing its relationship with the United States, Washington will need to loosen its rigid opposition to allied nuclearization. This may become easier under Trump, who showed in his first term that he is inclined to throw out the script when it comes to U.S. alliances.

Most American concerns reflect general opposition to nuclear proliferation rather than specific misgivings about South Korea's acquisition. Nonproliferation advocates hold that nuclear weapons should not spread anywhere, and in many cases argue that all countries that possess these weapons should denuclearize. This ideal of "global zero" is admirable but probably unattainable unless nuclear weapons states act first—an unlikely prospect. It is hardly fair for them to retain their weapons while demanding that all other countries remain nonnuclear, no matter their security concerns. Critics of the NPT have long suggested that the treaty amounts to nuclear discrimination because it

locks in the nuclear status of early adopters while preventing other countries from building these weapons later on.

Another common concern is that South Korean nuclearization would cause the NPT to collapse. But this is purely speculative. One country has already withdrawn from the NPT—North Korea in 2003—and the treaty did not fall apart. Another departure should not destroy it, especially when the country withdrawing is one such as South Korea, a middle-sized power that has long complied with the NPT (and refrained from any rash response to North Korea's noncompliance) but now has an obvious, justifiable reason to seek nuclear capabilities.

Washington needs to stop getting in its ally's way.

Seoul's pursuit of a nuclear program would be an in-kind response to decades of North Korean misbehavior, not a rogue sprint to build a destabilizing weapon. Since 1992, when Seoul and Pyongyang issued an inter-Korean declaration to denuclearize the peninsula, Seoul has pursued that goal in good faith. Pyongyang has not. It has been sanctioned by the UN Security Council nine times for its nuclear activities and routinely makes outlandish threats about annihilating South Korea and its allies. Any international observer should be able to understand Seoul's reasoning for pursuing a nuclear option.

Some observers worry that, even if South Korean nuclearization did not damage the NPT, it might induce other countries in East Asia to nuclearize. This is possible but unlikely. That only nine countries have nuclearized since 1945 is strong evidence against an uncontrollable domino effect. And in South Korea's case, its autocratic neighbors in northeast Asia—China, North Korea, and Russia—already have nukes. The only possible nearby candidates to join a nuclear cascade are Japan and Taiwan, and there is no obvious reason why South Korea's nuclearization would encourage these fellow democracies and U.S. partners to nuclearize in response.

Taiwan's foreign policy is structured by its relationships with China and the United States, making it unlikely to be overly concerned about this new development in South Korea. Were China to make overt nuclear threats against Taiwan, then Taipei, too, might consider going nuclear, but China, unlike North Korea, wisely avoids such extreme language. Japanese-Korean historical tensions make Tokyo and Seoul's relationship more fraught, but if North Korean nuclearization has not pushed Japan to nuclearize for the last 18 years, it seems improbable

that South Korean nuclearization would do so today. Antinuclear sentiment has also remained very high in Japan since the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the country during World War II. Ultimately, the basic condition driving South Korea's current interest in nuclearization does not hold in either Japan or Taiwan. The debate in Seoul is driven by an acute nuclear challenge from North Korea. Neither Tokyo nor Taipei faces a comparable nuclear threat today.

Another proliferation concern is safety. With any new nuclear weapons state, there is a risk that it might store or maintain its weapons improperly or share them with other actors, intentionally or unintentionally. These general worries are legitimate, but in the South Korean case, they are not convincing. The South Korean parliament's unanimous rejection of the president's surprise declaration of martial law in December, as well as the swift public backlash to the measure, showed that the country's democratic system of checks and balances is working well. South Korea's command and control of its nuclear arsenal would be robust, and its military is under civilian authority. The country has properly managed a civilian nuclear power industry for decades, which should quell concerns about its ability to safely handle nuclear materials.

Some South Korean progressives also contend that if South Korea went nuclear, North Korea would expand its nuclear and missile programs and any possibility of a peace deal on the Korean Peninsula would disappear. This argument may have been persuasive at one time, but no longer. North Korean nuclear decisions clearly have little to do with South Korean choices; for decades, Pyongyang brazenly exploited Seoul's nuclear restraint to build its own weapons. Kim has made clear that North Korea will never give up its nukes. At this point, South Korean threats to nuclearize are more likely than continued South Korean restraint to prompt North Korea to negotiate.

WORTH THE RISK

South Korean nuclearization is not risk-free. If Seoul began taking steps toward a nuclear program, Pyongyang might intervene to try to prevent it. The most plausible means at its disposal is major missile strikes on South Korean nuclear facilities, which would likely provoke the very conflict that North Korea acquired nuclear weapons to avoid. South Korea would ensure that its nuclear weapons program would be well defended and dispersed across the country, so only a large surprise

attack by North Korea would have any hope of success. It might even have to use small nuclear weapons, because its conventional weapons might not be capable of destroying the relevant targets.

But this scenario is highly unlikely. North Korea's goal is to forestall a conflict it would probably lose. When it threatens nuclear use, the uncertainty it creates for South Korea and the United States deters them both and wedges the allies apart. But a preemptive strike would be different. The world would turn against North Korea immediately, and any qualms about escalation would be superseded by its offensive use of nuclear weapons. There would be no way to predict how China, Russia, or the United States would respond. North Korea does not want South Korea to nuclearize, but provoking a nuclear war to stop it would entail far more risk than Pyongyang is willing to take on.

The more credible risks for South Korea are Chinese and Russian countermeasures. But Beijing and Moscow have been bad-faith partners in Korean security for decades. Both had years to try to check North Korea's nuclear buildup and chose not to. Worse, Russia has become closer to North Korea in the last year. Moscow could seek to slow South Korean nuclearization with cyberattacks or threats to lend even more support to North Korea. But its economic leverage over South Korea is low, even more so since Seoul joined other democracies in sanctioning Russia after the latter's invasion of Ukraine, and its international credibility is in tatters. Indeed, if Russia is assisting North Korea's missile program, then it is contributing to the very problem driving South Korea toward nuclearization—undermining any diplomatic case Moscow may make against it.

China is less blatantly belligerent toward South Korea. But as the country with the most leverage over North Korea, its refusal to seriously punish Pyongyang for its nuclear buildup is also part of the problem that brought Seoul to this point. If Beijing were to impose sanctions on Seoul in response to nuclearization, it could inflict real pain—almost 20 percent of South Korea's exports in 2023 were to China. South Korea's steps to distance itself from the Chinese economy could soften the blow, however. In the first quarter of 2024, the United States narrowly overtook China as South Korea's largest export market in 2024, in part a result of the Yoon administration's encouragement of South Korean firms to move their operations out of China. South Korean investment in China has also dropped substantially in recent years. In 2023, China fell out of South Korea's top five destinations for outbound investment

for the first time since 1992. In short, both China and Russia are losing whatever influence they might have had to bully South Korea out of nuclearization. If they really want to prevent that outcome, they would be better off using their leverage over North Korea to reduce the threats pushing South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons.

MATURE RELATIONSHIPS

South Korean nuclearization is not only less dangerous than the United States fears but also offers strategic benefits for Washington and a salve to a strained alliance. Most obviously, a local South Korean deterrent gets the United States off the hook for direct, immediate involvement in a conflict with North Korea that could go nuclear and could draw in China. If South Korea cannot have its own nuclear weapons, then it has no option but to look to the United States for coverage. Washington's alliance commitment thus exposes the U.S. homeland to nuclear retaliation. It is in the United States' interest, of course, to reduce that risk.

This does not mean that the United States should abandon South Korea if it nuclearizes. The alliance between Washington and Seoul serves as a linchpin of peace and stability in the region and more broadly contributes to upholding the rules-based international order. Nuclearization is no reason to throw it away. A nuclear South Korea could play a role akin to that of France or the United Kingdom—both of which possess nuclear weapons and provide supplemental, regional deterrence within the U.S. alliance network. Paris and London can act more independently and carry more of their own risk than Washington's nonnuclear allies. They could, for example, form the core of an independent nuclear European deterrent and help lead a European response to Russian aggression in Ukraine should Trump pull back from NATO in his second term. For now, South Korea, which has no security backstop without the United States, lacks the equivalent capacity to deal with East Asia's nuclear powers as a peer.

U.S. leaders have long demanded that the country's allies do more for their own defense and stop free-riding on American security guarantees—Trump most emphatically. By building its own nuclear weapons and lessening its dependence on U.S. nuclear protection, South Korea would be doing precisely that. Yet the United States has so far blocked this path to strategic maturity and responsibility.

Therein lies the core problem of Washington's insistence that its allies adhere to nonproliferation. If U.S. partners are not allowed to

make strategic choices without U.S. permission, then they will likely free-ride. It is unreasonable to expect U.S. allies to have large defense budgets and capable militaries but deny them independent strategic thinking. Strategically infantilized allies, such as Germany, are also likely to have militaries with poor capability. Berlin could afford a vastly more capable military, but it has not prioritized such spending, as was evident in its slow military response to the war in Ukraine; it has little incentive to do so, having consented to U.S. domination of NATO. Conversely, capable partners that can project power independently, such as France or India, will likely develop their own strategies, too. The United States wants the impossible: capable, big-spending allies that will do Washington's bidding.

South Korean nuclearization need not cause a rupture with the United States.

Allowing allies to develop and implement their own strategies is in the United States' interest, as Washington could thus reduce its involvement in its partners' conflicts and security problems. This leeway also reflects American values. If it wants to maintain credibility as a liberal hegemon, the United States cannot use its dominance to bully its weaker partners, as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War and China tries to do today. Washington must instead accept limits on its behavior and give its partners the freedom to make their own decisions, particularly when those partners are liberal democratic allies.

South Korea falls into that category. Public and elite support for nuclear armament will only grow as North Korea's arsenal expands and the United States becomes an unreliable backer under Trump. If Seoul persists in seeking nuclear weapons despite U.S. efforts to dissuade it, then Washington should accept its choice.

The alternative to accommodation is for the United States to coerce South Korea into giving up on nuclearization by threatening economic sanctions and exclusion from the market for nuclear materials. Washington has run this play before with nuclear-curious allies, most notably when it headed off West Germany's Cold War effort to build a bomb. But American threats, including suggestions that it could abandon Europe altogether, generated deep resentment in Bonn and violated the liberal principle that democracies do not coerce each other. To use the threat of sanctions to strong-arm South Korea today would similarly undermine the values that Washington's

claims distinguish democracy from autocracy—giving China more ammunition to attack the United States for hypocrisy.

PENINSULAR PARITY

An independent South Korean nuclear program is the best way to deter North Korea, but several intermediate options are on the table, too. For example, the United States might station its own tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. This step could signal an intensified U.S. commitment to South Korean security, and it might cool public interest in full nuclearization. But the problems of U.S. extended deterrence and the fear of U.S. abandonment would remain, as the United States would retain command over these weapons, could decline to use them in a conflict, and could remove them at any time. The 2021 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey showed only nine percent of South Korean respondents—perhaps recognizing the insufficiency of this step—supported a U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons. (Of the remaining respondents, 67 percent favored a domestic nuclear program, and 24 percent did not want nuclear weapons in South Korea at all.)

Another option is a "nuclear sharing" arrangement, which would allow the South Korean military to access U.S. warheads positioned on South Korean territory under clearly defined wartime circumstances. The idea would be to give South Korea a deterrent but limit the United States' exposure in a conflict. North Korea and China might not accept that fine distinction, however; they might consider South Korean use of American nuclear weapons to be the same as American nuclear use. And they would likely argue as much in an effort to derail this option. Ultimately, nuclear sharing is only slightly better than redeploying U.S. tactical nukes to South Korea and keeping them under U.S. control.

The next step up the ladder is "nuclear latency," a compromise position that is growing in popularity among pronuclear South Korean politicians such as Han Dong-hoon and Yoo Yong-won of South Korea's ruling People Power Party. In this scenario, South Korea would develop the capability to quickly build nuclear weapons but would not actually do so. Reducing Seoul's "breakout time" would not violate the NPT. But this solution has its own difficulties. If South Korea's breakout time is too long, then its latent nuclear capabilities cannot provide the desired deterrent effect. But if its breakout time is sufficiently short, then latency is nuclearization in all but name, and

South Korea would face the international backlash without capturing the full security benefits.

The best option is still for South Korea to build enough survivable nuclear weapons to achieve local deterrence and restore inter-Korean nuclear parity. Assembling even a limited arsenal would give South Korea greater strategic independence and reduce its constant anxiety over the shifts in U.S. foreign policy. It would relieve the United States from its commitment to immediately join a conflict when its very participation would worsen nuclear escalation pressures. And it would block North Korea from trying to use its nuclear advantage to score gains from South Korea during crises. Washington and Seoul's relationship would be more balanced and mature. The United States, which worries about free-riding allies and overextending itself, could reduce its responsibility for South Korean security.

The very outcome that ought to benefit Washington may also be what it fears most. It is possible that an unwillingness to cede paramount authority in South Korea is driving U.S. opposition to Seoul's nuclearization even more than are dubious concerns about proliferation. Nuclearized partners, such as France, India, and Israel, are more difficult for the United States to dominate. Yet in the case of South Korea, the strategic benefits to Washington should outweigh its fear of losing control.

South Korean nuclearization need not cause a rupture with the United States unless Washington chooses to create one. As South Korea's primary security partner and longtime political patron—and running neck and neck with China to be South Korea's biggest export market—the United States wields an informal veto. It has already tried to dissuade Seoul, reassure it, and vaguely threaten it. None of this has worked. Trump's return will only deepen Seoul's nuclear interest; just two days after his reelection, South Korea's largest daily newspaper ran an editorial suggesting that the country might need its own nuclear weapons.

Washington's moves have failed to resolve the core security problems that a South Korean program can redress: North Korea's relentless march toward ever more powerful weapons of mass destruction and the United States' unreliability in (and likely after) the Trump era. The United States itself would never tolerate the nuclear vulnerability South Korea now experiences. Rather than insisting that its ally remain imperiled, Washington should drop its barriers to Seoul's finding its own way to security.

The Price of American Retreat

Why Washington Must Reject Isolationism and Embrace Primacy

MITCH McCONNELL

When he begins his second term as president, Donald Trump will inherit a world far more hostile to U.S. interests than the one he left behind four years ago. China has intensified its efforts to expand its military, political, and economic influence worldwide. Russia is fighting a brutal and unjustified war in Ukraine. Iran remains undeterred in its campaign to destroy Israel, dominate the Middle East, and develop a nuclear weapons capability. And these three U.S. adversaries, along with North Korea, are now working together more closely than ever to undermine the U.S.-led order that has underpinned Western peace and prosperity for nearly a century.

The Biden administration sought to manage these threats through engagement and accommodation. But today's revanchist powers do not seek deeper integration with the existing international order; they reject its very basis. They draw strength from American weakness, and their appetite for hegemony has only grown with the eating.

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Many in Washington acknowledge the threat but use it to justify existing domestic policy priorities that have little to do with the systemic competition underway. They pay lip service to the reality of great-power competition but shirk from investing in the hard power on which such competition is actually based. The costs of these mistaken assumptions have become evident. But the response to four years of weakness must not be four years of isolation.

Even though the competition with China and Russia is a global challenge, Trump will no doubt hear from some that he should prioritize a single theater and downgrade U.S. interests and commitments elsewhere. Most of these voices will argue for focusing on Asia at the expense of interests in Europe or the Middle East. Such thinking is commonplace among both isolationist conservatives who indulge the fantasy of "Fortress America" and progressive liberals who mistake internationalism for an end in itself. The right has retrenched in the face of Russian aggression in Europe, while the left has demonstrated a chronic allergy to deterring Iran and supporting Israel. Neither camp has committed to maintaining the military superiority or sustaining the alliances needed to contest revisionist powers. If the United States continues to retreat, its enemies will be only too happy to fill the void.

Trump would be wise to build his foreign policy on the enduring cornerstone of U.S. leadership: hard power. To reverse the neglect of military strength, his administration must commit to a significant and sustained increase in defense spending, generational investments in the defense industrial base, and urgent reforms to speed the United States' development of new capabilities and to expand allies' and partners' access to them.

As it takes these steps, the administration will face calls from within the Republican Party to give up on American primacy. It must reject them. To pretend that the United States can focus on just one threat at a time, that its credibility is divisible, or that it can afford to shrug off faraway chaos as irrelevant is to ignore its global interests and its adversaries' global designs. America will not be made great again by those who simply want to manage its decline.

A FALSE CHOICE

China poses the gravest long-term challenge to U.S. interests. But although successive presidents have acknowledged this reality, their actual policies have been inconsistent. Administrations have failed even to agree

on the basic objective of competition with China. Is it merely a race to produce more widgets? An opportunity to sell more American soybeans, semiconductors, solar panels, and electric vehicles? Or is it a contest over the future of the international order? The Trump administration must recognize the gravity of this geopolitical struggle and invest accordingly.

In so doing, it must not repeat the mistakes of President Barack Obama's so-called pivot to Asia. The Obama administration failed to back up its policy with sufficient investments in U.S. military power. Inverting the traditional relationship between strategy and budgets, it prioritized defense cuts for their own sake, abandoning the decades-long "two-war" construct of force planning. The bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011 compounded this mistake and harmed military readiness.

America will not be made great again by those who simply want to manage its decline.

Partners in Asia came to understand what the pivot meant for them: that they would receive a larger slice of a shrinking pie of American attention and capabilities. Partners in Europe, for their part, were not happy to see Washington ignore the Russian threat. Republicans who consider Ukraine a distraction from the Indo-Pacific should recall what happened the last time a president sought to reprioritize one region by withdrawing from another. In the Middle East, Obama's premature withdrawal from Iraq left a vacuum for Iran and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) to fill, and the ensuing chaos there consumed Washington for years. By 2014, as Obama struggled to consummate the pivot to Asia, dithered on the Middle East, and failed to enforce his own "redline" on Syria's use of chemical weapons, Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded eastern Ukraine and seized Crimea.

Standing up to China will require Trump to reject the myopic advice that he prioritize that challenge by abandoning Ukraine. A Russian victory would not only damage the United States' interest in European security and increase U.S. military requirements in Europe; it would also compound the threats from China, Iran, and North Korea. Indeed, hesitation in the face of Putin's aggression has already made these interconnected challenges more acute. The George W. Bush administration's failure to respond forcefully to Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008 was a missed opportunity to nip Russian aggression in the bud. Obama's "reset" with Russia doubled down on this miscalculation, snuffing out

hope for a concerted Western response to Russian aggression. In pursuit of arms control negotiations, he pulled his punches as Putin grew emboldened. This weakness continued in Obama's tepid response to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

Trump deserves credit for reversing the Obama administration's limitations on assistance to Ukraine and authorizing the transfer of lethal weapons to Kyiv. During the first Trump administration, the United States used force against Russia's ally Syria to at last enforce the redline against chemical weapons, killed hundreds of Russian mercenaries who threatened U.S. forces in Syria, and increased U.S. energy production to counter Russia's weaponization of its oil and gas reserves. But Trump sometimes undermined these tough policies through his words and deeds. He courted Putin, he treated allies and alliance commitments erratically and sometimes with hostility, and in 2019 he withheld $400 million in security assistance to Ukraine. These public episodes raised doubts about whether the United States was committed to standing up to Russian aggression, even when it actually did so.

Despite Biden's tough campaign rhetoric about Russia, his policy of détente with the Kremlin resembled Obama's reset. Immediately after taking office in 2021, Biden signed a five-year extension to the New START treaty, giving up leverage over Russia that he could have used to negotiate a better agreement and tying the United States' hands as nuclear threats from China and North Korea grew. In June of that year, he, too, withheld critical security assistance from Ukraine. And in August, he oversaw the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which no doubt encouraged Russia to further test the limits of American resolve. The Biden administration's apparent belief that Putin's imperial ambitions could be managed with arms control and U.S. restraint was not dissimilar to right-wing isolationists' misplaced interest in accommodating Russia.

As it became clear that Putin would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I urged Biden to offer meaningful lethal aid to Ukraine and expand the U.S. military footprint in Europe. But the president demurred. Even after the invasion, the Biden administration's assistance to Ukraine was beset by hesitation, needless restrictions, and endless deliberation. These delays repeatedly ceded the initiative to Moscow and diluted the effectiveness of U.S. aid, prolonging the conflict and diminishing Kyiv's negotiating leverage. The weakness of the Biden administration's policies was drowned out by frenzied attention to some

Republicans' objections to supporting Ukraine. Their misguided opposition delayed passage of the "national security supplemental," but when the chips were down, Senate Republicans overwhelmingly supported the measure, as did many Republicans in the House. Congress passed the supplemental in April 2024. And not a single Republican legislator who voted for Ukraine lost a primary.

Despite legitimate misgivings about Biden's approach, a majority of my GOP colleagues appreciated that support for Ukraine is an investment in U.S. national security. They recognized that most of the money was going to the U.S. defense industrial base or military and that this security assistance, a mere fraction of the annual defense budget, was helping Ukraine degrade the military of a common adversary. But more work is required. For now, Putin's indifference to his own people's suffering has allowed him to increase his defense industrial base's capacity to pump arms and soldiers into Ukraine. His ability to do this in perpetuity is questionable; Russian victory is inevitable only if the West abandons Ukraine.

THE ALLIED ADVANTAGE

Trump will hear from neo-isolationists who discount the importance of American allies to American prosperity, ignore the need for the United States' credibility among fence sitters in critical regions, and misunderstand the basic requirements of the U.S. military to deter or win faraway conflicts. Their arguments elide the fact that the enemy gets a vote, too, and may decide to confront the United States simultaneously on multiple fronts, at which point allies become more valuable than ever.

In Europe, Trump will find encouraging progress. After major surges in their defense budgets, U.S. allies on the continent now spend 18 percent more than they did a year ago, a far greater increase than the United States'. More than two-thirds of NATO members now meet or exceed the alliance's target of spending at least two percent of GDP on defense. This progress is not without exception. One of the West's most glaring vulnerabilities to the influence of Russia—and China and Iran—is Hungary's self-abnegating obeisance to those countries.

But aside from this noisy exception, it is not lost on the United States' European allies that Trump called on them to take hard power and burden sharing more seriously. NATO allies are also buying American, and since January 2022 have ordered more than $185 billion of

modern U.S. weapons systems. But Trump will be right to encourage allies to do more. At the next NATO summit, allies should set a higher defense-spending target of three percent of GDP and commit to increasing their base budgets accordingly.

The most inconvenient truth for those calling on Trump to abandon Europe is that European allies recognize the growing links between China and Russia and increasingly see China as a "systemic rival." During a visit to the Philippines in 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen noted that "security in Europe and security in the Indo-Pacific is indivisible." U.S. allies in Asia understand the same thing. As Hsiao Bi-khim put it in 2023, when she was Taiwan's representative in Washington, "Ukraine's survival is Taiwan's survival."

Trump must reject the myopic advice that he prioritize China by abandoning Ukraine.

The unwillingness of the "Asia first" crowd to welcome European allies' progress is curious. They ignore a glaring need to work with allies to counter Chinese threats to shared interests, raising the question of whether they are really interested in contesting China after all. Some even seem to have seized on the need to counter China as a rationale for the United States to abdicate leadership everywhere else, suggesting that "Asia first" is merely an excuse for underlying isolationism.

These critics ignore the growing strategic alignment of China and Russia, Russia's own influence in Asia (including its increasingly capable Pacific fleet), and the inescapable reality that U.S. competition with both powers is global. In the Middle East, for example, Russia has undermined U.S. interests for years through its intervention in Syria and partnership with Iran. Putin's use of Iranian attack drones in Ukraine should have come as no surprise: the West's collective failure to stand up to Iran earlier has allowed it to become a more powerful partner to China and Russia. Beyond embracing Iran, the two countries have also sought to deepen their relationship with traditional U.S. partners in the region.

China has for years sought to drive a wedge between the United States and its partners. It is tragic that the "Asia first" crowd would so obviously play into Beijing's hands, just as previous administrations that had turned their back on allies in the Middle East opened the door to Chinese influence in that critical region.

HOLIDAY FROM HARD POWER

The U.S. government spends nearly $900 billion annually on defense, but considering the total amount of federal spending, the challenges facing the United States, the country's global military requirements, and the return on investment in hard power, this is not nearly enough. Defense is projected to account for 12.8 percent of federal spending in 2025, less than the share devoted to servicing the national debt. And each year, a larger portion of the defense budget pays for things other than weapons; nearly 45 percent of it now goes toward pay and benefits.

The situation is grave. According to an estimate by the American Enterprise Institute that rightly incorporates the paramilitary functions of China's space program and coast guard, China spends $711 billion a year on its military. And in March 2024, Chinese officials announced a 7.2 percent increase in defense spending. The Biden administration, by contrast, requested real-dollar cuts to military spending year after year. If defense budgets cannot even keep up with inflation, how can Washington keep up with the "pacing threat" of China?

Moreover, because its immediate military objectives are focused on countering the United States in the Indo-Pacific, China, unlike the United States, mainly needs to allocate resources to its own backyard. The requirements of global power projection necessarily spread U.S. defense expenditures far thinner. Although bipartisan recognition of U.S. interests in Asia is welcome, it is reckless for U.S. politicians to visit Taipei or talk tough about China if they are unwilling to invest in the capabilities necessary to back up U.S. commitments.

The United States needs a military that can handle multiple increasingly coordinated threats at once. Without one, a president will likely hesitate to expend limited resources on one threat at the expense of others, thereby ceding initiative or victory to an adversary. The United States must get back to budgets that are informed by strategy and a force-planning construct that imagines fighting more than one war at once.

And yet for years, congressional opponents of military spending absurdly insisted that there be parity between increases in defense spending and increases in nondefense discretionary spending, holding military power hostage to pet political projects. Meanwhile, domestic mandatory spending skyrocketed, and massive expenditures that circumvented the annual bipartisan appropriations process, such as the ironically named Inflation Reduction Act, included not a penny for defense.

Ready to rumble: a joint military exercise between China and Southeast Asian countries in Zhanjiang, China, November 2023

Isolationists on both ends of the political spectrum unwittingly validate this artifice when they peddle the fiction that military superiority is cost-prohibitive or even provocative, that the United States must accept decline as inevitable, or even that the effects of waning influence won't be that bad. Calls for "disentanglement," "leading from behind," and "hard prioritization"—amplified by historical amnesia—amount to defeatism. The United States' security and prosperity are rooted in military primacy. Preserving that decisive superiority is costly, but neglecting it comes with far steeper costs.

Past levels of U.S. defense spending put today's needs into perspective. During World War II, U.S. defense spending hit 37 percent of GDP. During the Korean War, it reached 13.8 percent. At the height of the Vietnam War, in 1968, it stood at 9.1 percent. The defense buildup under President Ronald Reagan, which followed a low of 4.5 percent of GDP during the Carter administration, peaked at only 6 percent. In 2023, the United States spent 3 percent of GDP on defense.

During this American holiday from hard power, China and Russia have invested in asymmetric capabilities to offset the U.S. military edge. Today, their munitions in many categories can outrange U.S. versions, and their production can outpace the United States'. This is to say nothing of

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their numerical advantage in key platforms, from missiles to surface vessels. Quantity has a quality of its own. What's more, the wars of the future may well last longer and require far more munitions than policymakers have assumed, as both Israeli and Ukrainian munitions-expenditure rates suggest. U.S. stockpiles are insufficient to meet such a demand. For years, the military services have shortchanged munitions in favor of new weapons systems and platforms. This is not to downplay the need to modernize major weapons systems but to highlight the harmful tradeoffs imposed by inadequate defense budgets.

If the United States finds itself embroiled in conflict in a far-flung theater, it will also have difficulty resupplying its forces. China, for one, intends to contest U.S. logistical supply lines. This reality, combined with the possibility of being challenged in different parts of the world simultaneously, doesn't just require building larger inventories of platforms and munitions. It also requires ensuring that such capabilities are pre-positioned in multiple theaters. That, in turn, requires securing basing, access, and overflight rights—yet another argument for strengthening U.S. alliances globally.

Thanks to Republican efforts, the national security supplemental included necessary investments to expand the production capacity of key items, such as solid rocket motors, needed for long-range munitions and interceptors. But my efforts with Susan Collins, the vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to expand this investment beyond the Biden administration's request faced the same headwinds as our annual campaign to build bipartisan support for greater overall defense spending. In fiscal year 2023, congressional Republicans overcame Democrats' insistence on parity between defense and nondefense discretionary spending. That was a step in the right direction, but Democrats need to permanently abandon this misguided obsession. The demands of U.S. national security are not political bargaining chips.

Progress on this front begins with real increases in defense spending. In 2018, the Commission on the National Defense Strategy—a bipartisan group of defense experts established by Congress—stressed that preserving the United States' military edge would require sustained real growth in the defense budget of between three percent and five percent. By 2024, the commission, noting the worsening threats, called that range a "bare minimum" and advocated budgets big enough to "support efforts commensurate with the U.S. national effort seen during the Cold War."

The Trump administration must heed the commission's warning. To pay for increased defense budgets, it should take an axe to extravagant

nondefense discretionary spending and tackle the unsustainable level of mandatory spending on entitlements that is driving the deficit. It should also reform an overly burdensome economic regulatory environment to counteract these drags with higher growth and revenue.

THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY

At the same time, the United States must tend to its atrophied defense industrial base. The Pentagon, Congress, and industry all deserve blame for its sorry state. The Defense Department and Congress have sent inconsistent demand signals to industry, which has discouraged companies from investing in expanded production capacities and resilient supply chains. To solve the problem, administrations must submit defense-budget requests that are big enough to meet the United States' true military needs. Congress must pass appropriations bills on time. If it doesn't, the resulting "continuing resolutions"—temporary measures to keep the federal government funded—delay contracts and prohibit new program starts.

Congress has given the Pentagon the authority to sign multiyear procurement contracts—which limit the uncertainty sometimes caused by the annual appropriations process—for certain critical munitions. This approach and the money to back it up should both be extended to other long-range munitions and missile defense interceptors for which long-term demand is nearly certain. To expand production capacity, the Pentagon can also use the Defense Production Act, a 1950 law that allows the government to prioritize and steer resources toward the production of goods for national defense. Unfortunately, recent administrations have used this authority for purposes that have nothing to do with national security. Biden, for instance, invoked it for the production of solar panels. It is past time to put the "defense" back into the Defense Production Act.

But industry cannot simply wait for the government to invest. I am sympathetic to companies' frustrations with a slow federal bureaucracy and an inconsistent Congress, but only to a point. It should be obvious to private-sector leaders that the need for air and missile defense interceptors, long-range munitions, and other critical weapons is steadily rising and unlikely to abate anytime soon. The demand is inevitable. Industry should be leaning forward to meet it. Trump should put the Pentagon and the defense industry on notice about the need to act.

Bureaucracy has also stifled innovation even when its military utility is obvious. The Defense Department is to be commended for its Replicator Initiative, a program designed to hasten the adoption of emerging military technologies, but creating an entirely new acquisition process raises the question of why the Pentagon doesn't just fix its existing one. The department must figure out how to adopt and integrate disruptive technologies as soon as possible, or else the military will find itself on the receiving end of smarter, cheaper, more autonomous unmanned systems fielded by adversaries moving faster than the speed of bureaucracy.

Just the contracting process for weapons—to say nothing of actually building them—moves unbelievably slowly. For weapons systems that cost more than $100 million, it takes an average of more than ten months between releasing a final solicitation for bids and awarding a contract. Foreign military sales move even slower: it takes an average of 18 months for American partners to get U.S. weapons under contract. The Biden administration made a halfhearted attempt to reform the foreign military sales process, but making it more efficient needs to be a joint priority for the secretary of defense and secretary of state. The arsenal of democracy will not endure if the United States' own inefficiencies—or the opposition of vocal minorities in Congress—dissuade vulnerable allies from buying American.

Tariffs have strained relationships with allies and tested the patience of American consumers.

The Trump administration should consider dramatically streamlining the process for commonly used munitions or preemptively building up inventories for export. The military should also consider maintaining larger stockpiles of weapons that can be more easily shared with allies and partners in times of crisis. Once the shooting starts, the time to build production capacity has passed.

To build an allied coalition of cutting-edge forces that can work together seamlessly, the United States must also be willing to share more technology. AUKUS, the United States' security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom, can be a model for greater technology sharing with other trustworthy allies and partners. Defense-technology transfer isn't an act of charity; increasingly, it is a two-way street, with allies such as Australia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Norway, South Korea, and Sweden bringing cutting-edge capabilities to the table. The United

States should expand coproduction with its allies and encourage them to produce interoperable capabilities, thereby reducing costs, shoring up inventories, improving supply chain resilience, and enhancing collective capacity to compete with China.

THE ECONOMIC ELEMENT

The United States would be foolish to compete with China by itself. U.S. allies and partners represent a significant share of the global economy. It would be simply unaffordable to replicate all their supply chains domestically.

Obama deserves credit for negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership with U.S. allies in Asia, and I do not regret working with him to overcome the objections of protectionist Democrats in Congress. Beyond lowering trade barriers and expanding market access for U.S. companies, the agreement was designed to establish favorable rules of the road for international trade in a critical region of the world. The parties to the proposed agreement represented 40 percent of the global economy. But rather than strengthen and harness the power of Western economies, the first Trump administration and then the Biden administration sometimes actively antagonized them, including with tariffs that have strained relationships with allies and tested the patience of American consumers. This abdication was an invitation for China to expand its economic influence in Asia at the United States' expense.

There is plenty of evidence that the globalist optimism of the 1990s was unfounded. Welcoming China and Russia into the World Trade Organization has not transformed their governments or economies, at least not in ways beneficial to the free world. Rather, both countries have exploited and undermined this and other international economic institutions. I am not naive about the downsides of international trade, but there is no question that free markets and free trade have been responsible for much of the United States' prosperity. That's why the United States and like-minded free-market economies must work together to reform the international trading system to protect U.S. interests from predatory trade practices—not abandon the system entirely. Without U.S. leadership in this area, there is little question that Beijing will be able to rewrite the rules of trade on its own terms.

Although flagging military primacy is the most glaring impediment to national security, the United States cannot neglect the role of foreign aid, either. As the former chair of the Senate appropriations

subcommittee responsible for foreign assistance, I take seriously James Mattis's admonition when he was head of U.S. Central Command that if Congress shortchanged diplomacy and foreign aid, he would "need to buy more ammunition." Unfortunately, these important tools of American power are increasingly divorced from American strategic interests. It is past time to integrate foreign assistance more deliberately into great-power competition—for example, by working with allies to present credible alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

NO TIME TO TURN INWARD

In January 1934, William Borah, a Republican senator from Idaho and an outspoken isolationist, addressed a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Because peace had prevailed for 15 years following the end of World War I, Borah argued, global military spending was excessive. Tensions between European powers, he insisted, could not be solved by outsiders: "It will be a long time, I venture to believe, before there will be any necessity or any justification for the United States engaging in a foreign war."

Of course, by the end of the 1930s, the Nazi conquest of Europe had driven a dramatic swing in U.S. public opinion away from Borah's isolationist daydream. By May 1940, as German forces invaded France, 94 percent of Americans supported any and all necessary investments in national defense. By June, more than 70 percent favored the draft.

The United States saw the light during World War II. But must it take another conquest of a close ally before the country turns its belated attention to the requirements of national defense? Isolation is no better a strategy today than it was on the eve of World War II. Today, in fact, in the face of linked threats even more potent than the Axis powers, a failure to uphold U.S. primacy would be even more catastrophically absurd than was the refusal to assume that responsibility 85 years ago. The last time around, the naive abdication of the requirements of national defense made reviving the arsenal of democracy on a short timeline unnecessarily difficult. As Admiral Harold Stark, then the chief of naval operations, observed in 1940, "Dollars cannot buy yesterday."

The United States urgently needs to reach a bipartisan consensus on the centrality of hard power to U.S. foreign policy. This fact must override both left-wing faith in hollow internationalism and right-wing flirtation with isolation and decline. The time to restore American hard power is now.

Migration Can Work for All

A Plan for Replacing a Broken Global System

AMY POPE

Across the world, a backlash to immigration is remaking politics. In election after election, voters have backed candidates who promise to do whatever is necessary to stop the flow of unauthorized arrivals and, in many cases, send millions back to their countries of origin, no matter how war-torn or desperate. Anti-immigrant politicians and activists spread disinformation to suggest that countries are being invaded by waves of undocumented migrants. Images of migrant caravans, rickety boats at sea, and chaos at borders suggest that authorities have lost control of the migration system as a whole. With these images repeated on social media and anti-immigrant views gaining traction with the general public, even politicians normally sympathetic to immigration have found themselves recalibrating and on the defensive.

These politics reflect the reality that, globally, irregular immigration—entering a country without prior authorization—is at historic levels.

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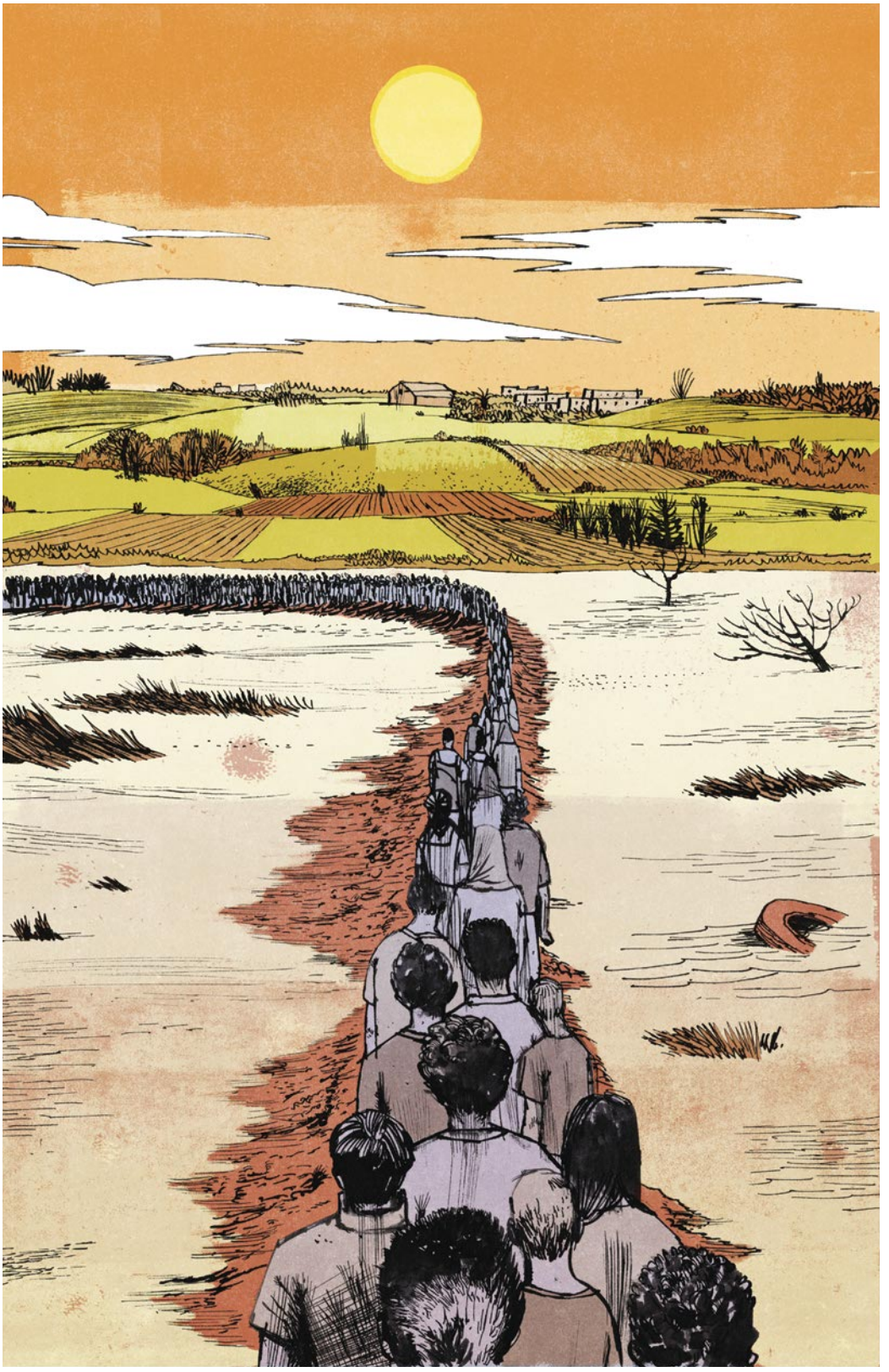

Illustration by Matt Rota

Americans are familiar with the record number of attempted crossings of the U.S.-Mexican border: nearly 2.5 million in 2023 alone, compared with less than half a million a year at the beginning of the millennium. But that surge is not unique to the United States. In Europe, the number of unauthorized border crossings climbed to 380,000 in 2023, the highest since 2016. In other areas of the world, even where hostility to immigrants is more pronounced and, in some cases, even violent, migrants continue to risk death and abuse to enter a country, often because they know work is available.

Immigration does not have to be a zero-sum proposition.

The fact that the phenomenon is so global also points to the problem with policy responses that aim to crack down on particular borders or in individual countries: today's unprecedented levels of migration make plain that a decrepit, outdated system, built in the wake of World War II, is incapable of contending with today's humanitarian needs, demographic trends, or labor-market demands.

States that focus on border restrictions, mass deportations, or the abrogation of legal protections for asylum seekers will fail to solve the problem. They will simply redirect it while creating a new host of problems that will, in the long term, feed the problem rather than solve it. They will empower criminal networks and black markets while leaving their own economies worse off. The system will continue to decay.

Instead of short-term hard-line responses, the better and ultimately more successful route is to build a new system that can replace the old one and effectively address today's challenges. That new system must start from the premise that migration is a permanent feature of human civilization—in fact, border management and standardized passports are relatively new phenomena—and that there is a way to manage the movement of people in a manner that is orderly, dignified, and advantageous to all parties. That would mean both supporting development in migrants' countries of origin and making legal immigration channels accessible and efficient.

Failure to immediately begin work on this new system will mean more social unrest, more inequality, and more abuse and exploitation of the most vulnerable. A new system could reduce the sense of disorder and lack of border control that has upended politics, and it would also create more opportunities for migrants, as well as for citizens of destination countries. It could enable the refugee system to work

as intended, restoring credibility to the asylum system. Contrary to much of the current public discourse, immigration does not have to be a zero-sum proposition.

WHO GETS IN?

For many high-income countries, the current approach to legal immigration that allows migrants to enter through family reunification and through labor visas is not only bureaucratic but also untethered to the evolving demands of their labor markets. Job openings that migrants could fill, especially in lower skilled sectors, are often not filled. There aren't enough labor visas available to meet workforce demand, but the number of people who can seek asylum is not capped. The asylum process is easily accessible for those who make it to the border, so it should come as no surprise, then, that people are using asylum processes as a way to enter the labor force.

In the United States, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act established the type and number of labor visas available to employers. The act set the cap for H-2B visas, the main visa for low-skilled nonagricultural workers, at 66,000 per year. The demand for H-2B visas, however, has rocketed since the program's inception, and the industries supposed to benefit from them have faced unprecedented labor shortages in the last several years. Yet the U.S. government has been unable to respond beyond allowing modest but temporary increases in the cap, creating legal employment opportunities for only a fraction of the foreign workers that U.S. industries rely on.

Even the process for acquiring the H-2A agricultural visa, which is not capped, has bureaucratic hurdles that limit its widespread use. With concerted, sustained efforts, the program has helped bring in more seasonal farm workers from Mexico in authorized rather than unauthorized ways, but it has proved to be challenging for farm workers from elsewhere to access these visas. A smarter labor-migration scheme would tie visa quotas to labor-market shortages and reevaluate those quotas frequently; it would also pair those visas to markets, extending beyond Mexico and into Central America, in which high numbers of migrants currently fill jobs. Yet political disagreements have prevented Congress from modernizing the 1965 legislation, allocating appropriate resources, and correcting this disconnect.

Many European countries have prioritized attracting high-skilled workers, with very few provisions to admit lower-skilled ones. Not

surprisingly, many of these countries, such as Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, now face labor shortages in service sectors such as construction, hospitality, and health care without clear pathways to meet those needs.

At the same time, nearly all countries grant wide-ranging access and protections for people classified as "refugees"—that is, those who are fleeing persecution because of "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion," in the words of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which counts 149 states as parties. Not only are refugees admitted to safer countries without any assessment of the skills they have or the needs of the country welcoming them but, as stipulated in the convention, they also have a right to jobs, housing, education, travel documents, and social protections. Accordingly, even people who cross a border without authorization can avail themselves of these protections if they request asylum and their refugee claims are validated.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has estimated that more than 43 million people worldwide currently qualify as refugees. The definition of "refugee" as detailed in the convention and its subsequent protocol can be traced back to World War II, when millions of Europeans were displaced. Although modern refugee and asylum policy has evolved only slightly over the last eight decades, its foundational tenets remain relevant and essential. It has undoubtedly saved millions of lives.

The need for these protections is more critical than ever, and the right to seek asylum must remain sacrosanct. Yet under the current rules, many people who are forced by circumstance to relocate do not actually qualify as refugees. In 2023, climate-related disasters displaced a record 26.4 million people, more than those displaced by conflict. Many affected countries, such as those across the Sahel and the eastern Horn of Africa, are already economically and politically fragile, and there is little government support for families who must choose between moving and starving.

Likewise, the number of people who move to escape poverty vastly outstrips the number who qualify as refugees. Many migrants face acute, often life-threatening risks in their home countries but because of the current binary approach to individuals fleeing crises—you either qualify as a "refugee" under current laws or you don't—hundreds of millions of desperate people are either ignored or demonized.

A BROKEN SYSTEM

For those on the move in search of stability, safety, or better opportunities, the legal channels available to migrate are few. The result has been a surge in irregular immigration and an overreliance on seeking asylum. The established systems for resettling refugees in safe countries are woefully inadequate to meet demand. Even the United States—which has the largest program, admitting more than 100,000 refugees in 2024—does not take in a fraction of the qualifying refugees who apply for asylum.

Over the last several years, growing numbers of people have been crossing borders—whether by land, sea, or air—and seeking asylum once they arrive in their destination country. Europe witnessed a dramatic surge in 2015 as Syrians fled their country's civil war. Although applications decreased sharply in subsequent years, the number of applications is again on the rise. In the last 20 years, asylum applications in the United States have increased from less than 100,000 a year to more than 500,000 a year. Even at the U.S.-Mexican border, far fewer people are seeking to evade detection than in years past. Instead, they are walking up to the border, presenting themselves to border patrol officials, and requesting asylum.

Yet while more people are seeking asylum, less than half will qualify for it. But even if they fail to establish an asylum case, applicants often find a viable route to live and work in the destination country for years before immigration authorities make a final determination on their case. In the United States, the asylum backlog has now reached three million cases. Complicated cases have taken as long as seven years to be resolved.

Some countries, such as France, Germany, and Greece, have shortened asylum processing times. Still, an asylum seeker's right to appeal can add years to the clock. In many countries, applicants can work, find housing, and put down roots while their cases wend their way through the system. Many of those who are not granted work permits simply disappear into their country of destination, finding work in the informal sector, where they are often underpaid and exploited. The success of so many applicants who enter and stay in a country of destination through this irregular pathway incentivizes others to attempt the same route, adding to the overburdened asylum docket and further slowing the adjudication of new applications.

This inefficient system also traps many applicants in limbo, preventing them from returning home for fear they will not be able to

come back. Applicants with legitimate asylum claims can wait years before they have the status and stability they need to build a future. For those who start new lives but eventually do not qualify for asylum, deportation can be traumatic and destabilizing. It is also expensive and time-consuming for the deporting governments; as a result, millions stay unlawfully.

HUMAN RESOURCES

In addition to harming migrants, this broken migration system is fueling a political backlash. More and more governments are embracing restrictive policies. Some are rolling back asylum protections. In 2024, both Finland and Poland passed legislation that allows border officials to turn back asylum seekers at their land borders. The United States has also significantly restricted its asylum protections for those seeking refuge at its land borders. And South Africa is contemplating withdrawing from the Refugee Convention altogether.

Ironically, this anti-immigration wave is hitting at the same time that immigration is becoming more essential than ever. Global fertility rates have dropped from 5.3 births per woman in 1963 to 2.3 in 2021. When the asylum system was set up, in 1951, many of the most advanced countries in the world were experiencing a baby boom. Veterans flooded the workforce, and the demographic trend meant there were plenty of workers to meet economic needs for decades into the future. Today, many societies are experiencing the opposite trend. By 2050, nearly 40 percent of the population in Japan and in South Korea will be over the age of 65. Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain also have fast aging populations. Governmental efforts to encourage families to have more babies have largely failed, as have attempts to replace work often done by migrants, such as elder care, with artificial intelligence. Thirty of the largest economies in the world suffer from labor shortages, and those unfilled jobs cost an estimated $1.3 trillion in lost GDP in 2023 alone.

Because there has been little political appetite to modernize immigration systems to meet the demand for low-skilled labor, the shortages are being filled by people who migrate irregularly. In the United States alone, about five percent of the overall workforce is undocumented, and in industries such as agriculture, construction, and food service, the percentage runs much higher. These workers are contributing to economic progress, but they are also more vulnerable

to abuse and exploitation and are more likely to depress wages and working conditions for workers who are citizens. In the agricultural sector, employers pay undocumented workers as much as 24 percent less than they pay authorized workers. These lower wages can incentivize employers who already face difficulties in recruiting workers to become overly reliant on those who are undocumented.

At tremendous risk, many migrants depend on smugglers to help them find work abroad. Since 2014, nearly 3,000 migrants have died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexican border, with hundreds more dying in the Caribbean and in the Darién jungle connecting South America and Central America. During that same period, more than 30,000 migrant deaths have been recorded in the Mediterranean, one of the most dangerous migrant routes in the world.

In the meantime, criminal networks are flourishing. There is a high demand for entry to more stable, economically prosperous countries, and the fewer legal pathways there are, the more profitable smuggling becomes. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime has estimated that as many as three million migrants are smuggled every year, bringing in as much as $10 billion a year for the smugglers, who charge up to several thousand dollars for a single client. In many cases, whole communities help foot the bill, knowing that some of these migrants' wages will eventually come back as remittances.

GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR

Given the current anti-immigration mood, revising the Refugee Convention to expand access and protection to a greater number of people is a political nonstarter. Worse, such a move could risk rolling back the refugee and asylum protections that remain critical for tens of millions of vulnerable people. Yet without a modernized approach to the movement of asylum seekers, increasingly negative public perceptions of immigration may cause governments to chip away at these protections. Governments need to adopt an approach that recognizes the link between development and migration: lack of development fuels migration, but migration also fuels development in source and destination countries.

The evidence is overwhelming that poverty is a key driver of the recent and unprecedented uptick in irregular immigration. As recently as 2008, more than 90 percent of the people stopped at the U.S.-Mexican border were Mexicans. Seventeen years later, as the

Mexican economy has grown, only around one-third of the migrants trying to cross the border without authorization are Mexican, and there are many more families and unaccompanied minors. Today, those apprehended hail from more than 100 countries, with growing numbers from poor communities in places such as Bangladesh, China, and India. Many are fleeing poverty, which in many parts of the world has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and a changing climate.

Even those migrants moving from conflict-ridden Afghanistan, Syria, and Venezuela increasingly cite the lack of economic opportunity at home as their primary reason for leaving. One Venezuelan migrant I met in Mexico last spring told me that she had worked as an office administrator in a primary school and had survived the upheaval wrought by the economic collapse of the country in 2015. But as inflation and other economic pressures increased, she was no longer able to afford health care for her ailing mother. In 2024, she finally decided to leave Venezuela with her entire family, with the hope of reaching the United States. Her husband and her sons carried her mother in a bed sheet through the Darién jungle. Sadly, her mother did not survive the trip, dying shortly after reaching Mexico.

HELP WANTED

For the millions of people around the world suffering from the effects of poverty, climate change, and violence, the response of the aid community has been to rely on official development assistance in sectors such as health care, education, infrastructure, and agriculture. Legal immigration has been an underutilized tool. Migrants' remittances already significantly boost developing economies; in 2022, migrants sent home over $831 billion. Creating opportunities for vulnerable people to migrate legally and secure formal work can empower them to rely more on their own capacity and less on aid.

That so many migrants who are undocumented find jobs in the informal markets of their destination countries signals an imbalance between legal immigration pathways and economic need, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and healthcare services. The United States, for example, relies on migrants entering irregularly to meet over 70 percent of its agricultural labor needs. Nearly one in five workers on dairy farms is an immigrant. During the early days of the pandemic, the share of meatpacking

workers who were foreign born stood at 45 percent, 28 percentage points higher than the average share for all industries combined. Without migrant farm workers, the United States would not enjoy a stable food supply.

Similar but less stark trends have been confirmed in construction and health care, sectors in which the demand for labor will likely only grow. In Spain, for example, a baby boom that lasted from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s created a generation of Spaniards who are now nearing the end of their careers. Over the next 20 years, some 14 million people in Spain will retire, and there are not enough workers to replace them. Boosting GDP enough to provide pensions for these retirees will require expanding immigration. Spain's central bank has estimated that filling the projected labor shortfall will require around 25 million immigrants over the next 30 years.

Restrictive immigration policies empower criminal networks and black markets.

There are some promising programs that demonstrate how to address labor shortfalls through immigration. Since 2021, India has signed bilateral migration deals with Australia, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. These accords create legal immigration channels, aligning visa quotas with workforce needs, especially in high-demand sectors such as agriculture, health care, and construction. They also include provisions for skills training in the countries of origin for migrants, so they are better prepared for those key industries.

Another forward-looking approach comes from, of all places, the right-leaning government of Italy. In 2023, despite having campaigned on a hard-line approach to immigration, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced adjustments to the country's immigration policies to allow in more foreign workers to address labor shortages. Over the next three years, Italy will admit more than 450,000 new workers to meet demand in various sectors, including agriculture, health care, and caregiving, in exchange for the origin country's agreement to accept back migrants who entered the country irregularly and do not have a legal right to stay.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, an unprecedented effort by European countries to share responsibility for the union's external borders, presents another promising model. In addition to improving border management by protecting security while preserving the

safety and rights of those crossing borders, the agreement calls for the recruitment of foreign talent to meet the EU's labor-market needs.

WIN-WIN

With the right systems in place, all parties—migrants, their countries of origin, and their host countries—can benefit. To get there, high-income countries should direct development funds toward skills training for workers that will prepare would-be migrants for high-demand industries. Such targeted aid would benefit the country receiving the aid by boosting the skills of its own workforce, in addition to ensuring that a migrant is also ready for work in a destination country.

The first step is for destination countries to analyze their own labor-market gaps and, if needed, change their policies to ensure a better alignment between skills shortages and visas, as Italy is now doing. They should also map current trends in irregular migration and share this information with aid agencies, which should use it to prioritize skills training in source countries.

The development arms of governments must then work with organizations on the ground to ensure that the most vulnerable communities have access to regular migration opportunities. Bangladesh, for instance, is now home to many technical schools where would-be migrants learn how to fix cars or take care of children, helping them build skills they can use in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Since 2013, Germany has had an initiative to train and recruit nurses in other countries. The program doesn't just benefit the nurses; it also fills labor gaps in the German health-care sector and creates much-needed additional skilled workers in the origin countries.

Long-term strategies on the part of rich destination countries should focus on training or retraining workers from poorer source countries. Collaborative projects between the imaging company Planet Labs and the International Organization for Migration are helping identify agricultural and pastoral communities most likely to be displaced by climate change. This data-driven approach enables governments and aid organizations working in vulnerable communities to take proactive measures, such as improving water management and teaching more efficient agricultural techniques, that help people succeed and remain in their home countries while also imparting new skills linked to future job opportunities for those who will choose to move.

In places where jobs are scarce, development organizations must ensure that workers who have been trained in new skills are able to access employment abroad through legal channels. The market works reasonably well in connecting high-skilled workers to job opportunities around the globe. Low-skilled workers, by contrast, are not able to land jobs as readily through ethical, safe, and legal pathways. But there are some promising fixes in the works. In 2023, for example, Australia and Tuvalu, an island north of Fiji, established a pilot labor-mobility program that addresses the threat of rising sea levels in Tuvalu while easing labor demands in Australia. Australia committed $110 million to Tuvalu for various infrastructure projects, including coastal adaptation and telecommunications, and established a special visa pathway allowing up to 280 Tuvaluans per year to live, work, and study in Australia. Such efforts could be scaled up around the world by using data analytics to identify at-risk communities before large-scale displacement occurs.

High-income countries should also invest in apprenticeships and temporary or seasonal migration programs. Such efforts can foster innovation and progress in migrants' home countries far more effectively than can traditional assistance projects. For countries that have diaspora communities across the globe, encouraging the diaspora to invest in development programs and skills building can enhance local skills training and services. Finland, for example, has an initiative that temporarily deploys Finnish-Somali health-care professionals to Somalia.

The world needs workers to be trained in their country of origin so that they can readily access jobs in host countries, send home remittances, and eventually bring their skills back home to fuel development there. And vulnerable migrants need to be able to access safe and legal immigration pathways when necessary. Officials should not assume that the labor market, left to its own devices, will protect migrant workers or support the communities that host them. Governments must make investments in migrant protections, empower civil society organizations and unions to play a monitoring role, and enforce labor laws.

Likewise, local officials, community leaders, and the private sector in destination countries must ensure that there are sufficient services to meet the demands of a growing population—and that migrants receive the support they need to integrate successfully in their host country. When immigration is poorly managed, communities feel

the tension. Yet when local officials receive the support and resources required to manage immigration, they are often the first to express their support for newcomers.

Finally, to make the regular pathways to immigration more attractive than the irregular pathways, countries must enforce their borders, including by deporting migrants who do not qualify for asylum or other protection; immigration authorities should process these deportations quickly and carry them out quickly, treating deportees with dignity. By encouraging migrants to rely on regular, legal pathways, current asylum systems will be able to help fulfill their original purpose by responding to refugees more effectively.

THE PROMISE OF MIGRATION

In recent years, it has become evident that public perceptions of migrants are often as outdated as the regulations that oversee immigration. By restricting immigration, countries across the globe, rich and poor alike, are missing critical opportunities to boost economic growth and social unity. The world's most vulnerable people, meanwhile, are left unprotected.

To realize the promise of migration, policymakers need to overhaul the system. Every country has the right to manage its own borders and decide who can remain in the country lawfully. But rather than spending tens of billions of dollars annually exclusively on border enforcement, which has limited effectiveness (particularly when migrants seek asylum and do not try to evade detection), governments must invest in an approach that links immigration trends with labor-market needs and development gaps.

Migration can work for all. States must build a system that takes advantage of the global marketplace and empowers people to connect with opportunities for security and prosperity. Newly skilled individuals must be able to take advantage of safe and legal immigration opportunities and then reinvest their resources into fueling development in their communities of origin.

The politics of migration seem almost impossibly fraught. But countries must pursue strategies to address their looming labor shortages. Doing so will also help address some of the world's most persistent development and humanitarian challenges, taking pressure off the desperate people who now see irregular immigration as their only way to survive.

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The Race to Lead the Quantum Future

How the Next Computing Revolution Will Transform the Global Economy and Upend National Security

CHARINA CHOU, JAMES MANYIKA, AND HARTMUT NEVEN

Over the last several years, as rapid advances in artificial intelligence have gained enormous public attention and critical scrutiny, another crucial technology has been evolving largely out of public view. Once confined to the province of abstract theory, quantum computing seeks to use operations based on quantum mechanics to crack computational problems that were previously considered unsolvable. Although the technology is still in its infancy, it is already clear that quantum computing could have profound implications for national security and the global economy in the decades to come.

Since the late 2010s, the United States and many other advanced countries have become increasingly involved in the race for leadership

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Illustration by Keith Negley

in quantum information science and technology, a field that encompasses quantum computing, quantum communications, and quantum sensing. Over the last decade, governments in 20 countries have announced investments in quantum development totaling more than $40 billion worldwide; China alone has committed to spend $15.3 billion over five years. In 2016, Beijing designated the development of quantum technologies as a national priority, and it has created advanced hubs for production. For its part, the United States, in 2018, enacted the National Quantum Initiative, legislation aimed at maintaining the country's technological and scientific lead in quantum information and its applications. The U.S. government has announced $3.7 billion in unclassified funding, plus more funding for defense research and development. In addition to government-led initiatives, multiple research and development efforts are underway in the private sector and academia.

Quantum machines could unlock breakthroughs rivaling those now projected to come from AI.

Although these investments are still dwarfed by U.S. and international funding for AI, the rise of quantum technology has already begun to shape international policy. In 2019, the United States announced a bilateral "statement on quantum cooperation" with Japan, which the U.S. government strengthened in 2023. And in 2024, Washington established a multilateral initiative called the Quantum Development Group to coordinate strategies for advancing and managing the new technology. The United States has also discussed quantum issues within various economic and security forums, including AUKUS, the trilateral defense pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; the Quad, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; and the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council. Underscoring the growing concerns about the technology in Washington, one analyst for the Center for a New American Security argued in November, following the U.S. presidential election, that the incoming administration must "act quickly during the first 100 days to reinvigorate America's quantum competitiveness."

Thus far, the advent of quantum technology has been perceived largely as a national security issue. Since the 1990s, researchers have

recognized that one of the greatest threats posed by a powerful quantum computer is its potential as a code-breaking tool, capable of penetrating the encryption used by the most advanced communication systems and digital networks around the world today. This concern has spurred the U.S. government to develop and advocate for the adoption of quantum-resistant cryptography, strengthen export controls on quantum technology and related products, and build action-oriented partnerships with industry, academia, and local governments.

But the focus on code breaking has led policymakers to ignore other important applications of quantum technology. In fact, before quantum machines are able to crack advanced encryption systems—a capability that will require enormous computational power even after the technology is developed—they could have a transformational effect in many sectors of the economy, including energy and pharmaceuticals. Effectively harnessed, quantum technologies could spur innovation, scientific discovery, economic growth, and opportunity. In sheer human impact, some of the breakthroughs that could be unlocked by quantum machines rival those that are now projected to come from AI. For this reason, it is especially important that the technology is developed in open societies, with clear guardrails in place to ensure that it is used for benevolent purposes.

Winning the quantum race will not be easy. China has already taken the lead in some areas such as quantum communications, and in the coming years, focused American innovation and leadership will be critical to maintain U.S. competitiveness. The United States and its international partners will need to commit far more resources to bring their quantum projects to fruition, and they will have to develop quantum industries and a strong quantum supply chain to support these projects. If the United States and its allies fail to make these efforts a central strategic goal and policymaking priority, they could lose diplomatic influence, military might, and the ability to provide oversight of a powerful new technology. They could also miss out on the chance to forge a new path for economic and societal progress.

EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

The concept of a quantum computer was first proposed by the theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman in 1981.

Feynman came of age during the dawn of quantum mechanics, when scientists began to recognize that atoms, electrons, light, and other sub-nanoscale objects—building blocks for everything in the universe—obey fundamentally different rules than the objects of everyday life. Unlike, for example, a ball, which follows the straightforward rules of classical mechanics, electrons behave simultaneously as particles and waves, and their location cannot be exactly defined.

Feynman's insight was that to truly understand the quantum mechanical world—and the general workings of the universe itself—it would be necessary to build a computer that operates according to the same laws. "Nature isn't classical, dammit," he said, "and if you want to make a simulation of nature, you'd better make it quantum mechanical." Feynman's insight has turned out to be prescient. In the more than four decades since, computers following the "classical" design have utterly transformed the planet: pocket-sized mobile phones today are a million times as powerful as the hulking desktop personal computers of the 1980s. Moore's law—the prediction that the number of transistors on a computer chip would double every two years—has continued to broadly hold true in the semiconductor industry, despite multiple predictions of its demise. And the best supercomputers today can handle a quintillion—that is, a billion billion—operations per second. Yet as this revolution continues to mature, it has become increasingly clear that some computations are and will remain beyond even the best classical computers.

This is because existing computer technologies are constrained by the basic premise on which they operate. All forms of classical computing, whether an abacus, a personal laptop, or a high-performance cluster of machines in a national security facility, follow what scholars call Boolean logic. In this system, the basic unit of information is a bit, which is an object that can assume one of two states, conventionally referred to as 0 or 1. Although this system has proved highly efficient for many kinds of calculations, it cannot perform those of exceeding complexity, such as factoring a thousand-digit number, calculating the reaction dynamics of a molecule with hundreds of atoms, or solving certain kinds of optimization problems that are common in many fields.

In contrast, by harnessing quantum mechanics, quantum computing does not have the same constraints. A lesson of quantum physics—one that is startling and counterintuitive—is that particles can

exist in a simultaneous combination of multiple states. Accordingly, instead of bits, with their either-or operation, quantum computing uses a quantum bit, or qubit, which is a system that can be simultaneously in states 0 and 1. This both-at-once ability, known as superposition, conveys an enormous computational advantage, one that increases when more qubits are working together. Whereas a classical computer must process one state after another sequentially, a quantum computer can explore many possibilities in parallel. Think of trying to find the correct path through a maze: a classical computer has to try each path one by one; a quantum computer can explore multiple paths simultaneously, making it orders of magnitude faster for certain tasks. It is important to note that contrary to popular simplification, a quantum computer is not simply an enormous set of classical computers working in parallel. Although there are exponentially many possible answers that can be explored through a quantum processor, only one combination can be measured in the end. Deriving a solution from a quantum computer thus requires clever programming that amplifies the correct answer.

A major challenge is figuring out how to build quantum processors that are large and stable enough to produce consistent results for meaningful problems. Such processors tend to be extremely sensitive to their environment and can be easily affected by changes in temperature, vibrations, and other disturbances, which can lead to a variety of errors in the system. Since computational fidelity relies on qubits maintaining coherence, researchers are investing heavily in methods to improve qubit quality, including new designs, chip-fabrication processes, and techniques to correct for qubit error.

Currently, there is a wide array of approaches to designing qubits, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. In principle, any quantum mechanical system—atoms, molecules, ions, photons—could be fashioned into a qubit. In practice, factors such as manufacturability, controllability, performance, and computational speed dictate the most viable paths. Today's leading efforts include superconducting, neutral atom, photonic, and ion trap qubits. It is unclear at this early stage which, if any, will turn out to be successful. Beyond building the processor, other challenges include how to package the qubits, transmit their signals, and run applications. Researchers must use cryogenic refrigerators, which can cool superconducting qubits to within thousandths of a degree above absolute

zero, to provide an ultracold, dark, and quiet environment for operation. Expertise across these highly specialized components comes from disparate sources in many countries. Today, there are various "full-stack" quantum computing companies, including Amazon, Google, IBM, and QuEra, that are trying to integrate components into a final product. In short, quantum computing today faces a multitude of challenges and unknowns, and continued development will require a host of engineering innovations. What is clear is that for any of the approaches to succeed, they must be reliable, scalable, and cost effective.

THE NEW ANSWERING MACHINES

The race to arrive at a full-scale quantum computer is driven by several motives. Most fundamentally, quantum computing promises to provide answers to problems previously thought unsolvable—puzzles that would take eons for the world's best classical computers to crack. The most well-known problem of this kind is integer factorization, or breaking down a number as a product of several smaller numbers: even the fastest supercomputers are unable to factor very large numbers. This has meant that the most advanced forms of cryptography—which are based on factorization—cannot now be broken. But quantum computers may change that.

In 1994, the computer scientist Peter Shor proved that a quantum computer would be able to factor very large numbers. At the time, such a computer remained firmly in the realm of theory, but as the technology has begun to develop, Shor's insight has led to concerns that quantum processors may one day be capable of breaking even the most advanced encryption. Today, national security experts assume that hostile state and private actors are already collecting encrypted information in anticipation of the new technology, an approach known as a "store now, decrypt later" attack.

But decryption is only one possible application for quantum computers, and it is likely more than a decade away. As Feynman intuited, more obvious uses for quantum-based computing relate to quantum simulation—the ability to make exact calculations of quantum systems such as electrons, molecules, and materials—and these applications could begin to come into use sooner. Quantum processors are already contributing to discoveries in a number of highly specialized areas in physics—including quasiparticle engineering, many-body

dynamics, spin transport, metallic transport, time crystals, wormhole dynamics, and magnetization. With a full-scale, full-capability quantum computer, the possibilities are astounding. Consider agricultural fertilizers. At present, nitrogen fixation—the chemical process required to produce ammonia from nitrogen gas—is hugely energy intensive, accounting for as much as two percent of the world's annual energy budget. This is because the industrial catalysts used in this reaction are highly inefficient. In fact, the naturally occurring FeMoco molecule, a catalyst for biological nitrogen fixation, is far more efficient, but it cannot yet be chemically synthesized or isolated in industrial-scale quantities, and its mechanism of action has proven too challenging for existing computing technology to elucidate. With quantum computers, however, researchers may be able to perform the difficult calculations necessary to learn FeMoco's reaction mechanism, allowing the design of FeMoco-inspired catalysts that could save vast amounts of energy.

Winning the quantum race will not be easy.

Or take pharmaceuticals, which require drug molecules to interact effectively with molecules inside the body. To simulate the behavior of cytochrome P450, a family of enzymes largely responsible for drug metabolism and therefore how patients will respond to drugs, classical computers would require colossal amounts of computing power. With quantum computers, this could be done far more efficiently, leading to important disease-fighting innovations. In the chemical and materials industries, quantum computing could inform the design of more efficient batteries for electric cars and noncorrosive elements for ships. Quantum computers might also assist in cracking the problem of turning nuclear fusion reactors into a sustainable energy source.

Another promising application area is the field of machine learning. Classical computers training on quantum data—electronic, magnetic, and other information describing the behavior of a quantum system—require enormous quantities of data and processing time. In contrast, quantum computers training on quantum data need exponentially fewer examples to master a task. With such huge gains in efficiency, these machines could be used to learn from and predict the behavior of innumerable chemicals and materials. At present, it remains unclear whether quantum computers will hold an advantage in learning from classical data—such as the text, audio, and video data

underpinning today's AI systems. Yet already, quantum computing is benefiting from advances in classical AI: researchers are using large language models, transformer models, and other AI architectures to help design quantum devices, develop software, and improve quantum error correction.

Of course, it stands to reason that quantum computers should have a natural advantage in applications that are themselves quantum mechanical. Less obvious is what also has been demonstrated—that quantum computers can offer dramatic gains in solving some kinds of non–quantum mechanical problems, such as factorization. Indeed, researchers and mathematicians have discovered 60 algorithms that allow quantum computers to solve problems much faster than classical ones. Some of these speedups are exponential in scale, as demonstrated by the examples above; others are less dramatic but still amount to a significant gain over classical computers.

One intense area of research is the study of optimization. Given a set of variables, optimization seeks to find the most efficient solution and is used by financial planners, shipping logistics managers, and athletic trainers, among many others. Optimization is also central to AI systems. Given how important optimization computations are to the global economy, if even a fraction of them were executed much more quickly and cheaply and with much less energy, the impact would be immeasurable.

FASTER MACHINES, BIGGER RISKS

Quantum computing's possibilities are inspiring, but the technology's current limits are sobering. Getting from today to the advanced systems needed for some of its most promising applications will require integrating deeply complex components and overcoming innumerable challenges. As a result, many of the envisioned applications may still be years away. According to current estimates, for example, a quantum computer that is capable of code breaking will require about 40,000 times as many physical qubits and a five-fold reduction in physical error rates compared with the best current prototypes. Quantum computers that can do simple chemistry calculations are about two orders of magnitude less costly, but they, too, will depend on far more advanced technology.

One measure of the current state of quantum development can be taken from the road map that Google published in 2018. The plan

envisioned six technical milestones that would be required to achieve a full-scale quantum computer: demonstrating that a quantum processor can outperform a classical one on a first task; developing a prototype for a logical qubit; demonstrating an actual logical qubit; building a logical gate for operations between multiple logical qubits; producing 100 logical qubits, which is considered to be a starting point for simple quantum simulation; and producing 1,000 logical qubits for more complex simulations. (A code-breaking computer would require even more advanced capabilities.) Google has achieved its first two milestones, and in December 2024 announced Willow, a new quantum processor that is able to solve in minutes a benchmark algorithm that would take one of the fastest supercomputers today an astounding 10^{25} years to complete. Other organizations—including IBM, IonQ, and QuEra—have published their own road maps to a large-scale error-corrected quantum computer. Chinese researchers, most notably at the University of Science and Technology of China, have achieved Google's first milestone and demonstrated processors with hundreds of qubits. Like other players in the field, Chinese researchers doubtless have other significant developments that have not yet been made public.

To assess the current state of the quantum race, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Defense, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, recently announced a Quantum Benchmarking Initiative to determine whether any quantum computing approach can achieve utility-scale operation by 2033. Although it is impossible to predict the exact pace of future innovation, some researchers have estimated that prototypes of full-scale quantum computers, consisting of perhaps ten logical qubits, may be developed by the end of this decade. Such a feat, together with improved error-correction methods and more efficient algorithms, would bring the world tantalizingly close to quantum simulation.

By current estimates, researchers are unlikely to achieve the first true quantum code-breaking machine—a quantum computer with millions of qubits and adequate error correction—until the late 2030s. Even then, such a computer would take hours to factor a single large number. Still, it is crucial for the United States and its international partners to prepare for this technology now. Networks have been notoriously slow to implement new security standards, despite their long availability. It will take

years to develop, test, and refine a set of quantum-secure standards. The U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology has been leading an effort since 2016 to develop cryptography standards for a post-quantum world. In August 2024, NIST announced a first set of three classical encryption algorithms as standards ready for immediate use, with instructions for integration into encryption systems and other products. Although this set of algorithms is impervious to all published decryption methods today, it is possible that one or more of them could be vulnerable in the future. Such concerns have taken on added urgency in the wake of new research suggesting that public encryption may never be fully secure against quantum attacks.

Like other new and powerful technologies, quantum computing holds enormous promise, and it also introduces significant new risks. In addition to large-scale data theft, economic disruption, and intelligence breaches, quantum computers could be used for malicious purposes such as simulating and synthesizing chemical weapons or optimizing the flight trajectories of a swarm of drones. As with AI, the possibility of misuse or abuse raises critical questions about who should control the technology and how to mitigate the worst threats. Policymakers will need to determine how to maximize economic and societal gains while minimizing the dangers. Finding the best ways to achieve this balance will require a rigorous debate within civil society and an understanding by the public of the technology's potential gains and harms. There are multiple futures for a world with quantum computers. The best one would see liberal democracies leading both the technology's development and its collective management. A worse one would have the United States and its international partners, through inaction or insufficient actions, cede dominance of the new technology to China and other autocratic countries.

QUANTUM LEAP

Perfecting the quantum computer is a bold, ambitious, and multifaceted project and not one that any company or country can accomplish on its own. Today's early systems already require thousands of specialty parts, tools, and instruments; sophisticated fabrication and cryogenic facilities; and world-class mastery in dozens of technical areas, all supported by billions of dollars of investment in research and development. Tomorrow's systems will be

appreciably more complex. If the United States is to lead this race and, together with its international allies, build the most advanced quantum computing systems, it must allow quantum workers to collaborate across sectors and borders. Effective collaboration can give liberal democracies a significant advantage over more closed, authoritarian countries.

For many companies working on quantum systems today, quantum processors are the crown jewel of their intellectual property and are fabricated in their home country: Google makes quantum chips in the United States, Oxford Quantum Circuits produces quantum chips in the United Kingdom, and Alice & Bob does so in France. In each case, these chips are for in-house research and development; in some instances, third parties are allowed to access early prototypes. As the semiconductor sector has demonstrated, there are geopolitical advantages for any country to maintain the domestic capacity to build a strategic component.

Washington and its partners will need to establish strong quantum-computing supply chains.

But in order to fabricate processors and integrate full computer systems locally, the necessary talent must also be available. This requires collaboration among government entities, industries, and research and educational institutions. Quantum computing companies can support this process by sharing their anticipated workforce needs and providing on-the-job training opportunities. Because the skill sets required for quantum computing are highly specialized, it will not be possible for every country—and may not even be possible for any one country—to develop all the talent needed. Our own work in quantum computing involves collaborations with over 100 academic institutions and industry partners across the United States, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific. The United States and its allies would be wise to implement visa, immigration, and export control policies that allow companies in this critical sector to recruit the most talented scientists, engineers, and technicians. In September, the U.S. Department of Commerce took an important step in this direction by announcing new rules that include a deemed export exemption to facilitate the employment of highly skilled international workers in the United States.

Washington and its international partners will also need to establish strong supply chains for all the subsystems and components that go into quantum computing. Many of the necessary components are and will continue to be produced in disparate locations around the world. Building superconducting qubits, for example, requires many of the same tools that are used in advanced semiconductor-fabrication facilities owned by companies such as Intel and TSMC; these tools are manufactured in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, among other countries. Cryogenic refrigerators require expertise that is possessed by only a handful of companies, most based in the United Kingdom and the EU. Still other components, such as control electronics and wiring, are designed by specialized companies in Israel, Japan, and Taiwan, as well as in the United States and the EU. Individual countries may attain mastery of different pieces, but like-minded states will need to work together to assemble the full puzzle and keep it out of the reach of authoritarian states.

For quantum computing to achieve its full potential, creative minds from many different disciplines will be needed to develop uses for the technology. There are several early efforts to foster a developer ecosystem, including DARPA's Quantum Benchmarking program, which measures progress toward potential application areas, and XPRIZE Quantum Applications, a three-year, $5 million international competition to generate new quantum computing algorithms for real-world challenges. Gains will come from software developers creating easy interfaces for access, academics and business leaders using these interfaces for the problems most important to them, and consumers and civil society providing input on what they find most valuable.

Like the race to land humans on the moon or to sequence all the genes in the human genome, the successful and safe development of quantum computing cannot be achieved by scientists alone. It will require generational public and private commitments of resources and talent and farsighted international diplomacy. Quantum computers will create extraordinary opportunities for the United States and many other countries around the world. They will also pose new risks, including the potential for abuse or misuse, and possible shocks to the world order. If these dangers can be managed, the potential of quantum computing to accelerate human progress and build a better future could be incredible.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Rise and Fall of Economic Statecraft

Overreach and Incoherence Hobble America's Most Powerful Weapon

HENRY FARRELL

Dollars and Dominion: U.S. Bankers and the Making of a Superpower
BY MARY BRIDGES. Princeton University Press, 2024, 280 pp.

Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare
BY EDWARD FISHMAN. Portfolio, 2025, 560 pp.

When Donald Trump returns to the White House in late January, he'll hold the levers of U.S. economic power. The ubiquity of the dollar as a currency of exchange, coupled with the centrality of U.S. financial institutions and networks, gives Washington an unparalleled ability to make it hard for adversaries to do business. Since 9/11, the United States has wielded financial sanctions at an increasing scale and scope, targeting individuals, governments, and nonstate actors. It has even turned export controls for technologies into a makeshift alternative for sanctions. The future of these tools—some of the most consequential the United States possesses—now resides with a mercurial president.

On the campaign trail, Trump insisted that sanctions were a poor tool compared with tariffs: he vowed to use them "as little as possible" for fear that they would kill the dollar as a world currency—an outcome as bad as losing a war, he claimed. That professed skepticism clashed with his record in office. In his first term, he was happy to slap sanctions on North Korea and deploy them in an effort to exert "maximum pressure" on Iran. Trump's flip-flopping on sanctions is likely to spark disagreements in his next term. Many of the figures he is bringing into his administration, such as Senator Marco Rubio, the nominee for secretary of state, are proponents of sanctions. They will certainly want to train this major weapon of U.S. economic statecraft on their enemies. Others may be nervous about overusing sanctions, as Steven Mnuchin, the treasury secretary in Trump's first administration, was.

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Some may even be actively hostile to the power of the U.S. dollar.

Discord may reign. Washington's ability to surveil vast troves of financial data and keep money and technology out of the hands of its rivals could be hamstrung by infighting and by Trump's tendency to change his mind on a whim. U.S. economic security policy is primed to become a battleground in which China hawks, tariff warriors, Wall Streeters, and Bitcoin bros compete to sway a president who comes up with policy based on the advice of whoever he last talked to.

The likely consequences of that discord are made clear by two new books that tell the story of how Washington came to master the art of economic coercion, and consider how that mastery might fare in the future. In *Dollars and Dominion*, Mary Bridges, a business journalist turned historian, lays out the century-old beginnings of the United States' financial empire. In *Chokepoints*, Edward Fishman, who worked at the Treasury and State Departments, celebrates the "sanctions technocrats" who have built up this mastery over the last two decades. Given that Trump regards technocratic expertise as the fetters of the "deep state," Bridges's account may prove more relevant in the near future, as Trump returns to an earlier and more primitive approach to American economic power.

Today, as in the early twentieth century, that power stems from a hodgepodge of sources. Over the past two decades, the United States has built economic enforcement muscle at the expense of figuring out how best to use it. The different parts of what might be called "the economic security state," such as the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control and the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security, sometimes struggle to coordinate their work and have a shockingly hard time gathering information or crafting long-term strategy. There is still no blueprint for how all the components ought to fit together.

Trump's return will only make these problems worse. The economic security state needs more coherence and planning, not less. Sanctions and export controls are some of the most powerful weapons in the U.S. arsenal, but they are administered by a bureaucratic machine held together by spit and duct tape. There is no equivalent of the Pentagon—a headquarters that brings the efforts of the U.S. government under one roof—for economic security.

If Trump follows through on his promised sidelining of civil servants, there will be nothing to restrain his appetite for chaos. In all likelihood, the new administration will lurch unpredictably between wildly incompatible policies: replacing sanctions and export controls with tariffs, deploying sanctions at scale (even possibly against allies), and protecting financial institutions and cryptocurrencies from U.S. regulatory power. That will be a mess in the short run and will weaken U.S. power in the long run, as other countries insulate themselves from the chaos by avoiding the American economic system as much as they can.

GROWING PAINS

Since 9/11, Democratic and Republican administrations have capitalized on the ubiquity of the U.S. dollar to turn financial sanctions into an all-purpose weapon. International banks need access to the dollar clearing system, which is

controlled by U.S. regulators, to transfer funds to one another. That obliges banks, even those based overseas, to comply with U.S. financial sanctions and reporting requirements.

The results are powerful. When the Trump administration sanctioned Carrie Lam, the pro-Beijing chief executive of Hong Kong, for human rights violations in 2020, even Chinese banks refused to do business with her. She had to keep piles of cash around her mansion to pay her bills. When, in 2024, the Biden administration sanctioned extremist Israeli settlers for attacking or dispossessing Palestinians, Israeli banks had no choice but to cut them off, to the fury and consternation of Israel's far-right finance minister. The force of U.S. sanctions reaches deep into the internal financial arrangements of allies and adversaries alike.

Washington has cobbled together other means of economic coercion, too. In Trump's first term, officials expanded the United States' reach into global supply chains by turning export controls, measures that were originally designed to keep U.S. technologies out of the hands of enemy militaries, into ersatz sanctions—another way to hurt an adversary's economy. U.S. President Joe Biden used the same mechanism to restrict the entire Chinese and Russian economies from accessing certain semiconductors.

Export controls have been less effective than U.S. officials had hoped because supply chains are murky and therefore hard to control. Nonetheless, they and other innovations have fostered a growing, albeit disorganized, economic security state within the U.S. federal government. By managing and administering sanctions, export controls, and investment screening, Washington can often prevent money and certain technology from falling into the hands of its rivals. Other parts of the U.S. regulatory state help, too, even when they don't have formal ties to national security. For example, the Securities and Exchange Commission's efforts to regulate cryptocurrencies helped the Treasury and Justice Departments bring an anarchic financial realm into compliance with U.S. law. As a result, terrorists and rogue states now have a harder time circumventing conventional financial controls.

But the rapid growth of the U.S. economic security state has come at the cost of coherence. U.S. officials have few guidelines on when to employ particular economic weapons and few ways to ensure that they don't interfere with each other. Sanctions, export controls, and other economic tools have lost some of their bite because they have been used to do ever more things. Now is an especially bad time for their degradation. The United States has embarked on a great reorientation of its relationship to the global economy. Washington once promoted economic interdependence but now openly weaponizes it. Domestic and international regulations are increasingly intertwined and essential to national security. If the United States cannot shape markets at home, it will be in no position to do so abroad. There are even bigger worries. In a world of rapid technological change, the United States cannot take its economic dominance for granted or rest on its primacy. Its advantages in the field of artificial intelligence may not compensate for losing the race for the clean energy technologies that AI server centers and everyday electronics will come to depend on.

Tackling these problems will require an enormous increase in state capacity. The United States needs to become more adaptive by getting much better at gathering information, taking big policy risks, and adjusting policy depending on which bets pay off—a tall order for any administration. It will be spectacularly challenging for Trump, given his difficulty with sticking to any long-term objectives and his hostility to experts and the so-called deep state.

POWER OF THE PAPER PUSHERS

Fishman's thoroughgoing book is all about expertise, lionizing the bureaucratic virtues that the new administration detests. It is a 500-page tribute to the sanctions technocrats, the oft-disregarded officials who built up Washington's coercive might. After 9/11, the United States discovered that economic globalization had created security vulnerabilities. Terrorists and other malign actors could organize on the Internet and send and receive money across borders without being tracked.

Over the next two decades, successive Republican and Democratic administrations reasserted influence over the world by controlling choke points in the networks that make up the global financial system. For example, through the SWIFT network, a communications platform for banks, U.S. officials can see who is sending money to whom. The first Trump administration expanded the reach of export controls by applying the foreign direct product rule, under which the U.S. government can stop the sale not only of U.S. products but also of many products made with U.S. equipment, technology, and know-how, including sophisticated semiconductors. That rule was first used to target Huawei, a Chinese telecommunications firm, and then to regulate the sale of a wide variety of goods to Russia. Eventually, it was used to block the export of certain high-end semiconductors to China.

Fishman adds previously unknown details to this story, ranging from the trivial (how an EU official stuffed his office with toy airplanes and trains) to the substantial (how Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was persuaded to embrace measures preventing Russia's central bank from accessing its foreign reserves). He has a knack for talking to the sometimes obscure people responsible for "writing the memo," a practice he shares with one of his bureaucratic heroes.

Chokepoints claims that the wisdom and foresight of these sanctions technocrats created the "blueprints" for a new kind of world order led by the United States and its allies. Fishman writes that the first Trump administration provides both a "cautionary tale" of how unilateralism can go too far and an example of how to take the threat of China seriously. He finds that U.S. financial and technological primacy enabled "little-known American and European bureaucrats" to restructure "relationships between world powers." The challenge for the United States and its allies is to manage these choke points wisely, using economic warfare to maintain this order and avoid shooting wars as long as possible.

Already, *Chokepoints* reads less like a prescription for the future than a celebration of the past. The first Trump administration turned out to be not a cautionary tale but a prototype for the world to come. There won't be a new technocratic order. Instead of operating

in a predictable cosmos, global politics will be reshaped by the internal chaos of a new Trump administration, which will feed the chaos of the world outside, as businesses and governments alike try to respond to an unpredictable superpower.

MAN PLANS, GOD LAUGHS

If Fishman praises the technocrats of empire, Bridges explains the limits of their vision. Her indispensable account of the prehistory of the U.S. economic security state argues that elite strategies of domination are only half the story, if that. As she points out, global systems of power have "rarely conformed to the blueprints of distant designers." It is impossible to understand unwieldy economic systems by focusing on the officials who planned them. Rather, one must also pay attention to the strategies of the businesses and foreigners subject to the plans.

Bridges sketches the haphazard process through which U.S. dollar dominance came into being. In the early twentieth century, the United States worried about its companies using the existing financial system, which was dominated by the United Kingdom. Politicians and businesses feared that foreign banks would share sensitive information with their competitors, a concern that led to the creation of the United States' first broadly multinational bank, the International Banking Corporation.

The effort to stand up the International Banking Corporation was born less out of a coherent strategy than an ad hoc construction, she finds. Business leaders and bankers assembled a loose infrastructure to allow U.S. colonies and dependencies to use the U.S. dollar, rather than the British pound, in their transactions. The International Banking Corporation itself was funded by private firms that had an interest in U.S. dominance. It was bumbling, chaotic, and self-centered; more interested in helping itself than in helping Uncle Sam. Through chance as much as intent, this "group of bewildered U.S. bankers," as Bridges puts it, helped cement U.S. global financial power, turning obscure financial instruments into an infrastructure for dollar exchange.

In Bridges's view, the current age is also one of flux, with one empire dwindling and another looking to expand. Just as the United States resented the United Kingdom's grasp on global finance in the early twentieth century, China resents U.S. power today and is trying to build its own alternative systems. The very nature of finance is shifting, as new technologies such as cryptocurrencies and central bank digital currencies emerge. It is possible that the United States may lose its technological primacy, perhaps through losing the clean energy race. Chinese leader Xi Jinping is doubling down on physical technologies such as advanced batteries, betting that the ability to create abundant and secure energy is right around the corner.

Xi's approach may win the support of foreign governments. Whereas the United States uses choke points to slow the progress of its adversaries, China is advancing in clean energy technologies that it can sell cheaply to other countries. Yet China's attempt to reorient the world economy around itself is sometimes as bumbling as the United States' was a century ago. China's Belt and Road Initiative is less an organized plan for world domination than a machine for shoveling contracts to well-connected

construction companies. If this helps build a world economy with Chinese characteristics, it will be half by accident.

Bridges's book reveals a chaotic and unpredictable world, in which other countries and seemingly minor players can undermine the grand designs of imperial planners. U.S. economic coercion rests not only on the primacy of the dollar or control over semiconductors but also on a vast interconnected system of banking, business, and law, one that is becoming ever more complex. The tools preferred by the sanctions technocrats are becoming less useful as businesses and adversaries find ways to circumvent U.S.-controlled choke points and adversaries, such as China, build their own. Oligarchs, arms dealers, and terrorists evade sanctions through cryptocurrencies. In 2023, almost as much money flowed through Tether, a cryptocurrency stablecoin pegged to the U.S. dollar, as did through Visa cards, powering a shadow economy that is mostly outside the reach of the U.S. government.

Washington is starting to feel its power falter. Export controls, even when supercharged by the foreign direct product rule, are far less straightforward to apply than the Biden administration hoped. There is no equivalent to SWIFT that can provide U.S. officials with data on supply chains, and U.S. semiconductor businesses have been willing to walk right up to the edge of what is allowable to maintain access to the Chinese market. Toward the end of Biden's term, U.S. officials began reverting to financial sanctions as they discovered how hard it was to enforce export controls on products with complex supply chains. Such problems would be tough enough to handle if the sanctions technocrats were still in charge. But if there is one person who has no technocratic inclination at all, it is Trump.

THE COMING CHAOS

The first Trump administration's economic security policy was a crazy ride, in which people who were connected to finance and Wall Street, such as Mnuchin, battled with China hawks, such as National Security Adviser John Bolton, and tariff enthusiasts, such as U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer. Things happened—or didn't happen—depending on who had the ear of the president at any moment and who had mastered the dark arts of bureaucratic warfare.

But in this sea of chaos, some islands of stability remained. Deeper layers of government worked much as they had in previous Republican administrations. Midlevel economic security officials did their jobs as best as they could. They lived in fear that an out-of-the-blue presidential tweet might completely remake the policies they were supposed to administer, but many areas of policy were too boring and technical for Trump to care about.

The second Trump administration will be different. There are new factions in the game, and the chaos may penetrate even those levels of government that escaped Trump's first term relatively unscathed. The crypto venture capitalists and entrepreneurs who backed Trump now want to collect their reward. Some of them have startling political beliefs. Balaji Srinivasan, for example, who was floated as a potential head of Trump's Food and Drug Administration, is the author of a self-published book attacking the

supposed nexus of U.S. dollar power and *New York Times* "wokeism," which he sees as the products of a decadent intellectual elite. Srinivasan wants the U.S.-led world order—which he sees as "declining"—to be swept away by a "Pax Bitcoinica."

Less philosophical crypto enthusiasts just want to block government regulations that would stop them from making money. Both the true believers and the opportunists were outraged when Biden's Treasury officials used sanctions to isolate a cryptocurrency mixer service—an entity that makes it harder to tell whose money goes where—for laundering billions of dollars for North Korea and other malefactors. Now, conservative judges have blocked these sanctions, and Trump plans to appoint crypto-friendly officials who will surely try to deregulate cryptocurrency finance. Should they succeed, the United States' economic security will be degraded as it becomes easier for people to skirt the dollar.

The internal battles will not be limited to financial deregulation. Traditional national security hawks will want to double down on sanctions and export controls, without any clear sense of where to stop. Fans of tariffs—a group that currently includes Trump—will apply them to remedy economic insecurity and all else that ails the United States. They will eventually discover the limits and costs of tariffs, but probably not soon enough. Well-connected firms will call for more traditional, business-friendly measures, combined with sweetheart deals and carve-outs for themselves and their friends. Fraught alliances, palace politics, knifings in the dark, and Trump's whims will send economic security policy reeling.

The one area in which Trump shows unwavering determination is his enmity toward technical expertise. His promised efforts to immediately fire "corrupt actors" in the national security and intelligence apparatus will lead to years of lawsuits. Yet even if they do not fully succeed, they will hinder the ability of the economic security state to get things done. Economic security officials with decades of experience will question whether they want to stay in an unpredictable workplace.

Indeed, everyone—businesses, allied governments, and adversaries—will be trying to figure out what is happening within a chaotic administration, and, if possible, to shape it. Allies will strive to protect themselves from an unpredictable great power that is no longer as capable of exercising control as it believes. Foreign and domestic businesses and crypto capitalists will rewire the infrastructure of the world economy to make more money, just as their forebears did in the early days of the U.S. empire, when the state was underdeveloped. Some may capture parts of the Trump administration, turning U.S. power to their own advantage. Adversaries will look to capitalize on America's weaknesses, leading to even greater disorganization.

Once, and not too long ago, it was possible for U.S. elites to believe that technocrats could order the world in their interests, making it secure and predictable for them. They held out hope that Trump's first term was a temporary aberration. Now, it is clear that it was no such thing. The sun is setting on the sanctions technocrats, and indeed on traditional technocracy more generally. American economic power is sure to suffer for it.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Man Who Almost Changed China

Hu Yaobang and the Unfinished Business of Reform and Opening

CHEN JIAN

The Conscience of the Party: Hu Yaobang, China's Communist Reformer
BY ROBERT L. SUETTINGER. Harvard University Press, 2024, 488 pp.

One of the most consequential events of the twentieth century was China's historic turn, in the years after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, toward a sweeping program of reform. By relaxing the state's grip on the economy and its control over society in this period, Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader from 1978 to 1989, helped put in motion the forces that would in mere decades pull hundreds of millions of people out of absolute poverty, transform China into the workshop of the world, and set it up as a great power in the twenty-first century—the only plausible rival to the United States. Although Deng led this process, he was aided at the time by the advice and work of a less heralded leader, Hu Yaobang.

Hu does not enjoy the broad name recognition of Mao, Deng, and the leading Mao-era statesman Zhou Enlai. Even in China, many people who came of age after 1989 know little about him. But as the international relations scholar Robert Suettinger shows in *The Conscience of the Party: Hu Yaobang, China's Communist Reformer*, Hu was an essential figure in the grand process of "reform and opening." Leading up to and during his tenure as chairman (and then general secretary) of the Chinese Communist Party from 1981 to 1987, he worked to shatter the ideological hold that Maoism had over Chinese politics, restoring the rights of millions of people purged during the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, and striving to ensure that the imperatives of reform prevailed in Chinese policymaking. Hu's commitment to political

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reform, however, led to his downfall, after a rift with Deng forced him out as CCP general secretary in January 1987. But he was still regarded by ordinary Chinese—as well as intellectuals and young students—as the champion of China's political democratization.

Hu died suddenly of a heart attack in April 1989, and his passing would spur the fateful occupation of Tiananmen Square in Beijing by pro-democracy protesters and similar demonstrations across the country. After seven weeks, Deng had the protests quashed ruthlessly, in the process foreclosing the political democratization that Hu had hoped for. Hu's key insight was that economic growth was not enough to power the Chinese state; without the legitimacy afforded by political reform and democratization, China would experience turbulence in its modernization and development. Chinese leaders may believe they have found a way to break that connection, but there is good reason to think that Hu will be proved right—and that ultimately, as they deal with a faltering economy and mounting discontent, they will have no choice but to confront Hu's warning.

THE IDEALIST

Suettinger's biography is a pathbreaking account of Hu, prodigiously and thoughtfully exploring what kind of person he was and how he emerged as a leader with reformist aspirations in a world of apparatchiks. It is the first full-dress biography of Hu in English. But Suettinger, a former national intelligence officer in the Clinton administration and a longtime scholar of China, isn't the first American academic to have attempted such a work. The social scientist Ezra Vogel died, in 2020, before he had finished his own biography of Hu, a volume he intended as a sequel of sorts to *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, his much-acclaimed 2011 biography of Deng. The two leaders are something of a pair; their fortunes rose and fell together during the tumultuous decades of Mao's rule before they both came to power after Mao's death. Hu's legacy would be defined in large part by his eventual rift with Deng, one that embodied their different visions of reform.

To draw a full picture of Hu's life is no easy task. The most apparent and seemingly insurmountable barrier to any biographer is lack of access to archival and other primary sources, which in Hu's case remain largely inaccessible to both Chinese and Western researchers. Suettinger spent nearly a decade finding sources and interviewing contemporaries, and in so doing managed to dig deeply into Hu's life in ways no Western scholar has done before. The result is a remarkably nuanced work that not only depicts Hu as a courageous and thoughtful reformist leader but also illuminates an important turning point in China's recent history.

Hu was an idealist, an honest, sincere, and candid man, as described by many who knew him and worked with him. He was born in 1915 into a poor but educated peasant family in Hunan Province. With the support of his parents, he received a good early education, albeit in tough circumstances; for several years, he had to walk 12 miles of rugged mountainous trails every day to school. At the age of 14, he joined the Communist Youth League, the youth wing of the CCP, and joined the fight.

Man of the moment: protesting in the wake of Hu's death, Beijing, April 1989

The fact that he was educated, combined with his dedication to the revolution and enthusiasm for work, helped him rise quickly through the ranks of the Red Army (which would later become the People's Liberation Army) and the CCP. He survived the harrowing and legendary Long March—the Red Army's retreat between 1934 and 1935 to the interior of the country—that would only further bolster his Communist credentials. By the time the CCP took over China in 1949, Hu had become the youngest army corps political commissar in the military.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. In 1932, as part of a campaign to suppress supposed "reactionaries" in their midst, Mao's agents accused him of being an enemy agent without any evidence; he escaped the death penalty only through the last-minute intervention of two Youth League inspectors who knew him to be a loyal comrade. In the early 1940s, during a campaign launched by Mao to consolidate his dominance over the party, Hu and other CCP members had to go through the mental torture of endless self-criticism. Such ordeals, as Suettinger points out, sowed in Hu the seed of doubt about Maoism and its propensity for brutally trying to control how people think and behave.

Hu nevertheless remained deeply loyal to the CCP after the Communists drove the Nationalists to Taiwan and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. He soon had the opportunity to work with Deng. From 1950 to 1952, Hu was the local CCP secretary in northern Sichuan Province, reporting directly to Deng, who was then the CCP's head in Sichuan. Hu flushed out the remnants of the Nationalist forces in the area, restored order in the wake of the civil war, carried out land reform, and promoted agricultural and industrial production. His outstanding track

GARRIGE HO / REUTERS

record and devotion to work won him Deng's admiration. Their accomplishments also earned them the attention of the grandees in Beijing.

By 1953, together with Deng, Hu was elevated to the national stage and transferred to Beijing to take up the position of secretary and then first secretary of the Communist Youth League. But in that post, Hu was involved in a series of disastrous Maoist endeavors, including the Anti-Rightist Movement, a political campaign that sought to purge alleged dissidents among the ranks of intellectuals; the Great Leap Forward, the economic and social drive beginning in 1958 that resulted in a devastating famine; and the Socialist Education Movement, a campaign of deepening ideological indoctrination in the early to mid-1960s.

Hu tried very hard to engage himself in these movements by following and implementing all orders from Beijing as faithfully as he could. But he was alarmed by the way many of his comrades and subordinates were groundlessly labeled "rightists" and by the suffering of everyday people during the Great Leap Forward. Those experiences cultivated in him a deeper suspicion of Mao's utopian program of "continuous revolution." At a CCP Central Committee plenum in Lushan in 1959, he was reluctant to follow the general push to criticize Peng Dehuai, the former defense minister whom Mao had identified as the head of an "anti-party clique" for making critical comments about the Great Leap Forward. Not surprisingly, when the Cultural Revolution began, in 1966, Mao singled out Hu and other leaders of the Communist Youth League for severe attack. Hu himself was repeatedly brought to denunciation rallies, where Red Guards would inveigh against him and seek to humiliate him in public. Deng also suffered during the Cultural Revolution, twice purged by Mao and his allies.

In 1969, Mao's agents at the Youth League Center banished Hu to a farm in Henan Province for "reeducation." He was forced to perform heavy manual labor almost every day and he suffered greatly in this period. After the death in 1971 of Lin Biao, one of Mao's key lieutenants, Hu was allowed to return to Beijing but was not fully rehabilitated into the ranks of the party elite. In this period, he read voraciously—including classic Marxist works, Chinese history, books of philosophy and ethics, and even the translated plays of Shakespeare. He became increasingly critical of Maoism in both its theory and practice. When Mao died, in September 1976, and the old order seemed in jeopardy, Hu was ready to advance the radical cause of reform in China.

OPENING THE DOOR

Mao's death led to a period of uncertainty in which various factions vied for power. Hu aligned himself with Deng, who was emerging from his second period of exile during the Cultural Revolution. Whereas Deng's principal adversaries, including Mao's chosen successor and the party chairman Hua Guofeng, claimed to adhere to "the two whatevers"—the slogan that "we will absolutely uphold whatever decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave"—Hu sought

a different path. In May 1978, the *Guangming Daily*, a party ideological organ, published an essay, written by a group of teachers at the Central Party School (Hu was then its executive vice president and reviewed the essay before publication), titled "Practice Is the Sole Criteria to Judge Truth." They argued that the truth must be tested and proved by practice—an implicit rebuke of the implacability of Maoist dogma and its claims to truth. The essay sent shock waves through the system; it effectively eroded the legitimacy of Hua (as his position as China's top leader entirely relied on Mao's designation) and rejected the restrictions that Mao and his ideology had imposed on China. This ideological salvo greatly enhanced Deng's position in the intraparty struggle with Hua's faction and helped lead to Deng's eventually becoming China's paramount leader in 1978.

As Deng rose, so did Hu, who became the head of the CCP's Central Organizational Department in December 1977. In this role, Hu sought to correct the injustices of the Cultural Revolution and other Maoist political campaigns. Under Hu's direction, tens of thousands of CCP cadres, including hundreds of high-ranking ones, were rehabilitated and assigned to official positions. Hu also helped end the ostracization of tens of millions of ordinary citizens who had suffered during Mao's destructive initiatives and let them live normal lives. These efforts to redress the excesses of the Mao era won Hu much support from within the party and among the wider public. In 1981, Hu replaced Hua as chairman of the CCP Central Committee (the next year, the title of the position would change to general secretary), allowing him to effectively function as Deng's right-hand man in the launch and promotion of reforms.

Between 1978 and 1982, Deng and Hu advanced a series of policies intended to open China's economy. These included abandoning the rigid centrally planned economic system borrowed from the Soviet Union, decollectivizing agriculture, embracing some market mechanisms, allowing foreign investment into the country, seeking greater trade with Western countries, and sending Chinese students to study abroad. As a result of these changes, the overall economy ballooned—with annual growth rates of around ten percent throughout the decade—as did productivity. Before the reforms, China's share of global GDP based on purchasing power parity hovered around two percent; today, it's around 20 percent.

Curiously, Suettinger focuses on Hu's domestic contributions in this period, altogether missing how he helped transform China's orientation to the outside world. During the Mao years, China styled itself as a revolutionary country, bent on challenging the existing international system and its institutions dominated by the United States and other Western capitalist countries. Hu was among the first Chinese leaders to see the need for a less instinctively confrontational, more cooperative, and forward-looking foreign policy. In the early 1980s, he played a central role in a CCP grand strategy review that led to the party's jettisoning the Maoist notion that another world war was inevitable and

reaching the consensus that it was in China's long-term and fundamental interest to strive for a peaceful external environment. Good relations with the outside world would allow the country to concentrate on economic development and the pursuit of socialist modernity. Hu shaped the trajectory of the change, understanding that opening to the world could speed reforms at home. He was a firm supporter of the normalization of ties with the United States in 1979, championing a friendly relationship between the two countries; he endorsed and even got personally involved in China's improving cooperative relations with its erstwhile foe Japan (in 1983, for instance, he invited 3,000 Japanese students to visit China); he strove to improve Beijing's relations with London by visiting the United Kingdom and receiving Queen Elizabeth II during her state visit to Beijing in 1986, which helped make more credible Deng's promise that China would not alter the special status of Hong Kong until 2047.

EARLY RETIREMENT

With Deng as paramount leader and Hu as general secretary, it seemed that China was on the path to ever-widening reform through much of the 1980s. But it was not to be. By around 1984, Deng, Hu, and several other CCP elders began to have critical disagreements on the way forward. The main point of contention was whether to create more checks and balances in the CCP system, which is what Hu wanted. At first, it seemed that Deng also favored this approach. As he consolidated his own power, however, Deng became increasingly worried that such reforms would result in the embrace of Western-style democracy, threatening the CCP's one-party domination of the country. Although he was willing to promote economic reforms and open up the economy, he repeatedly called on the party and the country to fight "bourgeois liberalization" and maintain the "four cardinal principles," adhering to the "socialist road," proletarian dictatorship, the leadership of the CCP, and Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideological beliefs.

Hu, by contrast, wanted to go further in the direction of political democratization. A fissure opened between the two men. When Deng persistently emphasized the need to resist "bourgeois liberalization," Hu spoke openly about the need for more democracy, more freedom of speech, and more public participation in politics. Deng grew disappointed with Hu's forthrightness and began to lose trust in his longtime ally.

Events came to a head with Hu's public call in 1985 for the "youthification" of the aging CCP leadership. He began with himself, stating, "I'm almost 70 years old, and I'm about to retire .... Those veteran comrades over the age of 80 even more should step down." Deng never rejected this suggestion, and even indicated that he might be willing to retire. But that was merely rhetoric. When Hu naively suggested that Deng would set a good example by "taking the lead in retiring," it was a step too far for the paramount leader. In January 1987, at a "democratic life meeting" attended by top party leaders and presided over by Deng and other elders, Hu was compelled to resign as general secretary. Hu calmly accepted

almost all the charges against him as he saw, in Suettinger's telling, "the need to preserve stability and unity within the leadership."

But this defenestration was not the end of Hu's story. Although he was pulled from China's political stage, he continued to haunt it. Many people in the country referred to him as "the conscience of the party"—the metaphor was not just praise but also implied that the CCP had lost its way without him. In the years following Hu's resignation, the gap between rapid economic and social change, on the one hand, and political stagnation, on the other, continually produced tensions between the state and the citizenry, as well as within Chinese society. Discontent and anxiety about the sclerotic pace of political reform spread far and wide.

When Hu died, in April 1989, students in Beijing—and then citizens from all walks of life—quickly turned the mourning of him into a powerful public demonstration of their frustration and anger at the lack of political reform and widespread corruption. Protesters flooded Tiananmen Square in Beijing. What followed became a defining moment in China's history. On June 4, Deng and other CCP elders ordered troops to crack down on students and other demonstrators, resulting in the bloody tragedy that shocked the world.

HU'S WARNING

More than four decades after the launch of the reform and opening-up project, China is now at another inflection point. Its economic growth during the reform era was extraordinary, and by 2010 it had become the second-largest economy in the world. That success has many causes, but one of the most important factors is that China in the era of reform and opening enjoyed a long peace; guided by the likes of Hu, it strove to craft amicable relations with the outside world and avoid confrontation, particularly with the United States.

But the other vision of political reform—Hu's vision—is decidedly unfulfilled. The CCP remains entrenched in Beijing. The prospect of a political system with greater checks and balances seems distant. From Deng's rule onward, the CCP leadership has taken full advantage of China's continuous and rapid economic growth to boost its legitimacy and has taken credit for all of China's economic successes. Legitimacy so defined, however, depends on continued strong performance; China's rapid economic growth must last forever if the government is to enjoy the legitimacy that accompanies that economic record. The current slowing of the Chinese economy is much more than an economic issue. It represents a serious challenge to the Chinese state. In his time, Hu understood this problem, which is why he wanted China to embrace greater political reform and put mechanisms in place that would satisfy the demands and social, moral, and cultural aspirations of the Chinese people.

Those needs remain unaddressed, a deficit that has periodically inflamed tensions between the Chinese state and society, as well as between China and other countries. Hu saw this coming. Even as he sought to remake China in the world, he understood that the biggest challenges facing China come not from without but from within.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Ghosts of Bud Dajo

How an American Massacre Shaped the Philippines

SHEILA S. CORONEL

Massacre in the Clouds: An American Atrocity and the Erasure of History
BY KIM A. WAGNER. PublicAffairs, 2024, 400 pp.

During a sweltering week in March 1906, American soldiers ascended Bud Dajo, a 2,000-foot volcano on the island of Jolo in the southern Philippines. At the time, the Philippines was ruled by the United States, and Major General Leonard Wood, the American governor and military chief of the province, had ordered his forces to "capture and destroy" a number of fortified encampments on the mountain. The encampments belonged to Muslim residents, known as Moros, who had fled their villages in Jolo, an island in the traditional Moro homeland of Mindanao, after the U.S. military took control in 1899.

Wood, a Harvard-educated former army surgeon, had staked his career and reputation on Moro subjugation, and pacifying the province was a matter of personal pride. U.S. troops bombarded the volcano with artillery, targeting the crater around which hundreds of families had resettled. American commanders had told their soldiers to shoot on sight, and they fired at anything that moved. The Moros fought back with whatever they could muster—obsolete cannons, old rifles, spears, knives, and conch shells filled with gunpowder. As their ammunition dwindled, some even hurled their bodies against the attackers. But they stood little chance. When the battle ended, "the whole crest of the mountain was covered with corpses," wrote Captain Edward Lawton, who led a column of the 19th Infantry from the eastern side of the volcano. The bodies, he recalled, were "filled with wounds of every description," with "headless and dismembered trunks" and

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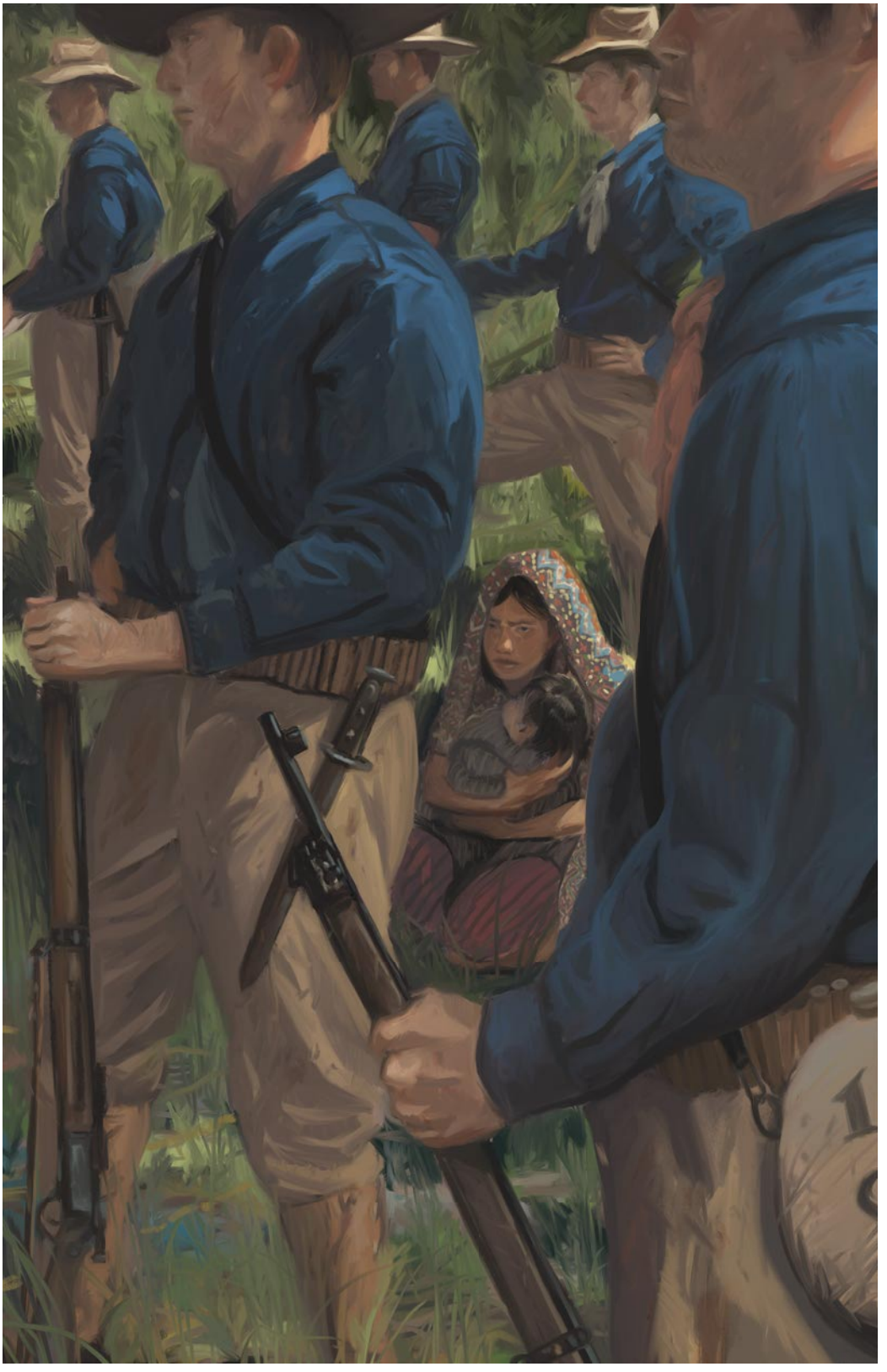

Illustration by John Lee

with "skulls crushed in and brains scattered about." The most heartrending sight, Lawton added, was that of "little helpless babies, some with a number of wounds, groping amid the mass of dead for the mother's breast."

In *Massacre in the Clouds*, the historian Kim Wagner provides a vivid account of the events that led up to the carnage at Bud Dajo, as well as of the massacre itself and its aftermath. Wagner draws extensively from colonial archives to tell a harrowing tale. He quotes from letters written by U.S. soldiers that describe the suffocating heat, the stench of blood, and their relentless fighting, shooting "everything in reach . . . regardless of age or sex," as one young private wrote to his mother.

In recounting this war crime, Wagner contends that the massacre of up to 1,000 men, women, and children at Bud Dajo by U.S. troops was not an aberration; although the death toll that week might have been unusually high, the violence at Bud Dajo revealed the essential character of the American regime. He also argues that the slaughter at Bud Dajo forms part of a brutal history of U.S. atrocities that includes the massacres at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890, where U.S. soldiers killed more than 150 Native Americans, and at My Lai in southern Vietnam in 1968, where U.S. soldiers killed over 350 Vietnamese civilians. In Wagner's telling, Bud Dajo also established a template for future American war crimes: gross abuse leading to a cursory investigation, a coverup, impunity, and, finally, erasure.

But the echoes of Bud Dajo can still be heard in the Philippines. The event remains deeply etched in Moro memory, its story passed down through *kissa*, traditional song epics. And it animates the ongoing tensions between Moros and the Philippine state, with the south of the country, including Mindanao, periodically racked by extremist violence and ruthless government crackdowns. More broadly, independence in 1946 did not free the Philippines from the legacy of colonial violence. On the contrary, the postcolonial state carried on with many of the practices and institutions of its colonial predecessors.

AMERICAN HORROR STORY

Wagner, a scholar of colonial India and the British Empire, draws on his deep knowledge of British imperialism to explore its American counterpart. Wagner sees the U.S. conduct in Bud Dajo as rooted in lessons the Americans had learned from British colonialists, some of whom saw their subjects as savages who responded only to violence. In a previous book, Wagner examines the 1919 Amritsar massacre, in which British troops killed hundreds of Indian protesters. According to an 1896 manual on colonial warfare by the British officer C. E. Callwell, the British achieved dominance by "overawing the enemy"—providing a show of overwhelming force followed by swift, merciless action.

By the time the United States seized the Philippines from Spain in 1898, Washington had already subdued "the Wild West" of North America by decimating native populations through slaughter and disease. The Philippines became a new frontier, another wilderness to conquer. In an account of a meeting with Methodist ministers

at the White House in 1899, President William McKinley said that the Philippines were "a gift from the gods" that "had dropped into our laps," and there was "nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them."

To American expansionists, the conquest of the Philippines was a continuation of the United States' westward drive and a fulfillment of its civilizing and democratizing mission. At the same time, like officials of other imperial powers, American authorities believed that their treatment of people they saw as uncivilized was exempt from the rules of war as laid out in international conventions. Wagner argues that U.S. abuses in the Philippines were comparable in brutality to contemporaneous massacres carried out by other colonial powers: the British in South Africa, the Dutch in Bali, and the Germans in South West Africa.

But the kind of atrocities that took place at Bud Dajo are hardly a relic of the imperial era. In 2005, U.S. Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians in Haditha, including a three-year-old girl and a 76-year-old man, in retaliation for the killing of a marine. As noted in a recent *New Yorker* podcast, *In the Dark*, the Haditha massacre was one of 781 potential war crimes committed by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan during "the war on terror." More than half of those cases were dismissed by investigators, and even those prosecuted had a limited scope.

During the Iraq war, "soldiers would return to the United States and confess—to women, health-care workers, job interviewers—that they'd murdered civilians or prisoners," wrote Parker Yesko, a reporter for *In the Dark*, "but military investigators would find that the allegations couldn't be substantiated."

A hundred years earlier, the same pattern had emerged after Bud Dajo. Returning troops told journalists about the massacre. Soldiers wrote about it in letters home, some of which were published in local papers. Commanding officers told military investigators about the carnage. Postcards showing a trench filled with hundreds of Moro bodies were peddled as souvenirs on the streets of Jolo. Yet both civilian and military authorities concluded that the violence had been unavoidable. They believed the lie that Moro women and children had fought as fiercely as the men. No soldiers were punished, and many earned commendations for their valor. Four years after Bud Dajo, Wood, the general who ordered the assault, was named the army chief of staff; in 1921, he was appointed governor general of the Philippines.

HIDDEN HISTORY

Between 1899 and 1902, Filipinos fought the invading U.S. military for their independence. Violence, hunger, and disease claimed the lives of somewhere between 200,000 and one million people in the archipelago. Yet today, few Filipinos or Americans know much about this war. Many Americans do not even know that the Philippines was once a U.S. colony. Even McKinley, who served as president during the war, had trouble finding the country on a map.

And yet U.S. involvement in the Philippines helped determine the kind of global power the United States would become in the decades that fol-

lowed. As the historian Alfred McCoy and others have shown, the Philippines was where the United States pioneered techniques of counterinsurgency that it would later use in its series of military interventions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. After their victories on the battlefield, American forces prevented a Filipino rebellion through psychological warfare, infiltration, surveillance, torture, extrajudicial executions, and the formation of native militias tasked with suppressing dissent. U.S. soldiers first used waterboarding, often associated with the "war on terror" in the twenty-first century, in its fight against Filipino insurgents (though the practice was controversial even then). To prevent ordinary Filipinos from aiding rebels, the United States fortified small villages that isolated noncombatants, mimicking the *reconcentrado* system that the Spaniards had used against rebels in Cuba. The United States and its South Vietnamese allies would revive the tactic during the Vietnam War, dubbing it the "strategic hamlet program."

When the Philippines gained independence in 1946, it inherited a police force and a military trained in U.S.-style counterinsurgency. In the 1950s, CIA operatives helped the Philippine military crush a communist-led peasant rebellion, a campaign from which the United States later drew inspiration for counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, Latin America, and the Middle East. During the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the Philippines from 1972 to 1986, the United States trained and funded a Philippine army that tortured, jailed, and disappeared thousands of dissidents. Soldiers terrorized the countryside as they pursued communist guerrillas and Moro separatists.

In September 1981, paramilitary troops gunned down 45 men, women, and children in the town of Las Navas in the central Philippines. The following September, Marcos and his wife, Imelda, began a triumphal state visit to the United States that included a star-studded banquet hosted at the White House. Days before the visit, *The New York Times* published an article dedicated to the Las Navas massacre, but the issue of human rights hardly made a dent in the proceedings; the United States was eager to ensure that it could use and maintain military bases in the Philippines, no matter the conduct of the Marcos regime.

Post-Marcos governments inherited security forces that continued to rely on American support and on brutal methods of suppressing dissent. In the late 1980s, the military attempted coups against Marcos's successor, Corazon Aquino, who had restored democratic institutions and competitive elections. The coups failed, but when the military demanded harsher counterinsurgency measures and impunity for its Marcos-era abuses, the Aquino government acquiesced.

In the decade that followed, successive Philippine governments made deals with the United States for military assistance and signed truces with Moro separatist groups. But lasting peace remained elusive. Jihadi organizations, including a chapter of the Islamic State, have found fertile ground for recruitment in Mindanao, the country's poorest region. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Philippines pledged itself as an ally

in Washington's war on terrorism, and in 2002, U.S. forces returned to Mindanao, 100 years after their colonial occupation of the island. The United States advised the Philippine army and joined in jungle patrols to hunt down Islamist extremists. The two countries conducted joint military exercises and exchanged intelligence.

When Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines, in 2016, he unleashed a bloody war on drugs, reviving the death squads and the surveillance and psychological warfare machinery of the Marcos era. Human rights groups have estimated that the police and death squads killed as many as 30,000 people suspected of drug use or involvement in drug trafficking. Some death squads left dead bodies, with their heads wrapped in tape, on Manila's streets with signs declaring, "drug lord." (Today, with Marcos's son, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., as president, the police continue to execute unarmed people suspected of drug crimes.) When U.S. President Barack Obama criticized this approach, however, Duterte accused Obama of hypocrisy, referring to the hundreds of Moros killed during the U.S. occupation and saying, "As a matter of fact, we inherited this problem from the United States. Why? Because they invaded this country and made us their subjugated people."

In 2017, hundreds of militants linked to the Islamic State seized Marawi, a city in central Mindanao, holding it for five months. In response, the Philippine army carried out a campaign to retake the city; in military operations that received support from the United States and other countries, around 1,000 militants were killed. But ground

and aerial assaults reduced the city, a hub of Islamic education and culture, to rubble, and thousands were displaced. Residents resented both the militants' terror tactics and the government's excessive response.

LOST GROUND

The violence that the Philippines has suffered in the last several decades, as well as its remaining ethnic and social tensions, can be traced to the legacy of imperial oppression. By the time of the Bud Dajo massacre, most Filipinos in the rest of the country had already grown weary of battle and surrendered to the United States. They paid taxes, learned English in public schools, and were introduced to U.S.-style elections. Rebel leaders, tempted by the rewards of colonial office, shifted from fighting for independence to campaigning for votes. Many Filipinos conveniently forgot the past as they sought to accommodate to colonial rule. U.S.-style public schools taught generations of Filipinos about the superiority of American democracy and way of life, while the colonial bureaucracy employed the nascent middle class.

The Moros were the last holdouts. Wagner describes how, in early 1905, many of them who lived on the island of Jolo fled to Bud Dajo, refusing to pay the poll tax or send their children to public schools out of fear that doing so would erode their religion and introduce unwanted American values. Moro leaders, Wagner points out, also had other motives: they were concerned about losing their authority, and the United States had banned the form of debt-servitude slavery practiced in Mindanao, a critical source of wealth for the Moros.

Most of all, according to the Canadian Filipino scholar Cesar Andres-Miguel Suva, those who held out on Bud Dajo objected to the "bewildering and inconsistent justice" dispensed by the colonizers, which only worsened, rather than resolved, local conflicts over issues such as cattle thefts. They preferred the mediation of the *datus*, their traditional leaders, who understood their people's notions of honor and morality. They considered the Americans unjust and immoral and, therefore, unfit to rule.

Despite American claims that the attack on Bud Dajo would pacify the restive Moros, the unrest continued. In 1913, U.S. troops killed 400 Moros who had entrenched themselves on Bud Bagsak, another mountain on Jolo. Many U.S. soldiers continued to believe myths about their adversaries. They claimed that .38-caliber revolvers were ineffective against the "unstoppable" Moros, prompting the army to issue .45-caliber pistols. Wagner notes that Americans viewed the Moros as "irredeemable fanatics" who would run amok at the slightest provocation. This belief justified, in their eyes, the use of indiscriminate violence against the Muslim minority—presaging, in Wagner's view, the abuses of the post-9/11 era.

During the near 50-year U.S. colonial regime, American officials in Manila encouraged landless farmers from Christian provinces to settle in Mindanao. The government gave these settlers the right to occupy land previously ruled by Moros and other indigenous tribes, intensifying local resentment. After World War II, the independent Philippine government promoted even larger-scale migration to Mindanao to alleviate land pressures elsewhere

in the country. By the late 1960s, the Moros had become a poor and displaced minority in their ancestral land.

NOT EVEN PAST

Today, Moros constitute somewhere between six and ten percent of the population of the Philippines. They maintain that their unique history and religion set them apart from the colonized, Christianized Filipinos. During Spain's colonial rule of the Philippines, which lasted from the mid-sixteenth century until 1898, Spanish priests staged folk dramas in town plazas; called *moro-moro*, the performances featured Christian soldiers dramatically capturing Islamic strongholds. Among Catholic Filipinos, the stereotype of the Moros as dangerous heathens lingers, and discrimination against them remains widespread.

Scarred by colonial and postcolonial violence, Muslim Mindanao remains a volatile region. Most Filipinos do not learn in school about Bud Dajo and other American atrocities or about many of the abuses of the postcolonial era, so they do not understand the Moros' deep-seated animosity toward American power or their desire for autonomy from the central Philippine state. And the governments in Manila and Washington, close allies in a contest with China, have little interest in digging up the past.

The national blindness to the depth of Moro resentment has led Philippine politicians and policymakers to treat Moros as wayward children who can be set right through minor concessions, or if those fail, through force. And the perception of Moro recalcitrance has been reinforced by predatory Moro elites who have thrived in the decades of persistent conflict, amassing land and wealth, monopolizing elected posts, and controlling the illicit economy of firearms, drugs, and goods smuggled from the southern border.

In recent years, however, there have been some signs of uneven progress. In 2014, the Philippine government signed a peace agreement with the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front that, for the first time, recognized "the legitimate grievances and claims" of the Moro people and paved the way for greater autonomy. In 2019, former members of the organization began to govern the new autonomous Bangsamoro region in central Mindanao, and the new region's first elections are scheduled for May 2025.

The agreement stipulates that the group's fighters be decommissioned and integrated into the national military and police. But that process has stalled; the rebels fear that if they give up their arms, they will lose their leverage over the national government and be unable to demand that it follow through on the agreement's other provisions, including amnesty for combatants. The Philippine government has also not yet managed to disband all the private armed groups in Bangsamoro, which are supported by local politicians and powerful clans and have been linked to a spate of killings in the region in recent years.

The elections in May will test the stability of the newly autonomous Bangsamoro region. But looking further into the future, a lasting, long-term peace will take root only if the Moros feel safe in their homeland and heard by their political leaders.

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

Waste Land: A World in Permanent Crisis
BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN. Random House, 2025, 224 pp.

Kaplan offers a bleak vision of a world in permanent political upheaval. Taking his title from T. S. Eliot's famous poem about civilizational breakdown in the wake of World War I, Kaplan sees the contemporary period as a similar moment, in which the political and institutional foundations of order are eroding both within and between states. In a theme that echoes across his writings, Kaplan argues that from ancient to modern times, "anarchy" tends to break out when "hierarchy"—manifest in monarchy, imperial order, and other forms of political domination—gives way, creating vacuums of legitimate political authority that are quickly filled with chaos and conflict. The imperial and hegemonic orders of the past were killed off in the twentieth century by the two world wars. In this century, China, Russia, and the United States are the last remaining imperial powers, and they are all, in different ways, in decline, ushering in a postmodern world of disarray and discord. Invoking the German philosopher Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Kaplan laments the corrosive forces of liberal modernity, which erode the stabilizing functions of the ancien régime and in the name of progress threaten to make the world a waste land.

Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization
BY RICHARD SEYMOUR. Verso, 2024, 288 pp.

In this original and richly argued book, Seymour takes the reader into the dark and disturbing political and psychological underworld of apocalyptic right-wing nationalism. In recent decades, far-right parties and movements have grown in strength in Brazil, India, the Philippines, the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Seymour argues that today's far-right groups seek to harness resentment, humiliation, and suffering across class lines in a revolt against the liberal way of life—defined notably by pluralism and social inclusion. They

want to restore the "traditional consolations of family, race, religion, and nationhood, including the chance to humiliate others." Far-right nationalism promises that the people and the state are one. Seymour argues that "disaster nationalism" emerges when this unity is threatened. Disaster nationalism is triggered by the fear of losing social distinction, the anxiety felt by those who held high positions in old hierarchies when facing, for instance, the advance of gender ideology, calls for the redistribution of wealth, and critiques of the nation-state's dark history. The far right has come to define its struggle as one not about policy agenda but about the fate of nation and civilization.

The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge With AI
BY RAY KURZWEIL. Viking, 2024, 432 pp.

Kurzweil, a computer scientist and futurist at Google, argues that the world is on the doorstep of a technological revolution so profound it will alter what it means to be human. In the coming decades, life on earth will be radically transformed by the arrival of "the Singularity," the complex uniting of the human brain, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence. Human intelligence will expand many millions of times, unlocking vastly increased capacities for ultrasophisticated and abstract cognition, and with it awesome new powers for collective problem solving, but also for courting civilizational catastrophe. Although many futurists argue that AI will increasingly compete with human intelligence, the Singularity hypothesis is that machine intelligence will merge with human life. Kurzweil imagines a future in which humans will have extraordinary capacities to produce transcendent new ideas and direct the tools of science to improve human health and well-being, such as by defeating disease and even aging. But Kurzweil also warns of the many existential risks inherent in the coming AI-driven revolution, including new nuclear weapons, bioengineered pandemics, and self-replicating machines that bypass human judgment and control.

In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea
BY JONATHAN WHITE. Profile Books, 2024, 264 pp.

White offers a learned and thought-provoking reflection on the travails of modern democracy. Flaws, dysfunctions, and injustices are inherent in democratic government. But over the centuries, such maladies have not proved fatal for democracy because citizens and leaders have believed that errors can be corrected in the years ahead. If people see the future as open, losing in electoral democracy, for instance, is not calamitous—they can always try again. White worries that democratic societies increasingly fear that time is not on their side. The growing prospect of catastrophic climate change, for example, conjures a bleak future of restricted possibilities. Looking back over the last two centuries, White explores the many ways that ideas about the future have framed how people engage with one another

across political divides. He shows that many of the most momentous political movements and doctrines of the past, from nineteenth-century utopianism to twentieth-century fascism, have been driven by elaborate notions of future transformations. White places his hopes in civic activism and liberalism's enduring conviction that a distant horizon of infinite possibility still exists.

Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship
BY ALEXANDER LEE AND JACK PAINE. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 320 pp.

In this pathbreaking empirical study, Lee and Paine illuminate the complex ways in which colonialism shaped the prospects for democracy in countries emerging from imperial rule. Surveying over a hundred countries that gained independence from Western powers over the last three centuries, the book finds that colonies that allowed electoral assemblies and other representative bodies had greatly improved chances for building functional postcolonial democracies. Some countries with long exposure to colonial elections, such as India and Jamaica, had a nonwhite middle class that spoke the colonizer's language and lobbied the metropole state for electoral representation. In the case of white settler colonies, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, the development of early representative assemblies and the expansion of suffrage did not threaten the white political elite's hold on power. In the decades after World War II, countries with a long experience of colonial pluralism tended to remain democratic, with electoral reforms deepening over time. In newly independent countries with a more limited experience of representative politics during colonial rule, political parties were weaker, and local elites struggled to check military coups and executive power grabs.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

Growth: A History and a Reckoning
BY DANIEL SUSSKIND. Belknap Press, 2024, 304 pp.

Susskind grapples with two fundamental questions about economic growth. First, do conventional measures of growth, such as the change in a country's gross national product, omit key aspects of collective social welfare, such as environmental quality and income inequality? Second, insofar as growth is associated with environmental degradation and inequality, are societies now approaching the point at which its costs exceed its benefits? GDP, the author acknowledges, is indeed an inadequate measure of well-being, although it can be extended to more meaningfully capture the health of a society. But doing so will not solve the underlying dilemma of how to balance increases in material consumption against the maintenance of environmental standards, equity in income distribution, and other hard-to-quantify social

goals. Susskind pushes back against the contention that the scope for economic growth is now greatly diminished and that humankind, in order to save the planet, must transition to no growth. There is no limit, he observes, to potential new ideas that promise to raise living standards while addressing concerns about the environment, inequality, and the direction of technological change. If there are limits to growth, these lie rather in people's capacity to make the hard political decisions needed to sustain it.

Punishing Putin: Inside the Global Economic War to Bring Down Russia
BY STEPHANIE BAKER. Scribner, 2024, 368 pp.

Baker, a veteran journalist, offers a deeply sourced investigation into the political economy of the sanctions imposed on Russia following its attack on Ukraine. Starting with U.S. efforts in 2022 to seize the *Amadea*, a Russian oligarch's mega-yacht, and concluding with the debate over whether to confiscate Bank of Russia reserves held by Euroclear, the Belgium-based custodian for securities holdings and transactions, she provides colorful detail on the cat-and-mouse game between Western governments and Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime. Sanctions would have been more effective, Baker argues, had Western governments been quicker to apply them to the Russian elite. Their impact would have been stronger had governments not waited nine months to cap oil prices and had they credibly threatened consequences for countries complicit in Putin's efforts to evade sanctions. She concludes that, notwithstanding contrary evidence, sanctions have been deeply damaging to the Russian economy. Although they have not forced Putin to abandon his military campaign, they have significantly slowed the country's progress on the battlefield.

Central Bank Capitalism: Monetary Policy in Times of Crisis
BY JOSCHA WULLWEBER. Stanford University Press, 2024, 258 pp.

Wullweber argues that financial markets in advanced economies can no longer function without "unconventional policies" from central banks. By unconventional policies, he means the asset purchase programs and other methods through which central banks supply credit and liquidity to distressed financial institutions and markets. These programs were once understood as exceptional measures put in place in response to exceptional events, but now, he argues, they have become indispensable in the day-to-day operation of the financial system and the economy. Unfortunately, these exceptional measures, pursued in the name of financial stability, have also enabled the growth of shadow banking—financial transactions undertaken outside the commercial banking system by hedge funds, private equity funds, and mortgage companies. Shadow banking has thus become the new locus of financial instability, in turn requiring additional unconventional central bank lending and asset purchase programs. The inevitable result is yet more shadow banking and ever more financial instability.

The Green Frontier: Assessing the Economic Implications of Climate Action
EDITED BY JEAN PISANI-FERRY AND ADAM S. POSEN. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2024, 528 pp.

This book presents thoughtful essays on the macroeconomic effects of economic policies that seek to mitigate global warming and reach the Paris agreement's target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Contributors ask, for instance, whether a tax on carbon is sufficient to achieve this goal or whether such taxation should be supplemented by other policies, such as subsidies encouraging the development of green technologies. They assess the budgetary implications of the European Union's carbon tax, contrasting it with tax credits for electric vehicles and subsidies for clean energy generation in the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act. Importantly, contributors distinguish the efficiency advantages of different policy interventions—that is, their ability to reduce emissions at the lowest possible cost—from their political economy effects. Climate action can have very different impacts on different segments of society, threatening a backlash from those who experience the negative effects of these policies without receiving compensatory side payments.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

A Measure Short of War: A Brief History of Great Power Subversion
BY JILL KASTNER AND WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH. Oxford University Press, 2025, 304 pp.

Prompted by the ease with which Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Kastner and Wohlforth ask whether the Russian intervention really was an unprecedented and uniquely audacious episode. Their brisk, lively, and skeptical history of subversion starts with ancient times, stops off in early modern Europe before moving on to recent centuries, and ends with a look forward. The rivalries between Greek city-states led to the regular use of bribery to encourage shifts in loyalties and stoke rebellions. The printing press encouraged malicious propaganda, and now the digital age has opened new opportunities for the spread of disinformation. The authors focus on activities undertaken by countries that are not at war but remain wary of one another and hope to weaken their targets and produce a change in policy—or even topple a regime. Subversion is a relatively cheap weapon, and in principle deniable, but it does not achieve results easily, especially when used against paranoid states. The discovery of attempts at subversion invites retaliation and leads to the loss of trust between countries that might otherwise have managed their relations through diplomacy.

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A Day in September: The Battle of Antietam and the World It Left Behind BY STEPHEN BUDIANSKY. Norton, 2024, 304 pp.

Budiansky focuses on the Battle of Antietam, which took place during the American Civil War in 1862 and left some 3,600 soldiers killed and 16,000 wounded. A military draw, it became a political victory for the Union, ensuring that the Confederacy would not receive international recognition and providing President Abraham Lincoln with the opportunity to unveil his Emancipation Proclamation less than four months later. Although this is a much-studied encounter, Budiansky's consideration of nine people caught up in the battle and its aftermath is thoughtful and insightful. The cast includes the two opposing generals: Robert E. Lee, the Confederate commander recklessly determined to take the war to the Union, and George McClellan, the Union leader so chronically cautious that he was incapable of decisive action even when Lee's battle plans fell into his lap. Budiansky also highlights the professionalization of medical care at the front under the guidance of the battlefield doctor John Letterman, how the nurse Clara Barton exaggerated her humanitarian work, the ghoulish fascination prompted by the photographer Alexander Gardner's staged images of dead soldiers, and the reflections on the war's meaning crafted by the jurist and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., after he survived being shot through the neck while fighting for the Union.

The Neptune Factor: Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Concept of Sea Power BY NICHOLAS A. LAMBERT. Naval Institute Press, 2024, 448 pp.

Lambert, a naval historian, insists that the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the nineteenth-century naval officer and historian who is the United States' greatest naval thinker, has come to be unfairly dismissed as simplistic and outdated. He argues that scholars should not emphasize Mahan's preoccupation with winning decisive battles but instead appreciate his grasp of sea power's economic dimensions and its value as an essential part of national strategy. It is unclear that Mahan's reputation needs rescuing in this way or is quite as relevant to the contemporary world as Lambert claims, but the author has written a fresh and readable biography with new material. It follows Mahan's studies of British naval ascendancy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then his career as pundit and advocate for sea power. In the process, Lambert illuminates the debates surrounding the development of the U.S. Navy in the aftermath of the Civil War. Lambert shows how Mahan's thinking developed over time as the strategist came to stress the importance of blockades and destroying the enemy's commerce.

Book and Dagger: How Scholars and Librarians Became the Unlikely Spies of World War II
BY ELYSE GRAHAM. Ecco, 2024, 400 pp.

Graham argues that scholars of the humanities contributed to victory in World War II by transforming the practice of intelligence agencies. Scavenging for every piece of relevant information, including apparently arcane books, these academics found clues about what the enemy was up to and guides to the places where landings would take place and battles would be fought. Their training in piecing together large amounts of disparate information allowed them to support both acts of sabotage and large-scale military operations. This is a world of libraries, index cards, and filing cabinets. Employed by the Office of Strategic Services, they worked alongside the United Kingdom's intelligence agencies. Many stories are packed into this vigorous and engaging book, but at its heart are the Chicago archivist Adele Kibre and, from Yale, the English professor Joseph Curtiss and the historian Sherman Kent, who had an impressive line in profanity. Descriptions of the initial training in the United Kingdom used to turn academics into spies provide fascinating detail on the crafts of information gathering and deception—as well as of sabotage and assassination.

A Capital Calamity: A Novel
BY FRED KAPLAN. Miniver Press, 2024, 177 pp.

As an experienced observer of the entanglements in Washington between policymakers and think tanks, Kaplan skewers the Beltway effectively in his satirical novel, a thriller and morality tale that affords some light relief in dark times. The defense consultant Serge Willoughby plays a prank on his host at a Georgetown party that completely backfires to the point that not only is the host arrested but also skirmishing between the United States and China begins and World War III looms. Working closely with the director of the CIA, an ex-girlfriend, a possible future girlfriend, and others, Willoughby helps defuse the crisis. The hero represents the greed and cynicism of the Beltway; his consultancy specializes in studies that help one U.S. military service make a case for a new weapon—while providing another service with the case against the weapon. But Kaplan affords his protagonist a measure of redemption. The author claims that the plot is made up, but the knowing reader will recognize aspects of the main characters and events in contemporary figures and historical episodes.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

John Lewis: A Life
BY DAVID GREENBERG. Simon & Schuster, 2024, 704 pp.

Greenberg manages to avoid hagiography in telling the story of an exemplary life. From his youth, the civil rights leader John Lewis displayed extraordinary physical courage, fierce dedication, an almost superhuman commitment to nonviolence, and political skills that eventually earned him the sobriquet "the conscience of the Congress." Born the third of ten children in a home without electricity or plumbing in Alabama, Lewis came early to his calling as a preacher, baptizing and eulogizing the chickens he cared for. Although not a natural orator, he was the youngest and one of the more powerful speakers at the 1963 March on Washington and was the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a leading organization of civil rights activists, from 1963 to 1966. Across the South, he endured savage beatings, including one that left him with a fractured skull, and over 40 jailings. Acclaimed as a champion of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, he won the congressional seat he would hold for the rest of his life in 1986. This is a richly detailed, moving biography of a towering figure and encompasses much of the history of the civil rights movement, as well.

Polarized by Degrees: How the Diploma Divide and the Culture War Transformed American Politics
BY MATT GROSSMAN AND DAVID A. HOPKINS. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 398 pp.

Possession of a college degree is a defining trait of people who have voted against Donald Trump in recent U.S. presidential contests. In their deeply researched account, Grossman and Hopkins delve into the implications of a related but less widely appreciated trend: the very rapid growth in the number of college-educated Americans in recent decades. Since 1970, the proportion of Americans who have such degrees has more than tripled to almost 40 percent. At roughly the same time, there has been a rapid leftward shift in cultural attitudes on issues such as same-sex marriage, criminal justice reform, and the decriminalization of marijuana. These separate but related trends in education and culture have collided with the limited choice available in the United States' two-party system. In a broad realignment, college graduates who once reliably voted Republican gradually shifted to the Democratic Party, while white working men and women who did not attend college left the Democratic Party that traditionally represented their economic interests. Political affiliation became less a matter of policy than one of identity, producing a widening divide that is hard to bridge.

Landing the Paris Climate Agreement: How It Happened, Why It Matters, and What Comes Next
BY TODD STERN. MIT Press, 2024, 280 pp.

This elegantly written volume recounts the seven years during which Stern led the U.S. team involved in climate diplomacy under the Obama administration. The effort culminated in the Paris agreement on climate change, reached in the last days of 2015. Unlike many other diplomatic histories, Stern's account does not get bogged down in dry expositions about proposals and memos. Details and the big picture are finely balanced throughout. The personalities of the key players come alive. Stern offers a revisionist view of the "bitter, turbulent, acrimonious" UN climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, arguing that it was not the failure that many at the time considered it to be but rather the turning point away from a framework that was not working toward one that might. The account of the painstaking American effort to find common ground with China, led by a deeply committed U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, is worthwhile reading even for those whose primary interest is U.S.-Chinese relations rather than climate. The volume will be of equal interest to those who are new to the ongoing quest to contain this existential threat and to veteran observers of the ups and downs of climate diplomacy.

Seven Social Movements That Changed America
BY LINDA GORDON. Liveright, 2025, 528 pp.

Gordon, a noted historian of the United States, seeks to understand how social movements arise and operate, in the belief that these movements have changed the world as significantly as have wars or individual leaders. Gordon's seven cases range from the late-nineteenth-century settlement house movement, which sought to alleviate poverty and inequality, to the twentieth-century struggle for women's liberation, the largest social movement in American history. In the latter case, she makes a less than satisfying choice to focus on two obscure Boston-based groups rather than on the well-known major players in the movement. She also examines the beginnings of the civil rights movement through the Montgomery bus boycott that began in 1955 and the organizing of Cesar Chavez among Latino agricultural workers in the 1950s and 1960s. Not all significant social movements were progressive: Gordon also sketches the largely nonviolent northern branch of the nativist and racist Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, as well as its highly violent progeny, the 1930s American fascist movement. These cases have such a variety of structures and outcomes that the discrete stories are more interesting than the few lessons Gordon is able to draw from them as a whole.

Partisan Nation: The Dangerous New Logic of American Politics in a Nationalized Era
BY PAUL PIERSON AND ERIC SCHICKLER. University of Chicago Press, 2024, 336 pp.

Pierson and Schickler explain why the long-held assumption that competition in the United States' two-party system will drive both parties to compete for voters in the center no longer holds. Thanks to the constitutionally imposed asymmetries of the Senate and the Electoral College, a minority party can exercise power without turning to the center. Bad enough on their own, these distortions are amplified by a fragmented media landscape, gerrymandering, and widespread efforts by state legislatures to impose voter restrictions. The two parties are most starkly divided now on cultural issues rather than on the economic lines that once separated left from right, making a centrist compromise to produce policy solutions seem less and less important. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham was thus wrong when he warned his party in 2012, "We're not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term." The authors see little hope of constitutional change to fix the "glaring mismatch" between the current party system and the country's inherited institutions. Instead, they suggest a few reforms they believe to be modest yet urgent to strengthen political parties and empower the political center.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Hitler's People: The Faces of the Third Reich
BY RICHARD J. EVANS. Penguin Press, 2024, 624 pp.

Who would support fascism today? To answer this question, Evans, a distinguished historian of modern Germany, examines the lives of 23 individuals in Nazi Germany. To understand why Germans at different levels of society backed Hitler, scholars often cite people's deep commitment to Nazi ideology; the hatred of Jews, homosexuals, Romani, or Communists; or sheer psychopathic sadism. But Evans argues that, to the contrary, few Germans truly shared such inclinations. Even those closest to Hitler were generally tempted into evil by an overriding desire to make Germany great again after the humiliating defeat of World War I and to take advantage of the opportunities created by the Third Reich itself. The overwhelming majority of midlevel functionaries and low-level perpetrators were opportunists who carried out Nazi dictates so as to maintain or improve their social and economic positions or to avoid facing coercive pressures that they could not resist. These meticulously researched conclusions may surprise some and anger others, but they bear close reading today.

The Conservative Effect, 2010–2024: 14 Wasted Years?
EDITED BY ANTHONY SELDON AND TOM EGERTON. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 566 pp.

Unleashed
BY BORIS JOHNSON. Harper, 2024, 784 pp.

The Retreat From Strategy: Britain's Dangerous Confusion of Interests With Values
BY DAVID RICHARDS AND JULIAN LINDLEY-FRENCH. Hurst, 2025, 336 pp.

Three recent books on contemporary British politics and foreign policy bring readers through the tumult of the past decade to the uncertainty that lies ahead. In *The Conservative Effect*, a must-read book, more than a dozen policy experts offer detailed, thoughtful, and balanced assessments of policies pursued by the Conservative governments that ruled the United Kingdom during the last decade and a half. The conclusions are sobering. To be sure, British primary and secondary education has seen some improvements, and after early indecision, the government's COVID-19 vaccine policy was reasonably effective. Yet success was rare. Economic austerity under Conservative rule ushered in rising levels of debt, falling investment, and tepid productivity and income growth. Approval ratings for the National Health Service went from the highest on record to the lowest. The Conservatives' tough talk about defending Ukraine hardly makes up for the own goal they scored by forcing through Brexit—a policy that failed even to control immigration while undermining almost every other aspect of British foreign policy. Northern Ireland and Scotland remain disgruntled. Conservative governments, the editors conclude, pursued the most "divided and ideologically incoherent policy" of any since the 1840s. No other governments "achieved so little" or "left the country . . . in a more troubling state."

The memoirs of former national leaders are rarely entertaining, insightful, or revealing. Johnson, who was the British prime minister from 2019 to 2022, seems at first to offer an exception. His coy narrative voice and audacious insouciance, thinly disguised under a patina of classical Oxford education and self-deprecating wit, amuse the reader for several hundred pages. Yet *Unleashed* has almost 800. One soon tires of self-justification and begins to search for a glimpse of the political motivations underlying Johnson's actions in office. No such revelations emerge. This caginess would be unimportant were it not that Johnson's actions—many officially judged as procedurally unconstitutional and involving lies to the queen, Parliament, and the public—were both consequential and controversial. Without those actions, the United Kingdom's global reputation today would surely be quite different. Ultimately, this book reads like a pitch for the author's continued public prominence, couched in the media-savvy political rhetoric that increasingly dominates modern democracies.

Written by two British military experts, including a decorated general,

The Retreat From Strategy offers advice to the new Labour government. It advances a view shared by many U.S. defense planners—and, to judge from his statements, the incoming American president. European countries, the authors argue, should spend up to one percent more of GDP on defense than they do now, which would be an increase of up to 50 percent. Those funds would, at least initially, be spent largely on U.S. arms imports. The authors defend this proposal with a 20-page acronym-packed scenario describing a successful combined Chinese-Russian defeat of NATO. Yet readers learn little about the most important practical concern: where the money should come from. Nor do the authors consider whether tax increases, cuts in civilian foreign assistance (for example, to stabilize and rebuild Ukraine), or diminished social, infrastructure, and education spending would truly render the United Kingdom more secure. Where the book makes more sense is to point out that British military involvement outside Europe—the so-called Global Britain strategy pursued by the previous Conservative governments—is more symbolic than real and perhaps should be cut to prioritize the defense of Europe.

The Laissez-Faire Experiment: Why Britain Embraced and Then Abandoned Small Government, 1800–1914
BY W. WALKER HANLON. Princeton University Press, 2024, 504 pp.

No modern experiment in libertarian governance was as thorough as that of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century. The country rose to global economic dominance, established a national infrastructure, and managed a far-flung empire, all with modest government regulation, low tariffs, and limited public spending that rarely topped ten percent of GDP. Why did the British abandon such policies? The answer lies in the processes of industrialization that took hold over the course of the century. Almost immediately, regulation was required to prevent child labor, unsafe work practices, and pollution. Dirty water, inadequate sewage treatment, and the spread of disease made cities unsafe—a problem that proved impossible to solve without more direct government intervention. The need for reliable rail, road, telegraph, shipping, and energy infrastructures freed from exploitative monopolies also invited the further involvement of the state. Depressions, recessions, and famines in the nineteenth century brought catastrophic unemployment and poverty, which governments had to offset. Private and parochial schools could not educate the workforce required by a sophisticated economy, so the government had to make primary education compulsory and free by the end of the nineteenth century. Contemporary libertarian proposals for lower taxes and reduced government intervention might do well to keep these British lessons in mind.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

"Uncool and Incorrect" in Chile: The Nixon Administration and the Downfall of Salvador Allende
BY STEPHEN M. STREETER. McFarland, 2023, 320 pp.

The culpability of U.S. President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, in the violent overthrow in 1973 of Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile, remains hotly contested. Thoroughly reviewing the voluminous primary and secondary sources, Streeter concludes that the United States was not directly involved in the coup but that Washington helped create a climate of frenzied polarization that provoked the Chilean military's bloody takeover. Streeter documents the CIA's support for opposition movements in Chile and its role in spreading disinformation via Chilean media, as well as the surreptitious U.S.-imposed "invisible blockade" that callously starved Chile's economy of external financing. Nevertheless, he argues, domestic factors, such as Allende's mismanagement of the economy and tensions within the president's coalition, played a more decisive role. Streeter wonders what decisions might have preempted the military coup: for example, Allende might have tried to negotiate a coalition government with the center-right Christian Democrats or agreed to a plebiscite on his rule. But deepening polarization purposefully abetted by U.S. policies blocked a peaceful compromise.

Development Traps in Latin America and the Caribbean: Vital Transformations and How to Manage Them
BY THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION ON LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN. United Nations, 2024, 287 pp.

In this state-of-the-art comprehensive study, UN economists take a starkly dim view of Latin America's overall performance. The contributors follow with a daunting list of policy prescriptions to energize growth, overcome inequalities, build more inclusive cities, accelerate the green transition, and fix governmental inefficiencies—complex, intertwined transformations that, the document insists, must be implemented simultaneously to be effective. Many of the reforms proposed here would require an activist and competent state, which suggests that quite a few countries would need to monumentally overhaul their governments' operations. Growth-oriented economists will welcome the emphasis many contributors place on boosting macroeconomic performance and labor productivity to address long-standing economic divides and gender gaps. This refreshingly candid UN document recognizes the region's multiple social fissures and urges dialogues among key sectors to ensure that reform is durable. Yet some wary policymakers may find the UN's elaborate recipes too ambitious and overwhelming to be workable.

Sin Padres, Ni Papeles: Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Coming of Age in the United States
BY STEPHANIE L. CANIZALES.
University of California Press, 2024, 338 pp.

Canizales, a sociologist, offers a full-blown defense of the rights of young migrants arriving illegally in the United States from Mexico and Central America. In her view, U.S. imperialism is responsible for the violence and poverty of the migrants' home countries; similarly, the inequalities and injustices of "neoliberalism" lead to the alienation and exploitation of undocumented workers in the United States. Consequently, Canizales advocates public policies that relax asylum procedures, support households receiving migrants, and help migrants adapt to American life. The author's in-depth interviews with 75 young migrants, the majority of them from Guatemala and living in Los Angeles, provide the more original and evidence-rich core of the book. The median age of the interviewees at the time they traveled north was 16; when Canizales speaks with them, they are older, and many are working full time in the garment and hospitality industries. She empathetically traces their personal evolutions through trauma and disorientation—including, for some, the "perdition" of loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem—to gradual adaptation, material stability, and emotional growth.

Killing the Elites: Haiti, 1964
BY JEAN-PHILIPPE BELLEAU.
Columbia University Press, 2024, 400 pp.

In 1964, henchmen of the Haitian dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier notoriously murdered 27 relatively well-off "mulattos," or mixed-race persons of lighter skin color, in the small provincial town of Jérémie. Historians of Haiti typically ascribe such massacres to uprisings of the downtrodden poor against exploitative elites. In this elegant and erudite revisionist study, Belleau, an anthropologist, refutes such "blame the victim" excuses for mass violence. To build his own account, the author interviewed 63 people, including witnesses and perpetrators of the slaughter. His well-documented conclusion is that far from being a spontaneous local uprising, the Jérémie killings were directly orchestrated from the presidential palace to instill terror and submission in the general population. Locals were then given license to loot the victims' properties. Irrational mob vengeance was not the driver behind the executions: Belleau accuses Duvalier of manipulating the philosophy of "negritude," which sought to articulate and promote the value of Blackness, to stigmatize the mulattos as effete, scornful "others," as illegitimate foreigners, as individuals and families deserving of hatred and vengeful violence—all to solidify his own hold on power.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

Patriot: A Memoir
BY ALEXEI NAVALNY. Knopf, 2024, 496 pp.

The posthumous memoir by Navalny, the late Russian opposition leader, mingles the account of a politician with the story of a martyr. He recalls his childhood as a boisterous boy with a strong sense of humor. At university, where he studied law, he initially saw himself as "a shy nerd pretending to be a cool dude." As Navalny matured in the 1990s, he grew increasingly outraged by pervasive corruption. His transformation into a relentless anticorruption crusader soon revealed his extraordinary political talent: he earned trust and inspired people to join his cause. He was charismatic, funny, inventive, and unstoppable. By his mid-30s, Navalny had become Russia's most prominent opposition figure, lauded by crowds of supporters. His rise to nationwide popularity made his presidential aspirations feel inevitable. But in President Vladimir Putin's Russia, Navalny's political audacity made him a target for elimination. Poisoned with a nerve agent in 2020, he miraculously survived and recuperated abroad. His return to Russia in 2021 with the knowledge that he would be imprisoned without hope of release marked his shift from political activism to the highest form of self-sacrifice. His prison diary, featured in the book, reads like a journey into martyrdom.

To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement
BY BENJAMIN NATHANS. Princeton University Press, 2024, 816 pp.

Drawing on extensive new material, including unpublished diaries, private letters, and KGB interrogation transcripts, this insightful history of Soviet dissidents introduces remarkable individuals who courageously and selflessly tried to pursue civil rights from the 1960s through the 1980s. Nathans argues that the dissident movement arose during the monumental shift from Stalin's murderous dictatorship, built on mass mobilization, to a softer regime that expected citizens to pay lip service to its proclaimed tenets and norms. The dissidents, primarily academics and intellectuals, demanded that the state abide by the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Soviet constitution. When arrested and put on trial, they defiantly asserted their convictions, in sharp contrast to the cowed victims of Stalin's show trials. Concerned about their growing influence, the state changed tactics: it confined dissidents to psychiatric asylums or forced them to emigrate. By the mid-1980s, most dissidents had been driven out, imprisoned, or silenced. They cannot take credit for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, but by that time, the Soviet state's inability to abide by its own laws had become obvious to the majority of its people.

From Incarceration to Repatriation: German Prisoners of War in the Soviet Union
BY SUSAN C. I. GRUNEWALD. Cornell University Press, 2024, 258 pp.

Grunewald significantly enhances understandings of the fate of Germans captured by the Soviet Union during World War II. Her archival research demonstrates that the Soviets saw the German prisoners of war as a source of labor at a time when the Soviet Union urgently needed to rebuild and lacked manpower after its enormous war losses. Numerous Soviet enterprises, operating under dozens of ministries, used POWs contracted out by prison camp officials. Grunewald argues that the mistreatment of German POWs and their high death rates were the consequence not of retribution but of negligence, lack of coordination, and severe shortages, especially during the famine that followed the war. Those too weak to work were often repatriated. POWs were also subjected to intense antifascist reeducation so that once home, they would help win support among Germans for the Soviet Union; many former prisoners filled leadership roles in East Germany after the establishment of two German states in 1949. The last POWs returned to Germany in early 1956.

Unstuck in Time: On the Post-Soviet Uncanny
BY ELIOT BORENSTEIN. Cornell University Press, 2024, 216 pp.

In his new book, Borenstein, an indefatigable explorer of contemporary Russian culture, examines the peculiar evocation of time and history in literature, film, video games, and other cultural forms, a discourse generated by the failure of Russians to fully accept the post-Soviet era as their new reality. In this highly popular genre of *popadantsy* (from *popast*, which means roughly to "end up somewhere"), characters find themselves transported to another time, most often to the Soviet past, where they attempt to rectify historical wrongs. For example, they might advise Stalin to eliminate future "traitors" Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in their childhood, thereby preventing the Soviet Union's collapse. Borenstein also explores bizarre groups of people in the real world who define themselves as "Soviet citizens," deny that the Soviet Union ever fell, and dismiss the contemporary Russian Federation as a fiction. Fantasy authors' attempts to envision a postapocalyptic Russia tend to refrain from depicting the future as one marked by what is conventionally imagined as "progress." Borenstein discusses a novel that creates "an atmosphere of intense ressentiment and xenophobic fury" as it imagines Russia's humiliating conquest of the West. In this future Russia, technological innovations consolidate a sociopolitical setup in the mold of the tyranny of the Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible.

M. N. Pokrovskii and the Origins of Soviet Historiography
BY JAMES D. WHITE. Brill, 2024, 312 pp.

This highly readable biography portrays the life of Mikhail Pokrovskii, a Marxist historian, prominent early-

twentieth-century Russian revolutionary, and close comrade of Lenin and Trotsky. Pokrovskii, who was a leading academic authority in the early decades of the Soviet Union, reinterpreted the entirety of Russian history through a Marxist lens and dedicated himself to promoting the Marxist method in historical scholarship. Pokrovskii subscribed to Stalin's version of Marxism-Leninism. Marxist ideas, primarily that economic forces are the main drivers of history, well before they became the cornerstone of the Soviet Union's ideology. But after Lenin's death, in 1924, when Stalin established himself as the unquestioned ideological authority, Pokrovskii dutifully adapted to the new tenets. A few years later, many academics were put on trial for real or imagined scholarly disagreements with the ideological orthodoxy. By that time, Pokrovskii was gravely sick. He was still a broadly respected academic when he died, in 1932, but was posthumously discredited as insufficiently Leninist.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Twenty Years: Hope, War, and the Betrayal of an Afghan Generation
BY SUNE ENGEL RASMUSSEN.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024, 352 pp.

In 2019, 85 percent of Afghans reported that they had experienced trauma. More than half the Afghan population lived below the poverty line—a proportion that would skyrocket after the United States withdrew chaotically in the summer of 2021. That withdrawal brought to a shambolic end the longest war ever fought by the United States. To convey the impact of the two decades of conflict in Afghanistan itself, Rasmussen recounts the stories of half a dozen or so Afghans who came of age during the U.S. invasion, young men and women who navigated a war that came to define their lives. Invoking the American soldiers in full battle gear trying to win hearts and minds by handing out candy, the terrified children swept up in anti-Taliban raids, the U.S.-backed governments in Kabul that were corrupt or ignorant or both, Rasmussen argues that U.S. policy was maladroit, disingenuous, and ultimately incomprehensible. The U.S. intervention raised and dashed the hopes of millions of young Afghans who had believed in American know-how and trusted American promises but were left with only the wreckage of trauma and disillusionment.

Illusions of Control: Dilemmas in Managing U.S. Proxy Forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria
BY ERICA L. GASTON. Columbia University Press, 2024, 419 pp.

Gaston argues that efforts to exercise influence through proxies—what she calls "local, hybrid, and substate forces"—are becoming "normalized" as new technologies permit remote warfare and as fragile states remain weak for decades. As a result, the need to limit predatory, illegal, and corrupt behavior among fighters who are often insurgents and even criminals has compelled U.S. and other Western

officials to screen potential proxy partners for past abuses, train their leaders in human rights and international humanitarian law, and monitor and report illicit activity. Examining nine case studies of U.S. involvement with local proxies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, Gaston concludes that virtually none of those attempts to mitigate the risks of partnering with proxy forces were effective in limiting undesirable behavior, even as they served bureaucratic purposes within the U.S. government and among its international partners and allies. These mechanisms were deployed to protect bureaucratic interests, guard against reputational harm, and distance donors who backed proxy forces from the responsibility for the actions of those forces. Gaston ends with a sobering conclusion: the promise of risk mitigation makes it easier to authorize lethal assistance despite scant evidence that such control mechanisms limit unsavory or destabilizing behavior by the recipients.

The Struggle to Reshape the Middle East in the Twenty-First Century
EDITED BY SAMER S. SHEHATA. Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 336 pp.

Bringing together essays by some of the most prominent political scientists focusing on the Middle East today, this volume documents the upheavals in the region occasioned by the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the uprisings across the region a decade later. During this exceptionally turbulent time, the Middle East was convulsed by the U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, civil war, regime breakdown, state collapse, proxy wars, and refugee flight. Over a million people have died because of this turmoil, and millions more have been displaced while international and regional actors have tried to reshape local coalitions and rework interstate alliances. The unipolar international system led by the United States, once the region's undisputed power, has eroded as Russia and China have made inroads, supporting proxies and developing infrastructure across the region, and U.S. allies, such as Israel and the Gulf states, have scrambled to secure guarantees from the United States as its attention has waned. This book provides indispensable background to any sensible discussion of how the Middle East will adapt to Israel's war in Gaza and Lebanon and how the United States should adjust to new realities, as well.

Hamas: The Quest for Power
BY BEVERLEY MILTON-EDWARDS AND STEPHEN FARRELL. Polity, 2024, 340 pp.

Milton-Edwards and Farrell offer a clear-eyed account of Hamas's development, from its early days in Gaza as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood during the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, or intifada, in 1987 to its shocking attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Dedicated to the proposition that "Islam is the solution," it opposed the Oslo accords of the 1990s as selling out the Palestinian cause, and it became the first popularly elected Islamist party in the Arab world in 2006. Its subsequent takeover in Gaza

gave it a base from which to strengthen its military capacity—and exert draconian rule over the territory and its people. Its steadfast opposition to Israel muted the unhappiness of the Gazans under its control. That opposition, as well as Israeli complacency, was on full display on October 7. Israel's subsequent efforts to destroy Hamas are unlikely to extinguish the cause; as the authors suggest, Hamas's calls to end the occupation and protect Muslim holy places resonate widely. This lucid and perceptive book is a valuable guide to what is at stake in the ongoing conflict.

Heat, a History: Lessons From the Middle East for a Warming Planet
BY ON BARAK. University of California Press, 2024, 328 pp.

Much of the policy discussion of climate change is, understandably, at a global scale. But, as Barak argues, people experience heat not as remotely sensed data points but in rivulets of sweat. In this provocative book, both witty and profoundly serious, he provides a human-scale history of the causes and consequences of rising temperatures in the Middle East. Starting in the early twentieth century, the construction of vast swaths of concrete and asphalt in coastal cities between Beirut and Alexandria created heat islands and drove people to beaches where Arabs and Jews alike encountered unfamiliar immodesty. Air-conditioning, invented in the early twentieth century, allowed the indoor theaters that nurtured the famed Egyptian cinema industry and encouraged the development of the oil industry that fueled mechanical cooling in the scorching Arabian Peninsula. The bustle of city life in Cairo, once celebrated, became a source of miserable congestion as transport became mechanized and streets grew clogged with hot, crowded buses stuck in interminable traffic. Barak brings the abstractions of carbon footprints and greenhouse gas emissions to vivid, tangible life.

Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation
BY TYLER JOST. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 408 pp.

One reason leaders make mistakes is because they rely on bad information. Jost uses 17 case studies of decisions by leaders in China, India, Pakistan, and the United States to show that leaders get good information only when they create bureaucratic institutions capable of telling them the truth. Leaders tend to do this solely when they are politically secure. When Chinese leader Mao Zedong made a smart decision not to escalate a crisis over Taiwan in 1962 and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee chose to use threats rather than force in 2001–2 to respond to Pakistani-sponsored terrorist attacks, it was because the military, diplomatic, and intelligence bureaucracies were able to speak to one another and to the leader, a salutary arrangement that Jost calls "integrated institutions." When leaders erred—such as when Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal

Nehru triggered a war with China in 1962, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam in 1965, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping ordered the invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and Pakistan invaded the Kargil district of Indian-controlled Kashmir in 1999—it was because leaders had either siloed the institutions by preventing them from speaking to one another or fragmented them in ways that blocked them from speaking truth to power. Leaders often choose to be ill advised because they prefer to protect their hold on power.

On Day One: An Economic Contingency Plan for a Taiwan Crisis
BY HUGO BROMLEY AND EYCK FREYMANN. Hoover Institution, 2024, 121 pp.

The threat of economic sanctions is often mentioned as a necessary adjunct to military deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. But Bromley and Freymann show that quick, sweeping decoupling from China is not a credible option in light of the country's importance to the global economy. Instead, they propose a carefully reasoned, step-by-step approach that they label "avalanche decoupling," which they insist would have a greater deterrent effect because it is more realistic. Such a policy would gradually lock China out of the U.S. market while revitalizing free trade norms and reshoring manufacturing jobs among allies and friends; provide aid to affected third countries; and intervene in currency markets to undercut China's ability to finance its trade in yuan. The authors acknowledge that China is making plans to withstand economic coercion, using its Belt and Road Initiative to tie other countries' economies to its own, and investing in key industries to reduce dependency on the West. A U.S. strategy that gradually forces China to become "impoverished and isolated" would require a high degree of consensus at home and cooperation with allies.

The Political Outsider: Indian Democracy and the Lineages of Populism
BY SRIRUPA ROY. Stanford University Press, 2024, 374 pp.

Roy argues that populism in India originated with Indira Gandhi, who as prime minister in 1969 formed a breakaway faction of the ruling Congress Party that campaigned successfully on a platform of righteous popular anger at a corrupt political establishment. The same impulse eventually drove Gandhi from power in 1977 and in the long run opened the door to the victory of India's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, who portrays himself as a political outsider with a mandate to cure the ills of a diseased democracy. What Roy labels "curative democracy" requires an angry public, a partisan media, strongman rule, and a reinforced national identity—in Modi's case, one fostered through Hindu nationalism. She illustrates the argument with in-depth portraits of selected events and institutions. Indian populism emerges in her analysis as typical rather than exceptional, a type of political movement found globally that seeks a return to an imagined healthy past when social conflicts were overridden by the unity of an imagined people.

Late Industrialization, Tradition, and Social Change in South Korea
BY YONG-CHOOL HA. University of Washington Press, 2024, 336 pp.

As South Korea underwent rapid industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, traditional social ties—what Ha and others call neo-familism—became more rather than less important, contrary to what classic modernization theory would have predicted. Ha argues that this happened when government officials, under pressure from the military dictator Park Chung-hee, turned to regional, high school, and family connections to propel a forced march to prosperity. More bureaucrats were recruited from Park's southeastern region than from other areas of the country, and they were promoted faster as well. Government contracts went disproportionately to businesses led by people from high schools overrepresented in the bureaucracy. Personal connections likewise structured the relations of big chaebols, South Korea's corporate conglomerates, with their small and medium-sized suppliers, and even individual citizens' job searches, financial choices, and voting behavior. Other consequences included a fragmented party system and a rash of corruption scandals. Park's industrialization push paradoxically left South Korean social mores even more traditional than they had been in preindustrial times.

Dictatorship on Trial: Coups and the Future of Justice in Thailand
BY TYRELL HABERKORN. Stanford University Press, 2024, 288 pp.

None of Thailand's 13 coup regimes since the first one in 1932 managed to dissolve the court system, make wholesale revisions of the law, or withdraw the country from its international human rights obligations. Yet the courts have always chosen to twist the law to hold coup leaders blameless and validate the repression of protesting citizens. Haberkorn describes five such cases dating from the rule of the country's most recent military regime (2014–19): those of an activist coalition that sued the coup leaders, a young law graduate who protested the coup, three citizens who refused to report for "attitude adjustment" to eliminate their critical views of the regime, two men who peacefully campaigned against the junta's draft constitution, and a defendant in a sedition case who sued over the creation of an abusive detention facility on a military base. In each case, she exposes the court's mendacity by composing the ruling it should have written, one faithful to the facts and the law. The cases illuminate the politics of resistance in Thailand and the pliability of authoritarian law.

Foreign Affairs (ISSN 00157120), January/February 2025, Volume 104, Number 1. Published six times annually (January, March, May, July, September, November) at 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065. Print subscriptions: U.S., $54.95; Canada, $66.95; other countries via air, $89.95 per year. Canadian Publication Mail–Mail # 1572121. Periodicals postage paid in New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Foreign Affairs*, P.O. Box 324, Congers, NY 10920. From time to time, we permit certain carefully screened companies to send our subscribers information about products or services that we believe will be of interest. If you prefer not to receive such information, please contact us at the Congers, NY, address indicated above.

THE ARCHIVE

March/April 2019

"A New Americanism"

JILL LEPORE

During Donald Trump's first term as U.S. president, the historian Jill Lepore took to our pages to explore the American idea. The United States, she argued, has been marked for centuries by a struggle over "competing ideas of the nation-state"—and that struggle hasn't ended. She warned that in the absence of a broad-based effort to craft a coherent national story, "charlatans, stooges, and tyrants" will create their own.

What would a new Americanism and a new American history look like? . . . They might take as their starting point the description of the American experiment and its challenges offered by [Frederick] Douglass in 1869:

"A Government founded upon justice, and recognizing the equal rights of all men; claiming no higher authority for existence, or sanction for its laws, than nature, reason, and the regularly ascertained will of the people; steadily refusing to put its sword and purse in the service of any religious creed or family, is a standing offense to most of the Governments of the world, and to some narrow and bigoted people among ourselves."

At the close of the Cold War, some commentators concluded that the American experiment had ended in triumph, that the United States had become all the world. But the American experiment had not in fact ended. A nation founded on revolution and universal rights will forever struggle against chaos and the forces of particularism. A nation born in contradiction will forever fight over the meaning of its history. But that doesn't mean history is meaningless, or that anyone can afford to sit out the fight.

"The history of the United States at the present time does not seek to answer any significant questions," [the historian Carl] Degler told [an] audience some three decades ago. If American historians don't start asking and answering those sorts of questions, other people will, he warned. . . . They'll lament "American carnage." They'll call immigrants "animals" and other states "shithole countries." They'll adopt the slogan "America first." They'll say they can "make America great again." They'll call themselves "nationalists." Their history will be a fiction. They will say that they alone love this country. They will be wrong.

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