

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS



MAY/JUNE 2024

## Can China Remake the World?

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

MATT POTTINGER & MIKE GALLAGHER

EVAN MEDEIROS

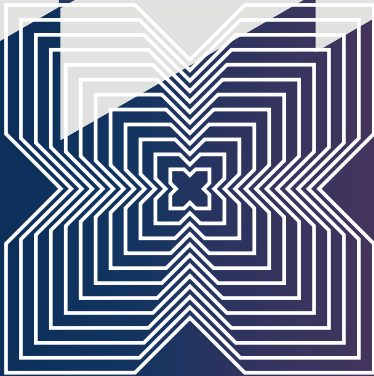
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Russia's Divergent  
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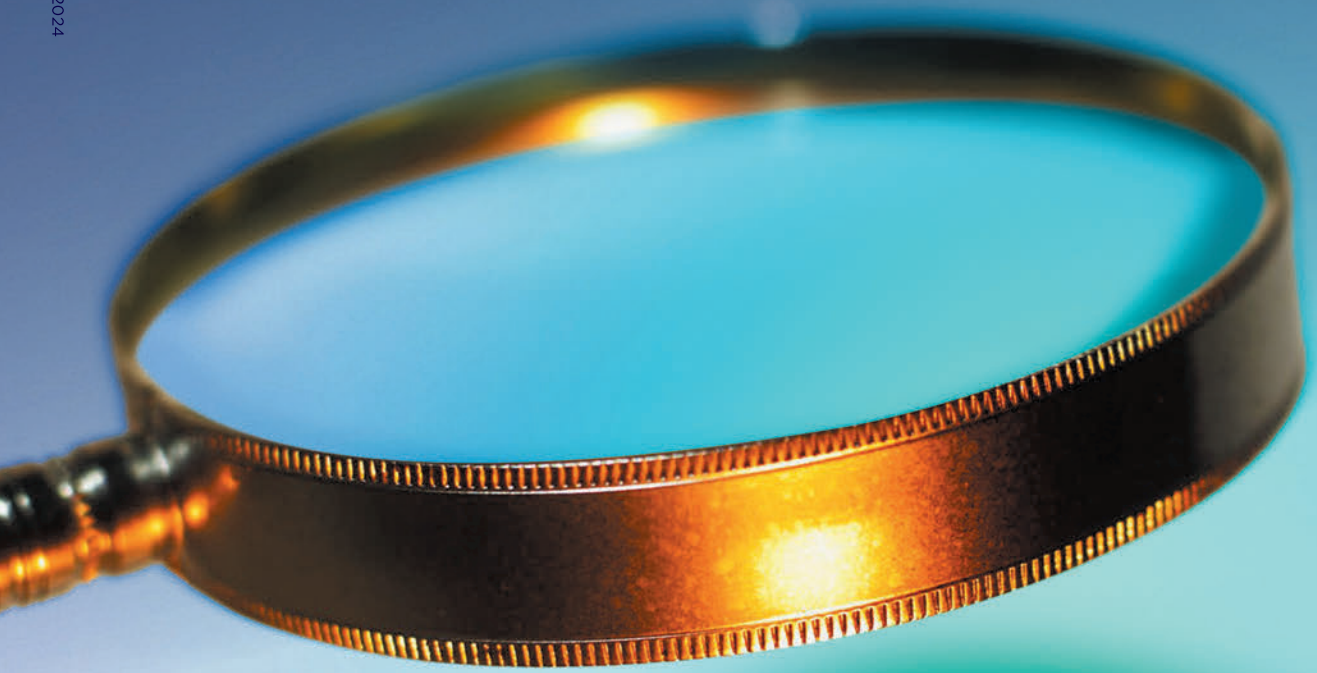
# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor  
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# China's Alternative Order

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## And What America Should Learn From It

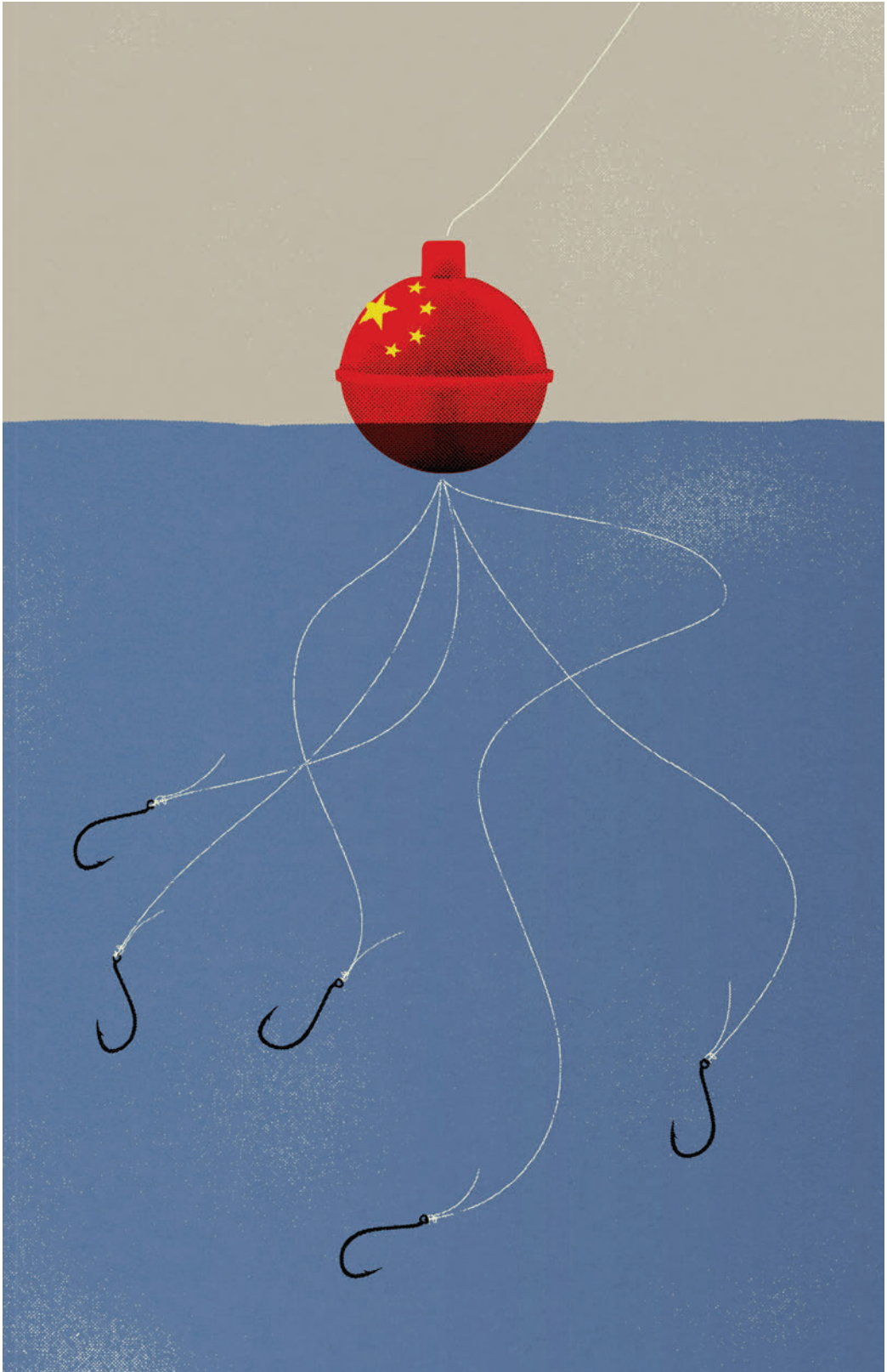
ELIZABETH ECONOMY

**B**y now, Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambition to remake the world is undeniable. He wants to dissolve Washington's network of alliances and purge what he dismisses as "Western" values from international bodies. He wants to knock the U.S. dollar off its pedestal and eliminate Washington's chokehold over critical technology. In his new multipolar order, global institutions and norms will be underpinned by Chinese notions of common security and economic development, Chinese values of state-determined political rights, and Chinese technology. China will no longer have to fight for leadership. Its centrality will be guaranteed.

To hear Xi tell it, this world is within reach. At the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs last December, he boasted that Beijing was (in the words of a government press

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release) a “confident, self-reliant, open and inclusive major country,” one that had created the world’s “largest platform for international cooperation” and led the way in “reforming the international system.” He asserted that his conception for the global order—a “community with a shared future for mankind”—had evolved from a “Chinese initiative” to an “international consensus,” to be realized through the implementation of four Chinese programs: the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative.

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China is  
succeeding in  
making itself  
an agent of  
welcome change.

Outside China, such brash, self-congratulatory proclamations are generally disregarded or dismissed—including by American officials, who have tended to discount the appeal of Beijing’s strategy. It is easy to see why: a large number of China’s plans appear to be failing or backfiring. Many of China’s neighbors are drawing closer to Washington, and its economy is faltering.

The country’s confrontational “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy may have pleased Xi, but it won China few friends overseas. And polls indicate that Beijing is broadly unpopular worldwide: A 2023 Pew Research Center study, for example, surveyed attitudes toward China and the United States in 24 countries on six continents. It found that only 28 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of Beijing, and just 23 percent said China contributes to global peace. Nearly 60 percent of respondents, by contrast, had a positive view of the United States, and 61 percent said Washington contributes to peace and stability.

But Xi’s vision is far more formidable than it seems. China’s proposals would give power to the many countries that have been frustrated and sidelined by the present order, but it would still afford the states Washington currently favors with valuable international roles. Beijing’s initiatives are backed by a comprehensive, well-resourced, and disciplined operational strategy—one that features outreach to governments and people in seemingly every country. These techniques have gained Beijing newfound support, particularly in some multilateral organizations and from nondemocracies. China is succeeding in making itself an agent of welcome change while portraying the United States as the defender of a status quo that few particularly like.

Rather than dismissing Beijing's playbook, U.S. policymakers should learn from it. To win what will be a long-term competition, the United States must seize the mantle of change that China has claimed. Washington needs to articulate and push forward its own vision for a transformed international system and the U.S. role within that system—one that is inclusive of countries at different economic levels and with different political systems. Like China, the United States needs to invest deeply in the technological, military, and diplomatic foundations that enable both security at home and leadership abroad. Yet as the country commits to that competition, U.S. policymakers must understand that near-term stabilization of the bilateral relationship advances rather than hinders ultimate U.S. objectives. They should build on last year's summit between President Joe Biden and Xi, curtailing inflammatory anti-Chinese rhetoric and creating a more functional diplomatic relationship. That way, the United States can focus on the more important task: winning the long-term game.

#### I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

Beijing's playbook begins with a well-defined vision of a transformed world order. The Chinese government wants a system built not just on multipolarity but also on absolute sovereignty; security rooted in international consensus and the UN Charter; state-determined human rights based on each country's circumstances; development as the "master key" to all solutions; the end of U.S. dollar dominance; and a pledge to leave no country and no one behind.

This vision, in Beijing's telling, stands in stark contrast to the system the United States supports. In a 2023 report, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed Washington was "clinging to the Cold War mentality" and "piecing together small blocs through its alliance system" to "create division in the region, stoke confrontation and undermine peace." The United States, the report continued, interferes "in the internal affairs of other countries," uses the dollar's status as the international reserve currency to coerce "other countries into serving America's political and economic strategy," and seeks to "deter other countries' scientific, technological and economic development." Finally, the ministry argued, the United States advances "cultural hegemony." The "real weapons in U.S. cultural expansion," it declared, were the "production lines of Mattel Company and Coca-Cola."

Beijing claims that its vision, by contrast, advances the interests of the majority of the world's people. China is center stage, but every country, including the United States, has a role to play. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference in February, for example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China and the United States are responsible for global strategic stability. China and Russia, meanwhile, represent the exploration of a new model for major-country relations. China and the European Union are the world's two major markets and civilizations and should resist establishing blocs based on ideology. And China, as what Wang called the "largest developing country," promotes solidarity and cooperation with the global South to increase its representation in global affairs.

China's vision is designed to be compelling for nearly all countries. Those that are not democracies will have their choices validated. Those that are democracies but not major powers will gain a greater voice in the international system and a bigger share of the benefits of globalization. Even the major democratic powers can reflect on whether the current system is adequate for meeting today's challenges or whether China has something better to offer. Observers in the United States and elsewhere may roll their eyes at the grandiose phrasing, but they do so at their peril: dissatisfaction with the current international order has created a global audience more amenable to China's proposals than might have existed not long ago.

#### FOUR PILLARS

For over two decades, China has referred to a "new security concept" that embraces norms such as common security, system diversity, and multipolarity. But in recent years, China believes it has acquired the capability to advance its vision. To that end, during his first decade in power, Xi released three distinct global programs: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021, and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022. Each contributes in some way to furthering both the transformation of the international system and China's centrality within it.

The BRI was initially a platform for Beijing to address the hard infrastructure needs of emerging and middle-income economies while making use of the Chinese construction industry's overcapacity. It has since expanded to become an engine of Beijing's geostrategy: embedding China's digital, health, and clean technology ecosystems

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globally; promoting its development model; expanding the reach of its military and police forces; and advancing the use of its currency.

The GDI focuses on global development more broadly, and it places China squarely in the driver's seat. Often working with the UN, it supports small-scale projects that address poverty alleviation, digital connectivity, climate change, and health and food security. It advances Beijing's preference for economic development as a foundation for human rights. One government document on the program, for instance, accuses other countries of the "marginalization of development issues by emphasizing human rights and democracy."

Beijing has positioned the GSI as a system for, as several Chinese scholars have put it, providing "Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions" to promote "world peace and tranquility." In Xi's words, the GSI advocates that countries "reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation." The better course, according to Xi, entails building a "balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture" that resolves differences between countries through dialogue and consultation and that upholds non-interference in others' internal affairs. Behind the rhetoric, the GSI is designed to end U.S. alliance systems, establish security as a precondition for development, and promote absolute sovereignty and indivisible security—or the notion that one state's safety should not come at the expense of others'. China and Russia have used this notion to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that Moscow's attack was needed to stop an expanding NATO from threatening Russia.

But Xi's strategy has taken flight only in the past year, with the release of the Global Civilization Initiative in May 2023. The GCI advances the idea that countries with different civilizations and levels of development will have different political and economic models. It asserts that states determine rights and that no one country or model has a mandate to control the discourse of human rights. As former Foreign Minister Qin Gang put it: "There is no one-size-fits-all model in the protection of human rights." Thus, Greece, with its philosophical and cultural traditions and level of development, may have a different conception and practice of human rights than China does. Both are equally valid.

Chinese leaders are working hard to get countries and international institutions to buy into their world vision. Their strategy is multilevel: striking deals with individual countries, integrating their



initiatives or components of them into multilateral organizations, and embedding their proposals into global governance institutions. The BRI is the model for this approach. Around 150 countries have become members of the program, which openly advocates for the values that frame China's vision—such as the primacy of development, sovereignty, state-directed political rights, and common security. This bilateral dealmaking has been accompanied by Chinese officials' efforts to link the BRI to other regional development efforts, such as the Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 created by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

China has also successfully embedded the BRI in more than two dozen UN agencies and programs. It has worked particularly diligently to align the BRI and the UN's high-profile 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which has been headed by a Chinese official for over a decade, produced a report on the BRI's support for the agenda. The report was partially funded by the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, which, in turn, was initially established by a \$200 million Chinese pledge. Such support undoubtedly contributes to the enthusiasm many senior UN officials, including the secretary-general, have shown for the BRI.

Progress on the GDI, GSI, and GCI has understandably been more nascent. Thus far, only a handful of leaders from countries such as Serbia, South Africa, South Sudan, and Venezuela have offered rhetorical support for the GCI's notion that the diversity of civilizations and development paths should be respected—and by extension, for China's vision for an order that does not give primacy to the values of liberal democracies.

The GDI has gained more international support than the GCI. After Xi announced the project before the UN General Assembly, China developed a "Group of Friends of the GDI" that now boasts more than 70 countries. The GDI has advanced 50 projects and pledged 100,000 training opportunities for officials and experts from other countries to travel to China and study its systems. These training opportunities are designed to promote China's advanced technologies, its management experiences, and its development model. China has also succeeded

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The United States must seize the mantle of change that China has claimed.

in formally linking the GDI to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and held GDI-related seminars with the UN Office for South-South Cooperation. Beijing, in other words, is weaving the program into the fabric of the international governmental system.

The GSI has achieved even greater rhetorical buy-in. According to China's Foreign Ministry, more than 100 countries, regional organizations, and international organizations have supported the GSI, and Chinese officials have encouraged the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to adopt the concept. At the SCO's September 2022 meeting, China advanced the GSI and received support from all the members except India and Tajikistan.

#### MASS APPEAL

China, in contrast with the United States, invests heavily in the diplomatic resources necessary to market its initiatives. It has more embassies and representative offices around the globe than any other country, and Chinese diplomats frequently speak at conferences and publish a stream of articles about China's various initiatives in local news outlets.

This diplomatic apparatus is supported by equally sprawling Chinese media networks. China's international news network, CGTN, has twice as many overseas bureaus as CNN, and Xinhua, the official Chinese news service, has over 180 bureaus globally. Although Chinese media are often perceived in the West as little more than crude propaganda tools, they can advance a positive image of China and its leadership. In a study published in 2024, a team of international scholars surveyed more than 6,000 respondents in 19 countries to see whether China or the United States was more effective at selling its political and economic model and its role as a global leader. At baseline, participants overwhelmingly preferred the United States—83 percent of the interviewees preferred the U.S. political model, 70 percent preferred the U.S. economic model, and 78 percent preferred U.S. leadership. But when they were exposed to Chinese media messaging—whether only to China's or to Chinese and U.S. government messaging in a head-to-head competition—participants preferred the Chinese models to those of the United States.

Beijing also draws heavily on the strength of state-owned companies and the country's private sector to promote its objectives. China's technology firms, for instance, not only provide digital connectivity

to a variety of countries; they also enable states to emulate elements of Beijing's political model. According to Freedom House, representatives from 36 countries have participated in Chinese government training sessions on how to control media and information on the Internet. In Zambia, adopting a "China way" for Internet governance—as a former government minister described it—resulted in the imprisonment of several Zambians for criticizing the president online. German Council on Foreign Relations experts revealed that Huawei middleboxes blocked websites in 17 countries. The more states adopt Chinese norms and technologies that suppress political and civil liberties, the more Beijing can undermine the current international system's embrace of universal human rights.

In addition, Xi has enhanced the role of China's security apparatus as a diplomatic tool. China's People's Liberation Army is conducting exercises with a growing number of countries and offering training to militaries throughout the developing world. Last year, for example, China brought more than 100 senior military officials from almost 50 African countries and the African Union to Beijing for the third China-Africa Peace and Security Forum. China and the African participants agreed to hold more joint military exercises, and they embraced the BRI and the GSI, alongside the African Union's Agenda 2063 development plan, as a way to pursue economic development, promote peace, and ensure stability on the continent. Together, these arrangements help create the collaborative security system China wants: one that's based on Beijing.

China has boosted its strategy by being both patient and opportunistic. Beijing provides massive resources for its initiatives, reassuring other countries of its long-term support and enabling Chinese officials to act quickly when opportunities arise. For example, Beijing first announced a version of the Health Silk Road in 2015, but it garnered little attention. In 2020, however, China used the COVID-19 pandemic to breathe new life into the project. Xi delivered a major address before the World Health Assembly promoting China as a hub for medical resources. Beijing paired Chinese provinces with different countries and had the former send personal protective equipment and medical professionals to the latter. China also used the pandemic to push Chinese digital health technologies and traditional Chinese medicine—a priority for Xi—as ways to treat the virus.

More recently, China has used Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting Western sanctions to push de-dollarizing the global economy. China's trade with Russia is now mostly settled in renminbi, and Beijing is working through the BRI and multilateral organizations, such as the BRICS (which 34 countries have expressed interest in joining), to advance de-dollarization. As Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said during a 2023 visit to China, "Every night I ask myself why all countries have to base their trade on the dollar. Why can't we do trade based on our own currencies?"

#### THE PAYOFF

Beijing has clearly made progress in gaining rhetorical buy-in from other countries, as well as from UN organizations and officials. But in terms of effecting actual change on the ground, garnering support from other countries' citizens, and influencing the reform of international institutions, China's record is more mixed.

The GDI, for its part, is well on its way. A two-year progress report produced by the Xinhua News Agency's think tank indicated that 20 percent of the GDI's initial 50 cooperation programs had been completed, and an additional 200 had been proposed. Some projects are highly local and long term, but others will have a greater immediate impact, such as a wind power project in Kazakhstan that will meet the energy needs of more than one million households.

Despite the relative nascence of the GSI, Wang, China's foreign minister, quickly claimed that the Beijing-brokered 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia was an example of the GSI's principle of promoting dialogue. China has had less success, however, using GSI principles in its attempts to resolve the war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, some countries have expressed concern that the GSI is a kind of military alliance. Despite being an early beneficiary of GDI projects, for example, Nepal has resisted multiple Chinese entreaties to join the GSI because it does not want to be part of any security alliance.

The BRI has transformed the geostrategic and economic landscape throughout much of Africa, Southeast Asia, and, increasingly, Latin America. Huawei, for example, provides 70 percent of all the components in Africa's 4G telecommunications infrastructure. In addition, China's 2023 BRI investments have increased from 2022. There are signs, however, that the BRI's influence may be plateauing. Italy, the

biggest economy in the initiative (aside from China itself), withdrew in December, and only 23 leaders attended the 2023 Belt and Road Forum, compared with 37 in 2019. China's financing for the BRI has fallen sharply since its peak in 2016, and many BRI recipient countries are struggling to repay Beijing's loans.

Public opinion polls paint a similarly mixed picture. The Pew poll indicated that middle-income economies, particularly in Africa and Latin America, are more likely to have positive views of China and its contributions to stability than higher-income economies in Asia and Europe. But even in these regions, popular views of China are far from uniformly positive.

A 2023 survey of 1,308 elites in ASEAN states, for instance, reveals that although China is considered the most influential economic and security actor in the region, majorities in every country, except Brunei, express concern over China's rising influence. Pluralities or majorities in seven of ten countries do not believe that the GSI will benefit their region. And when asked whether they would align with China or with the United States if forced to choose, majorities in seven of ten ASEAN countries selected the United States.

Afrobarometer's 2019 and 2020 surveys suggest China has a more positive reputation in Africa: 63 percent of Africans polled in 34 countries believe China is a positive external influence. But only 22 percent believe China is the best model for future development, and approval of China's model declined from the 2014 and 2015 surveys.

A 2021 survey of 336 opinion leaders from 23 countries in Latin America was similarly telling. Although 78 percent of respondents believe China's overall influence in the region is high, only 35 percent have a good or very good opinion of China. (Respondents have similar opinions about the United States.) There was support for engagement with China on trade and foreign direct investment but minimal support for engagement on multilateral cooperation, international security, and human rights.

Finally, support for China and Chinese-backed initiatives in the United Nations is mixed. For example, a detailed study of China's Digital Silk Road investment in Africa found that although eight African DSR members supported China's New IP proposal for increasing state

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China's vision is designed to be compelling for nearly all countries.

control over the Internet, more African DSR members did not write in support of it. And the February 2023 vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine—in which 141 countries voted in favor, seven voted against, and 32, including China and all other members of the SCO except Russia, abstained—suggests widespread rejection of the GSI's principle of indivisible security. Nonetheless, China won the support of 25 of the 31 emerging and middle-income countries (not including itself) in the UN Human Rights Council in a successful bid to prevent debate on Beijing's treatment of its Uyghur minority population. It was only the second time in the council's history that a debate has been blocked.

#### FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

Support for China's efforts may appear shallow among many segments of the international community. But China's leaders express great confidence in their transformative vision, and there is significant momentum behind the basic principles and policies proposed in the GDI, GSI, and GCI among members of BRICS and the SCO, as well as among nondemocracies and African countries. China's wins within bigger organizations—such as the UN—may seem minor, but they are accumulating, giving Beijing substantial authority inside major institutions that many emerging and middle-income economies value. And Beijing has a formidable operational strategy for achieving its desired transformation, along with the capability to coordinate policy at multiple levels of government over a long period.

Part of why Beijing's efforts are catching on is that the present, U.S.-led system is unpopular in much of the world. It does not have a good record of meeting global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, debt crises, or food shortages—all of which disproportionately affect the planet's most vulnerable people. Many countries believe that the United Nations and its institutions, including the Security Council, do not adequately reflect the world's distribution of power. The international system has also not proved capable of resolving long-standing conflicts or preventing new ones. And the United States is increasingly viewed as operating outside the very institutions and norms it helped create: deploying widespread sanctions without Security Council approval, helping weaken international bodies such as the World Trade Organization, and, during the Trump administration, withdrawing from global agreements.

Finally, Washington's periodic framing of the world system as one divided between autocracies and democracies alienates many countries, including some democratic ones.

Even if its vision is not fully realized, unless the world has a credible alternative, China can take advantage of this dissatisfaction to make significant progress in materially degrading the current international system. The uphill battle the United States has waged to persuade countries to avoid Huawei telecommunications equipment is an important lesson in addressing a problem before it arises. It would be far more difficult to overturn a global order that has devalued universal human rights in favor of state-determined rights, significantly de-dollarized the financial system, widely embedded state-controlled technology systems, and deconstructed U.S.-led military alliances.

The United States should therefore move aggressively to position itself as a force for system change. It should take a page from China's playbook and be opportunistic—seeking strategic advantage as China's economy is faltering and its political system is under stress. It should acknowledge that, as Xi has repeatedly said, there are changes in the world “the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years” but make clear that these shifts do not signal the decline of the United States. Instead, they are in line with Washington's own dynamic vision for the future.

The vision should begin by advancing an economic and technological revolution that will transform the world's digital, energy, agricultural, and health landscapes in ways that are inclusive and contribute to shared global prosperity. This will require new norms and institutions that integrate emerging and middle-income economies into resilient and diversified global supply chains, innovation networks, clean manufacturing ecosystems, and information and data governance regimes. Washington should promote a global conversation on its vision of technologically advanced change rooted in high standards, the rule of law, transparency, official accountability, and sustainability—norms of shared good governance that are not ideologically laden. Such a discussion would likely be widely popular, just as China's focus on the imperative of development holds broad appeal.

Washington has put in place some of the building blocks of this vision through the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment. Largely left out of the equation, however, are precisely the

states most open to China's vision of transformation—most members of the BRICS, the SCO, and nondemocratic emerging and middle-income economies. Together with these countries, Washington should explore regional arrangements akin to those it has established with its Asian and European partners. More countries should be brought into the networks Washington is establishing to build stronger supply chains, such as those created by the CHIPS and Science Act. And countries such as Cambodia and Laos, left out of relevant existing arrangements

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China is right:  
the international  
system does  
need reform.

such as the Indo-Pacific framework, should be given a path to membership. This would expand the United States' development footprint, allowing it to provide a development trajectory that is different from Beijing's BRI and GDI and—unlike China's initiatives—offers participating countries an opportunity to help develop the rules of the road.

Artificial intelligence presents a unique opportunity for the United States to signal a new, more inclusive approach. As its full applications become appreciated, AI will require new international norms and potentially new institutions to harness its positive effects and limit its negative ones. The United States, which is the world's leading AI innovator, should engage up front with countries other than its traditional allies and partners to develop regulations. Joint U.S.-EU efforts regarding skills training for the next generation of AI jobs, for example, should be expanded to include the global majority. The United States can also support engagement between its robust private sector and civil society organizations and their counterparts in other countries—a multistakeholder approach that China, with its “head of state” style of diplomacy, typically eschews.

This effort will require Washington to draw more effectively on the U.S. private sector and civil society—much as China has worked its state-owned enterprises and private sector into the BRI and GDI—by fostering vibrant, state-initiated but business-and-civil-society-driven international partnerships. In most of the world, including Africa and Latin America, the United States is a larger and more desired source of foreign direct investment and assistance than China. And Washington has left untapped a significant alignment of interests between its strategic goals and the economic objectives of the private sector, such as creating political and economic environments abroad



that enable U.S. companies to flourish. Because American companies and foundations are private actors, however, the benefits of their investments do not redound to the U.S. government. Institutionalizing public-private partnerships can better link U.S. objectives with the strength of the American private sector and help ensure that initiatives are not cast aside during political transitions in Washington. The work of private foundations in the United States—which invest billions of dollars in emerging economies and middle-income countries—should similarly be amplified by American officials and lifted up through partnerships with Washington.

More inclusive global governance also requires that Washington consider potential tradeoffs as other countries' economies and militaries grow relative to those of the United States. In the near term, for example, a clearer delineation of the limits of U.S. sanctions policy could help slow the momentum behind Beijing's de-dollarization effort. But Washington should use this time to assess the viability of the dollar's dominance over the longer term and consider what steps, if any, U.S. officials should take to try to preserve it. Washington's vision may also need to incorporate reforms to the current alliance system. The hard realities of China's growing military prowess and its economic support for Russia during the latter's war against Ukraine make clear that Washington and its allies must think anew about the security structures necessary to manage a world in which Beijing and its like-minded partners operate as soft, and potentially hard, military allies.

As with China, the United States needs to spend more on the foundations of its competitiveness and national security to succeed over the long term. Although defensive policies are often necessary, they grant only short-term protections. This means Washington must staff up to match Beijing's foreign policy apparatus. Around 30 U.S. embassies and missions have no sitting U.S. ambassador; each of these slots must be filled. The United States has taken the first steps to enhance its economic competitiveness with programs such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, but it needs sustained investment in research and development and advanced manufacturing. It also needs to adopt immigration policies that attract and retain top talent from around the world. And Washington needs to recommit to investing in the foundations of its long-term military capabilities and modernization. Without bipartisan support for the basic building

blocks of American competitiveness and global leadership, Beijing will continue to make headway in changing the global order.

Finally, to avoid unnecessary friction, the United States should continue to stabilize the U.S.-Chinese relationship by defining new areas for cooperation, expanding civil society engagement, tamping down needless hostile rhetoric, strategically managing its Taiwan policy, and developing a clear message on the economic tools it uses to protect U.S. economic and national security. This will enable the United States to maintain relations with those in China who are concerned about their country's current trajectory, as well as give Washington room to focus on building up its economic and military capabilities while moving forward with its own global vision.

China is right: the international system does need reform. But the foundations for that reform are best found in the openness, transparency, rule of law, and official accountability that are the hallmarks of the world's market democracies. The global innovation and creativity necessary to solve the world's challenges thrive best in open societies. Transparency, the rule of law, and official accountability are the foundation of healthy, sustained global economic growth. And the current system of alliances, although insufficient to ensure global peace and security, has helped prevent war from breaking out among the world's great powers for more than 70 years. China has not yet managed to convince a majority of the planet's people that its intentions and capabilities are the ones needed to shape the twenty-first century. But it is up to the United States and its allies and partners to create an affirmative and compelling alternative. 🌐

# No Substitute for Victory

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## America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed

MATT POTTINGER AND MIKE GALLAGHER

**A**mid a presidency beset by failures of deterrence—in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Middle East—the Biden administration's China policy has stood out as a relative bright spot. The administration has strengthened U.S. alliances in Asia, restricted Chinese access to critical U.S. technologies, and endorsed the bipartisan mood for competition. Yet the administration is squandering these early gains by falling into a familiar trap: prioritizing a short-term thaw with China's leaders at the expense of a long-term victory over their malevolent strategy. The Biden team's policy of "managing competition" with Beijing risks emphasizing processes over outcomes, bilateral stability at the expense of

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global security, and diplomatic initiatives that aim for cooperation but generate only complacency.

The United States shouldn't manage the competition with China; it should win it. Beijing is pursuing a raft of global initiatives designed to disintegrate the West and usher in an antidemocratic order. It is underwriting expansionist dictatorships in Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela. It has more than doubled its nuclear arsenal since 2020 and is building up its conventional forces faster than any country has since World War II. These actions show that China isn't aiming for a stalemate. Neither should America.

What would winning look like? China's communist rulers would give up trying to prevail in a hot or cold conflict with the United States and its friends. And the Chinese people—from ruling elites to everyday citizens—would find inspiration to explore new models of development and governance that don't rely on repression at home and compulsive hostility abroad.

In addition to having greater clarity about its end goal, the United States needs to accept that achieving it will require greater friction in U.S.-Chinese relations. Washington will need to adopt rhetoric and policies that may feel uncomfortably confrontational but in fact are necessary to reestablish boundaries that Beijing and its acolytes are violating. That means imposing costs on Chinese leader Xi Jinping for his policy of fostering global chaos. It means speaking with candor about the ways China is hurting U.S. interests. It means rapidly increasing U.S. defense capabilities to achieve unmistakable qualitative advantages over Beijing. It means severing China's access to Western technology and frustrating Xi's efforts to convert his country's wealth into military power. And it means pursuing intensive diplomacy with Beijing only from a position of American strength, as perceived by both Washington and Beijing.

No country should relish waging another cold war. Yet a cold war is already being waged against the United States by China's leaders. Rather than denying the existence of this struggle, Washington should own it and win it. Lukewarm statements that pretend as if there is no cold war perversely court a hot war; they signal complacency to the American people and conciliation to Chinese leaders. Like the original Cold War, the new cold war will not be won through half measures or timid rhetoric. Victory requires openly admitting that a totalitarian regime that commits genocide, fuels

conflict, and threatens war will never be a reliable partner. Like the discredited *détente* policies that Washington adopted in the 1970s to deal with the Soviet Union, the current approach will yield little cooperation from Chinese leaders while fortifying their conviction that they can destabilize the world with impunity.

#### BIDEN'S NEW BASELINE

The administration's China policy initially showed promise. President Joe Biden maintained the tariffs that President Donald Trump had imposed on Chinese exports in response to the rampant theft of U.S. intellectual property. He renewed, with some adjustments, the executive orders Trump had issued to restrict investment in certain companies affiliated with the Chinese military and to block the import of Chinese technologies deemed a national security threat. In a particularly important step, in October 2022, Biden significantly expanded the Trump administration's controls on the export of high-end semiconductors and the equipment used to make them, slowing Beijing's plans to dominate the manufacturing of advanced microchips. Across Asia, Biden's diplomats pulled longtime allies and newer partners closer together. They organized the first summits of the Quad, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, bringing together the leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and convened high-profile trilateral summits with the leaders of Japan and South Korea. Biden also unveiled AUKUS, a defense pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

As it turned out, however, aggression would come from the opposite direction, in Europe. Less than three weeks before invading Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin had signed a "no limits" security pact with Xi in Beijing. In a prudent step after the invasion, Biden drew a redline by warning Xi in a video call that the U.S. government would impose sweeping sanctions if China provided "material support" to Moscow. Xi nonetheless found plenty of ways to support the Russian war machine, sending semiconductors, unarmed drones, gunpowder, and other wares. China also supplied Moscow with badly needed money in exchange for major shipments of Russian oil. Chinese officials, according to the U.S. State Department, even spent more money on pro-Russian propaganda worldwide than Russia itself was spending.

Beijing was also coordinating more closely with Iran and North Korea, even as those regimes sent weapons to help Moscow wage war in Europe. Yet Washington was pursuing siloed policies—simultaneously resisting Russia, appeasing Iran, containing North Korea, and pursuing a mix of rivalry and engagement with China—that added up to something manifestly incoherent. Indeed, the situation that Xi had forecast at the start of the Biden administration was becoming a reality: “The most important characteristic of the world is, in a word, ‘chaos,’ and this trend appears likely to continue,” Xi told a seminar of high-level Communist Party officials in January 2021. Xi made clear that this was a useful development for China. “The times and trends are on our side,” he said, adding, “Overall, the opportunities outweigh the challenges.” By March 2023, Xi had revealed that he saw himself not just as a beneficiary of worldwide turmoil but also as one of its architects. “Right now, there are changes, the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years,” he said to Putin on camera while wrapping up a visit to the Kremlin. “And we are the ones driving these changes together.”

If ever the time was ripe to call out Beijing for fomenting chaos and to start systematically imposing costs on the country in response, it was early 2023. Biden, inexplicably, was doing the opposite. On February 1, residents of Montana spotted a massive, white sphere drifting eastward. The administration was already tracking the Chinese spy balloon but had been planning to let it pass overhead without notifying the public. Under political pressure, Biden ordered the balloon shot down once it reached the Atlantic Ocean, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken postponed a scheduled trip to Beijing to protest the intrusion. Press reports suggested the administration had kept quiet about the balloon in order to gather intelligence about it. But a troubling pattern of downplaying affronts by Beijing would persist in other contexts.

In June 2023, leaks to the press revealed that Beijing, in a remarkable echo of the Cold War, was planning to build a joint military training base in Cuba and had already developed a signals intelligence facility there targeting the United States. After a National Security Council spokesperson called reports about the spy facility inaccurate, a White House official speaking anonymously to the press minimized them by suggesting that Chinese spying from Cuba was “not a new development.” The administration also greeted with

a shrug new evidence suggesting that COVID-19 may have initially spread after it accidentally leaked from a Chinese laboratory. If the virus, which has led to the deaths of an estimated 27 million people worldwide, turns out to have been artificially enhanced before it escaped, the revelation would mark a turning point in human history on par with the advent of nuclear weapons—a situation that already cries out for U.S. leadership to govern dangerous biological research worldwide.

In the spring of 2023, as Beijing's actions grew bolder, Biden initiated what the White House termed an "all hands on deck" diplomatic campaign—not to impose costs on Beijing but to flatter it by dispatching five cabinet-level U.S. officials to China from May to August. Blinken's June meeting with Xi symbolized the dynamic. Whereas Xi had sat amiably alongside the billionaire Bill Gates just days earlier, the U.S. secretary of state was seated off to the side as Xi held forth from the head of a table at the Great Hall of the People. For the first time in years, Xi appeared to have successfully positioned the United States as supplicant in the bilateral relationship.

What did the United States get in return for all this diplomacy? In the Biden administration's tally, the benefits included a promise by Beijing to resume military-to-military talks (which Beijing had unilaterally suspended), a new dialogue on the responsible use of artificial intelligence (technology that Beijing is already weaponizing against the American people by spreading fake images and other propaganda on social media), and tentative cooperation to stem the flood of precursor chemicals fueling the fentanyl crisis in the United States (chemicals that are supplied mainly by Chinese companies).

Any doubts that Xi saw the American posture as one of weakness were dispelled after Hamas's October 7 massacre in Israel. Beijing exploited the attack by serving up endless anti-Israeli and anti-American propaganda through TikTok, whose algorithms are subject to control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chinese diplomats, like Russian ones, met with Hamas's leaders and provided diplomatic cover for the terrorist group, vetoing UN Security Council

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resolutions that would have condemned Hamas. And there is little sign Beijing has done anything, despite Washington's requests, to help rein in attacks carried out by the Houthis on commercial vessels and U.S. warships in the Red Sea—attacks conducted by the Yemeni rebel group using Iranian missiles, including ones with technology pioneered by China. (Chinese ships, unsurprisingly, are usually granted free passage through the kill zone.)

Whether Xi is acting opportunistically or according to a grand design—or, almost certainly, both—it is clear he sees advantage in stoking crises that he hopes will exhaust the United States and its allies. In a sobering Oval Office address in mid-October, Biden seemed to grasp the severity of the situation. “We’re facing an inflection point in history—one of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come,” he said. Yet bizarrely—indeed, provocatively—he made no mention of China, the chief sponsor of the aggressors he did call out in the speech: Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Through omission, Biden gave Beijing a pass.

#### THAT '70S SHOW

The current moment bears an uncanny resemblance to the 1970s. The Soviet Union was undermining U.S. interests across the world, offering no warning of its ally Egypt's 1973 surprise attack on Israel; aiding communists in Angola, Portugal, and Vietnam; and rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and investing heavily in its conventional military. These were the bitter fruits of *détente*—a set of policies pioneered by President Richard Nixon and his top foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, who stayed on and continued the approach under President Gerald Ford. By using pressure and inducement, as well as downplaying ideological differences, the United States tried to lure the Russians into a stable equilibrium of global power. Under *détente*, Washington slashed defense spending and soft-pedaled Moscow's human rights affronts. The working assumption was that the Soviet Union's appetite for destabilizing actions abroad would somehow be self-limiting.

But the Russians had their own ideas about the utility of *détente*. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis observed, the Soviets “might have viewed *détente* as their own instrument for inducing complacency in the West while they finished assembling the ultimate





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means of applying pressure—their emergence as a full-scale military rival of the United States.” Nixon and Kissinger thought détente would secure Soviet help in managing crises around the world and, as Gaddis put it, “enmesh the U.S.S.R. in a network of economic relationships that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Russians to take actions in the future detrimental to Western interests.” But the policy failed to achieve its goals.

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President Jimmy Carter came into office in 1977 intending to keep détente in place, but the policy didn’t work for him either. His attempt to “de-link” Soviet actions that hurt U.S. interests from Soviet cooperation on arms control ultimately yielded setbacks in both categories. The Soviets became more aggressive globally, and a wary U.S. Congress, having lost faith in Moscow’s sincerity, declined to ratify SALT II, the arms control treaty that Carter’s team had painstakingly negotiated. Meanwhile, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s national security adviser, had grown increasingly skeptical of détente. Brzezinski felt that a turning point had come in 1978, after the Soviets sponsored thousands of Cuban soldiers to wage violent revolution in the Horn of Africa, supporting Ethiopia in its war with Somalia. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the following year was “the final nail in the coffin” for arms control talks, Brzezinski wrote in his journal—and for the broader policy of détente.

By the time President Ronald Reagan entered the White House, in 1981, Nixon and Kissinger’s invention was on its last legs. “Détente’s been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its aims,” Reagan stated flatly in his first press conference as president, effectively burying the concept.

Reagan sought to win, not merely manage, the Cold War. In a sharp departure from his immediate predecessors, he spoke candidly about the nature of the Soviet threat, recognizing that autocrats often bully democracies into silence by depicting honesty as a form of aggression. In 1987, when Reagan was preparing to give a speech within sight of the Berlin Wall, some of his aides begged him to remove a phrase they found gratuitously provocative. Wisely, he overruled them and delivered the most iconic line of his presidency: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

THE SMOKELESS WAR

Washington must adopt a similar attitude today and try harder to disseminate truthful information within China itself and to make it possible for Chinese citizens to communicate securely with one another. Tearing down—or at least blowing holes in—the “Great Firewall” of China must become as central to Washington’s approach today as removing the Berlin Wall was for Reagan’s.

Beijing is waging a bitter information war against the United States—which is losing, despite its natural advantages. Xi and his inner circle see themselves as fighting an existential ideological campaign against the West, as Xi’s words from an official publication in 2014 make clear:

The battle for “mind control” happens on a smokeless battlefield. It happens inside the domain of ideology. Whoever controls this battlefield can win hearts. They will have the initiative throughout the competition and combat. . . . When it comes to combat in the ideology domain, we don’t have any room for compromise or retreat. We must achieve total victory.

For Xi, the Internet is the “main battlefield” of this smokeless war. In 2020, the scholar Yuan Peng, writing before he resurfaced under a new name as a vice minister of China’s premier spy agency, also recognized the power of controlling speech online: “In the Internet era . . . what is truth and what is a lie is already unimportant; what’s important is who controls discourse power.” Xi has poured billions of dollars into building and harnessing what he calls “external discourse mechanisms,” and other Chinese leaders have specifically highlighted short-video platforms such as TikTok as the “megaphones” of discourse power. They aren’t afraid to use those megaphones. According to a February 2024 report from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, TikTok accounts run by Chinese propaganda outfits “reportedly targeted candidates from both political parties during the U.S. midterm election cycle in 2022.”

As the CCP seeks to set the terms of global discourse, what it wants more than anything from the United States and the rest of the West is silence—silence about China’s human rights abuses, silence about its aggression toward Taiwan, and silence about the West’s own deeply held beliefs, which contrast irreconcilably with the party’s. It is no surprise, then, that so much of the CCP’s strategy

on the smokeless battlefield is about drowning out speech it doesn't like—both inside and outside China. It is American silence—not candor—that is truly provocative, for it signals to the CCP that China is advancing and the United States is retreating.

#### REARM, REDUCE, RECRUIT

What U.S. officials need first is clarity about the contest with China. They have to recognize that rising tensions are inevitable in the short run if the United States is to deter war and win the contest in the long run. Once they have faced these facts, they need to put in place a better policy: one that rearms the U.S. military, reduces China's economic leverage, and recruits a broader coalition to confront China.

Xi is preparing his country for a war over Taiwan. On its current trajectory, the United States risks failing to deter that war, one that could kill tens of thousands of U.S. service members, inflict trillions of dollars in economic damage, and bring about the end of the global order as we know it. The only path to avoid this future is for Washington to immediately build and surge enough hard power to deny Xi a successful invasion of Taiwan. Yet the Biden administration's latest budget request sheds badly needed combat power, proposing the retirement of ten ships and 250 aircraft and a drop in the production goal for Virginia-class submarines from two per year to just one. It replenishes only half the \$1 billion that Congress authorized for the president to furnish military aid to Taiwan. And in its 2023 supplemental request, the White House asked for just over \$5 billion in weapons and industrial base spending earmarked for the Indo-Pacific—barely five percent of the entire supplemental request. Looking at the budget trend line, one would think it was 1994, not 2024.

The Biden administration should immediately change course, reversing what are, in inflation-adjusted terms, cuts to defense spending. Instead of spending about three percent of GDP on defense, Washington should spend four or even five percent, a level that would still be at the low end of Cold War spending. For near-term deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, it should spend an additional \$20 billion per year for the next five years, the rough amount needed to surge and disperse sufficient combat power in Asia. Ideally, this money would be held in a dedicated “deterrence fund” overseen by the secretary of defense, who would award resources to projects that best align with the defense of Taiwan.



Table talk: Xi and Biden meeting in Woodside, California, November 2023

The deterrence fund should headline a generational effort directed by the president to restore U.S. primacy in Asia. The priority should be to maximize existing production lines and build new production capacity for critical munitions for Asia, such as antiship and anti-aircraft missiles that can destroy enemy targets at great distances. The Pentagon should also draw on the deterrence fund to adapt existing military systems or even civilian technology such as commercially available drones that could be useful for defending Taiwan. Complementing its Replicator Initiative, which tasks the services to field thousands of low-cost drones to turn the Taiwan Strait into what some have called “a boiling moat,” the Pentagon should quickly embrace other creative solutions. It could, for example, disperse missile launchers concealed in commercial container boxes or field the Powered Joint Direct Attack Munition, a low-cost kit that turns standard 500-pound bombs into precision-guided cruise missiles.

For U.S. forces to actually deter China, they need to be able to move within striking range. Given the maritime geography of the Indo-Pacific and the threat that China’s vast missile arsenal poses to U.S. bases, the State Department will need to expand hosting and access agreements with allies and partners to extend the U.S. military’s footprint in the region. The Pentagon, meanwhile, will need to

harden U.S. military installations across the region and pre-position critical supplies such as fuel, ammunition, and equipment throughout the Pacific.

But the United States could keep the Chinese military contained and still lose the new cold war if China held the West hostage economically. Beijing is bent on weaponizing its stranglehold over global supply chains and its dominance of critical emerging technologies. To reduce Chinese leverage and ensure that the United States, not China, develops the key technologies of the future, Washington needs to reset the terms of the bilateral economic relationship. It should start by repealing China's permanent normal trade relations status, which provides China access to U.S. markets on generous terms, and moving China to a new tariff column that features gradually increasing rates on products critical to U.S. national security and economic competitiveness. The revenue raised from increased tariffs could be spent on offsetting the costs that U.S. exporters will incur as a result of China's inevitable retaliatory measures and on bolstering U.S. supply chains for strategically important products.

Washington must also halt the flow of American money and technology to Chinese companies that support Beijing's military buildup and high-tech surveillance system. The Biden administration's August 2023 executive order restricting a subset of outbound investment to China was an important step in the right direction, but it doesn't go far enough. Washington must expand investment restrictions to include critical and emerging technologies such as hypersonics, space systems, and new biotechnologies. It must also put an end to U.S. financial firms' disturbing practice of offering publicly traded financial products, such as exchange-traded funds and mutual funds, that invest in Chinese companies that are on U.S. government blacklists. Using the current export controls on advanced semiconductors as a model, the Department of Commerce should reduce the flow of critical technology to China by introducing similar export bans on other key areas of U.S. innovation, such as quantum computing and biotechnology.

As China doubles down on economic self-reliance and phases out imports of industrial goods from the West, the United States needs to recruit a coalition of friendly partners to deepen mutual trade. Washington should strike a bilateral trade agreement with the United Kingdom. It should upgrade its bilateral trade agreement with Japan and establish a new one with Taiwan, agreements that could

be joined by other eligible economies in the region. It should forge an Indo-Pacific digital trade agreement that would facilitate the free flow of data between like-minded economies, using as a baseline the high standards set by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

To overhaul its dilapidated defense industrial base, the United States should turbocharge innovation in the defense industry by recruiting talented workers from allied countries. Every year, the U.S. government authorizes roughly 10,000 visas through the EB-5 program, which allows immigrants to obtain a green card if they invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in American businesses. The program is rife with fraud and has deviated far from its intended purpose as a job-creation program, becoming mostly a method for millionaires from China and other places to become permanent residents. These visas should be repurposed as work authorizations for citizens of partner countries who hold advanced degrees in fields critical to defense.

The U.S. government also needs to recruit the next generation of cold warriors to apply their talents to the contest with China. It should start by reversing the crisis in military recruitment—not by lowering standards, promising easy pay, or infusing the force with diversity, equity, and inclusion ideology but by unapologetically touting the virtues of an elite, colorblind, all-volunteer force and challenging young Americans to step up. The intelligence community also needs to recruit experts in emerging technology, finance, and open-source research and make it easier to temporarily leave the private sector for a stint in government. National security agencies need to cultivate deep expertise in Asia and in the history and ideology of the CCP. The curricula of the service academies and war colleges, as well as ongoing professional military education, should reflect this shift.

Finally, U.S. officials need to recruit everyday Americans to contribute to the fight. For all the differences between the Soviet Union yesterday and China today, U.S. policymakers' squeamishness about the term "cold war" causes them to overlook the way it can mobilize society. A cold war offers a relatable framework that Americans can use to guide their own decisions—such as a company's choice whether to set up a sensitive research and development center in China or an

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Washington is allowing the aim of its China policy to become process itself.

individual's choice whether to download TikTok. Too often, however, elected officials on the left and the right give the impression that the competition with China is so narrow in scope that Americans can take such steps without worry. The contest with Beijing, they would have people believe, shouldn't much concern ordinary citizens but will be handled through surgically precise White House policies and congressional legislation.

#### CHINA AS A NORMAL COUNTRY

It is a peculiar feature of U.S. foreign policy today that the elephant in the room—the end state Washington desires in its competition with Beijing—is such a taboo subject that administrations come and go without ever articulating a clear goal for how the competition ends. The Biden administration offers up managing competition as a goal, but that is not a goal; it is a method, and a counterproductive one at that. Washington is allowing the aim of its China policy to become process: meetings that should be instruments through which the United States advances its interests become core objectives in and of themselves.

Washington should not fear the end state desired by a growing number of Chinese: a China that is able to chart its own course free from communist dictatorship. Xi's draconian rule has persuaded even many CCP members that the system that produced China's recent precipitous decline in prosperity, status, and individual happiness is one that deserves reexamination. The system that produced an all-encompassing surveillance state, forced-labor colonies, and the genocide of minority groups inside its borders is one that likewise desecrates Chinese philosophy and religion—the fountainheads from which a better model will eventually spring.

Generations of American leaders understood that it would have been unacceptable for the Cold War to end through war or U.S. capitulation. If the 1970s taught Washington anything, it is that trying to achieve a stable and durable balance of power—a *détente*—with a powerful and ambitious Leninist dictatorship is also doomed to backfire on the United States. The best strategy, which found its ultimate synthesis in the Reagan years, was to convince the Soviets that they were on a path to lose, which in turn fueled doubts about their whole system.

The U.S. victory wasn't Reagan's alone, of course. It was built on strategies forged by presidents of both parties and manifested in documents such as NSC-68, the 1950 Truman administration policy



paper that argued that the United States' "policy and actions must be such as to foster a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system." One can draw a straight line from that document to National Security Decision Directive 75, the 1983 Reagan administration order that called for "internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism." In some ways, it was the détente years, not the Reagan years, that were an aberration in Cold War strategy.

Ironically, Reagan would end up pursuing a more fulsome and productive engagement with the Soviets than perhaps any of his predecessors—but only after he had strengthened Washington's economic, military, and moral standing relative to Moscow and only after the Soviet Union produced a leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, with whom Reagan could make real progress. Reagan understood that sequencing was everything. He also knew that the confrontational first phase wouldn't be easy or comfortable. His first directive on national security strategy, in May 1982, predicted, "The decade of the eighties will likely pose the greatest challenge to our survival and well-being since World War II." It was a tense and unsettling period, to be sure, during which Reagan called out the Soviet Union as "the focus of evil in the modern world" and deliberately sought to weaken its economy and contest its destabilizing activities around the world. Yet it paid off.

Xi, who has vilified Gorbachev and fashioned his own leadership style after that of Joseph Stalin, has proved time and again that he is not a leader with whom Americans can solve problems. He is an agent of chaos. Washington should seek to weaken the sources of CCP imperialism and hold out for a Chinese leader who behaves less like an unrelenting foe. This does not mean forcible regime change, subversion, or war. But it does mean seeking truth from facts, as Chinese leaders are fond of saying, and understanding that the CCP has no desire to coexist indefinitely with great powers that promote liberal values and thus represent a fundamental threat to its rule.

The current mass exodus of Chinese people from their homeland is evidence they want to live in nations that respect human rights, honor the rule of law, and offer a wide choice of opportunities. As Taiwan's example makes plain, China could be such a place, too. The road to get there might be long. But for the United States' own security, as well as the rights and aspirations of all those in China, it is the only workable destination. 🌐

# The Delusion of Peak China

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## America Can't Wish Away Its Toughest Challenger

EVAN S. MEDEIROS

**E**ver since Chinese President Xi Jinping secured his third term in power in the fall of 2022, he has had a rough time. Shortly after his reappointment, street protests pushed him to abruptly abandon his signature “zero COVID” policy. After a quick reopening bump in early 2023, the economy has progressively slowed, revealing both cyclical and structural challenges. Investors are leaving in droves, with foreign direct investment and portfolio flows reaching record lows. Meanwhile, Xi has fired his handpicked ministers for defense and foreign affairs in the wake of allegations of corruption and worse. His military bungled its balloon intelligence-collection program, precipitating an unwanted crisis after a stray balloon floated over the continental United States for days in early 2023. And now Xi is conducting a historic purge of military and defense industry personnel linked to China’s missile forces. Amid all

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this, the United States has continued to expand its alliances with China's neighbors and countries outside the region.

These and other events have fueled the claim that China is stagnating, if not in permanent decline. Some scholars now argue that the world is witnessing "peak China" and that the country's accelerating decline may lead it to lash out. "Welcome to the age of 'peak China,'" wrote the political scientists Hal Brands and Michael Beckley in *Foreign Affairs* in 2021. "China is tracing an arc that often ends in tragedy: a dizzying rise followed by the specter of a hard fall." Commentators, including the author and investor Ruchir Sharma, have begun to speculate about a "post-China world." Even U.S. President Joe Biden got in the game, stating in August 2023 that China is a "ticking time bomb" that "doesn't have the same capacity that it had before."

These views are both ill advised and premature. Xi still believes China is rising, and he is acting accordingly. He is committed to achieving the "China Dream," his longtime slogan for national rejuvenation. He intends to reach this goal by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. If China is peaking, there is little evidence that Xi sees it. In fact, many Chinese elites, including Xi, believe it is the United States that is in terminal decline. For them, even if China is slowing down, the power gap between the countries is still narrowing in China's favor.

If Xi did have concerns, he is unlikely to share them internally out of fear that doing so would generate criticism or even opposition. His ambitions are so central to his legitimacy and to the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that there is little space or incentive to walk them back. Xi is hardly oblivious to China's recent problems. But as a committed Marxist-Leninist, he sees his country's rise not as a linear process but as one that will take time and require adjustments. In his view, the country's current difficulties are mere bumps along the road to achieving the China Dream.

Xi also believes that China's path to greatness will differ from those of the Western powers, especially the United States. He believes in a strong role for the state, limited and controlled use of the market and the private sector, and the centrality of technology that can drive productivity gains. He wants an economy that looks more like that of Germany, an advanced manufacturing powerhouse, than that of the United States, which relies heavily on consumption and services.

Xi's approach could work if he harnesses the right blend of state power and market forces, remains sufficiently open to global capital and

technology, and embraces policies that address some of China's biggest domestic problems, such as its declining and aging population. Xi's recent actions, however, do not inspire confidence in his ability or willingness to take these and other steps to avoid a stagnating economy. But if there is one lesson to be taken from the past 40 years, it is that the CCP and its management of the economy can often muddle through against the odds.

Moreover, the concept of peak China makes little sense in today's interconnected world, where states possess diverse sources of power and myriad ways to leverage them. Is Chinese power waning if its economy underperforms but its military modernizes and its diplomacy generates influence? China peaking economically is not the same as China peaking geopolitically—a distinction lost on many advocates of the peak China argument.

And even if China has reached some undefined upper limit of its power, influence, or economic growth, Chinese and American leaders probably would not realize it until years later. In the meantime, Beijing could still pose numerous problems for Washington and its friends and allies. And if it turns out that China's power is in decline, it can still use its substantial capabilities to undermine U.S. interests and values in Asia and all over the world. So regardless of whether the label is accurate, for Washington to adopt a belief in peak China—and base its policymaking on it—would be unwise and even dangerous.

#### THE STORY CHINA TELLS ITSELF

Since coming to power in 2013, Xi has been crystal clear about his beliefs about China's prospects and its future trajectory. He has grand ambitions for the country and a great sense of urgency. At home, he seeks to improve the legitimacy and efficacy of CCP rule, to remake the party-state system by reducing the role of the government and increasing the role of the party, and to rewire the Chinese economy so it is more self-sufficient and equitable. Abroad, he wants to reform global governance to better protect Chinese interests and to promote illiberal values such as expanded state control, constrained markets, and limits on individual freedoms.

Xi's plans are evident in both his public remarks and how the CCP talks to itself via state media, propaganda, and internal speeches. Xi remains committed to the idea that China still enjoys what he calls a "period of strategic opportunity." In March 2023, on a visit to Moscow, Xi said to Russian President Vladimir Putin, "Right now, there are changes—the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years—and we are the ones driving these changes together." At a conference in December

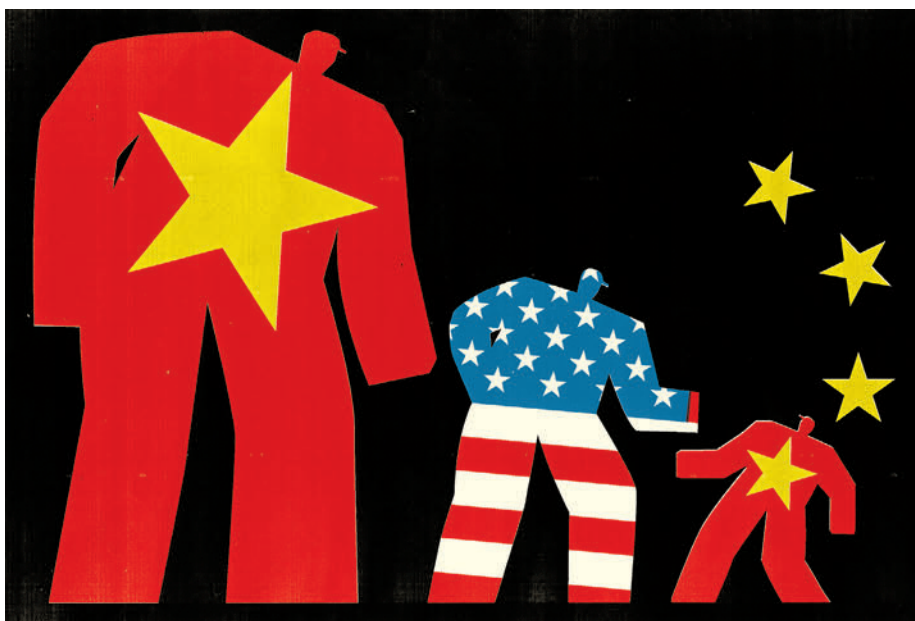
on “foreign affairs work,” a meeting the CCP holds every five years, Xi explained that one of his main tasks is to “foster new dynamics in China’s relations with the world, and to raise China’s international influence, charisma, and shaping power to a new level.” Although Xi has openly acknowledged the “high winds and perilous, stormy seas” confronting China, he sees those risks as reasons not to pull back but to keep forging ahead, to push harder and faster.

The same narrative is prevalent throughout the party. The CCP’s official history of the last 100 years, released in 2021, stated that China is “closer to the center of the world stage than it has ever been” and that it “has never been closer to its own rebirth.” Xi’s current intelligence chief, Chen Yixin, gave a speech to CCP cadres in early 2021 in which he cataloged all the problems facing Western democracies and announced that “the East is rising, and the West is declining”—a phrase that has become something of a CCP slogan. Xi echoes this sentiment whenever he highlights the growing appeal of what he calls the “China solution” or “China’s wisdom.”

The CCP’s ambitions are propelled by a complex mix of victimhood, grievance, and entitlement. Like other Chinese leaders who have emerged from the CCP system, Xi was raised on tales of “the century of shame and humiliation” that China suffered under foreign domination. National security has emerged as an overriding priority, newly shaping a broad variety of policies, especially economic ones. Everywhere he looks, Xi sees threats to “divide and Westernize China” and the danger of “color revolutions.” His fears have only intensified in recent years, driving China closer to Russia and other illiberal powers. In his December speech to Chinese diplomats, Xi noted that “external forces have continuously escalated their suppression and containment against us.” This fearful posture explains why the CCP now casts economic development and national security as priorities of equal importance—a position that would make former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping turn over in his grave given the overwhelming priority Deng put on growth and development.

#### ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

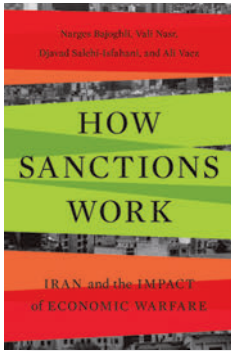
Xi’s predecessors allowed the country’s State Council (the cabinet) and its provinces to play a greater role in policy formulation and implementation and provided the political space for market forces, private capital, and individual entrepreneurs to drive much of the country’s growth. To carry out his agenda, however, Xi has taken steps to put the CCP at the center of political, economic, and social life in China. With barely a hint of internal



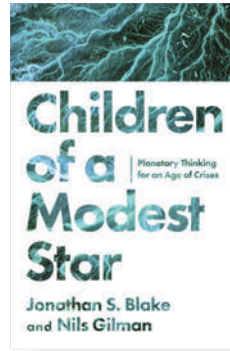
pushback, he secured a third term, positioned his confidants in top jobs, and marginalized and embarrassed his predecessor, Hu Jintao. (During the closing ceremony of the National Congress of the CCP in October 2022, the elderly Hu was removed from his seat on the dais and escorted offstage.) The sudden death of Premier Li Keqiang last fall has left Xi with no rivals within the party. Unlike Deng, Xi doesn't have to put up with a group of elders carping behind the scenes.

To further consolidate his political power and advance his policy goals, Xi has carried out an aggressive, decadelong anticorruption campaign, which today remains as intense as ever. The 2023 ouster of the ministers of defense and foreign affairs, who were both nominally close to Xi, should be read not as a sign of his weakness but of his strength and determination. He removed them summarily and with no apparent drama. His current purge of military and defense industry officials linked to China's cherished strategic rocket forces—more than a dozen men and counting—reflects his confidence in his position and his commitment to modernize the military.

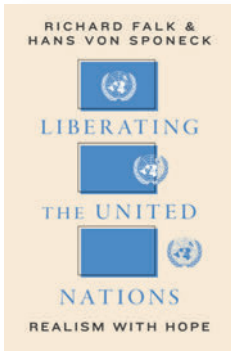
Xi's expansive view of national security involves a high degree of political monitoring and repression, which remain the CCP's key tools for realizing Xi's vision of a new party-state system. He has empowered his security services, aided by dystopian uses of surveillance technology, to eliminate any hint of dissent, to quiet restive minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and even to help implement economic directives, such as by



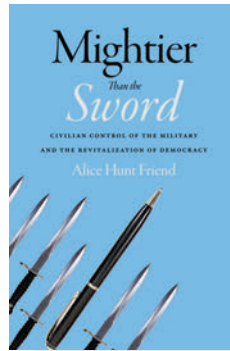
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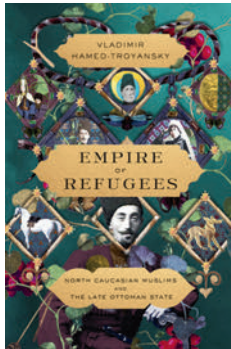
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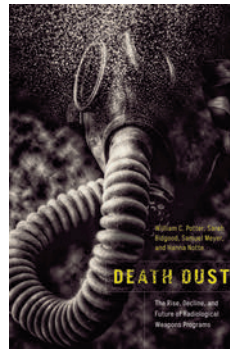
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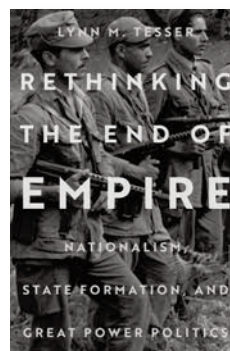
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harassing foreign consulting firms collecting sensitive information. In a first for China, the country's civilian spy agency, the Ministry of State Security, now operates an active WeChat account, where the office publicly comments on numerous hot-button issues, including U.S.-Chinese relations and alleged foreign spy operations.

Despite economic headwinds and slowing growth, Xi is driving forward, not struggling with indecision, as suggested by peak China advocates. He wants to rewire the Chinese economy so that it relies less on exports and investment in real estate and infrastructure and more on technology and advanced manufacturing to generate growth. That's why he is investing so much in clean energy technology, electric vehicles, and batteries, which some China watchers are calling "the new three" drivers of growth. (The "old three" are property, infrastructure, and processing trade.) Xi believes that shrinking the overheated property sector has been a painful but necessary step in reallocating capital to achieve economic transformation.

In truth, Xi is not merely comfortable with the current economic underperformance—he is actively promoting it. This is one of the main reasons the stimulus to date has been so modest. For him, the economy is simply suffering growing pains as it becomes stronger and more sustainable. To be sure, that belief raises the question of whether Xi is receiving reliable information about the depth of the structural and cyclical challenges weighing on the Chinese economy. Nonetheless, Xi has embraced austerity and tried to revive the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, and egalitarianism that characterized earlier eras of Maoist rule—for example, encouraging recent university graduates to relocate to the countryside instead of staying in cities to make their careers.

Many of Xi's policies have been poorly conceived and implemented. But that partly reflects the fact that he is trying to balance multiple and often contradictory objectives and his decision-making is too centralized. But it is critical to understand that Xi and other CCP leaders don't see their country as declining. Instead, they see themselves as making hard choices to restructure the economy so that China can propel itself toward its modernization goals.

#### GO BIG OR GO HOME

Xi sees China as ascendant globally and believes that now is the time to push for an even bigger role on the world stage. He is persisting with the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing's enormous infrastructure



and investment program, despite frequent financial losses that often generated local backlash. In 2023, China succeeded in expanding the BRICS (a bloc of major emerging economies named after its initial members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), adding five new countries. This is part of Xi's effort to provide an alternative to the West and its rules-based liberal international order. Xi is backing Putin in his war in Ukraine, helping him rebuild Russia's defense industry and civilian economy. China is carefully navigating wars in Europe and the Middle East, avoiding Western sanctions and eschewing responsibility, all while maintaining influence in both regions.

Xi now proudly promotes a somewhat inchoate tripartite vision of global order that seeks to challenge U.S. dominance and Western rules and norms. In the last two years, he has announced the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. Xi's goal is to make China the central actor in a transformed international system that is less liberal and less rules-based and that accedes to Chinese preferences, especially on priority items such as Taiwan, territorial disputes, and human rights. Xi is actively recruiting countries to adopt this anti-Western vision, which is the impetus behind the BRICS expansion and joint efforts with Brazil, Russia, and others to try to reduce the global influence of the U.S. dollar.

When Xi has faced headwinds, his policy pullback has been minimal, and the adjustments have been narrow and targeted. He abandoned zero COVID virtually overnight without any kind of new vaccination program, resulting in thousands of deaths yet no political or social repercussions. The removal of the defense and foreign ministers last year did not disrupt either ministry. After being halted by the spy balloon crisis, U.S.-Chinese diplomatic and military talks are back on track. Despite the upheaval in the Chinese military's strategic rocket forces, Xi's plans to quadruple China's nuclear forces continue and could fundamentally alter U.S.-Chinese relations.

On the economy, Xi reluctantly adopted more fiscal stimulus, including steps to boost consumption, but nothing close to the kind of "big bang" moves that would derail his vision of China becoming an advanced manufacturing superpower. As he shrinks the property sector and pushes state-directed investment strategies, Xi has remained indifferent to the sentiments of foreign investors who push for more stimulus and structural reforms. The Chinese government's effort to rescue the country's tanking stock market—by buying stocks—is just

the latest example of Xi's commitment to state-led development. His modest responses to some of China's biggest structural problems, such as its deeply indebted provinces and its growing demographic deficit, are worrisome. Still, there are policies he could adopt to address those problems; he just hasn't done so yet.

After a particularly difficult period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Xi has stabilized his key relationships, including with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. But he has not given away much to do so. China continues to thread the needle on Russia: it is boosting Russia's military capabilities with dual-use exports and helping to prop up its economy while avoiding large-scale U.S. sanctions. And China remains a dominant economic and diplomatic force in many parts of the world. So far, Xi has made only tactical adjustments—a tried and tested CCP approach to justify policy moves without being distracted from long-term goals.

#### IT'S NOT JUST THE ECONOMY, STUPID

Beyond ignoring Xi's clear commitment to China's rise, embracing the idea of peak China is problematic for additional reasons. First, it is difficult to measure and understand what peak China means in practice. Is it an absolute term or a relative one—and if the latter, relative to what? It is unclear whether the term takes into account U.S. power or Xi's perception of it. Perhaps China's leaders are not worried about whether their country is peaking because they believe the gap with the United States will keep closing, even if at a slower pace.

Also, China could peak in one area but advance in others, complicating the calculation. Proponents of the argument that China is now in decline point primarily to its economy. Yet as the economy slows (which is partially by design), China retains other sources of power and influence. The bottom line is that China will remain a global power even as its economy underperforms. It remains the world's largest exporter and creditor and is the second most populous country. It is also the center of innovation for some of the most important emerging industries, such as batteries and electric vehicles. It still produces or refines well over half the world's critical minerals. China possesses one of the largest and most advanced militaries in the world, with expeditionary capabilities and a growing overseas footprint. It is in the process of expanding its nuclear arsenal, supplementing it with conventional intercontinental ballistic missiles

and advanced hypersonic missiles. The military may also be moving to a more aggressive “launch on warning” nuclear weapons posture.

In terms of its diplomatic strength, China is at the center of global politics, with a seat at the table during every crisis. Xi has deftly used China’s investments in infrastructure abroad to create a network of economic ties that generate geopolitical influence. China’s incipient alignment with Iran, North Korea, and Russia could determine the future of global stability. On almost every transnational challenge, Beijing can both contribute to progress and disrupt it, a position that it deftly leverages to advance its interests and avoid unwanted burdens.

With the second-largest economy in the world in terms of GDP and deep ties to countries all over the world, Xi may make meaningful progress in shaping global rules and norms and undermining U.S. influence even as China’s economy slows. Chinese narratives about history and contemporary geopolitics resonate in the developing world, and Beijing is only getting better at promoting them. In short, either China is not peaking—or the idea of peak China doesn’t explain much about the challenges posed by China in the twenty-first century.

Instead of projecting the West’s fears and hopes onto China, Western officials must try to understand how China’s leaders perceive their country and their own ambitions. The idea of peak China only confuses the debate in the United States. It leads some to argue that China’s weaknesses are the problem and others to suggest that China’s strengths pose the biggest risks. Each side crafts convoluted policy proposals based on these assumptions. But seeing China through this simple lens ignores the fact that even a stagnant China can cause serious problems for Washington, economically and strategically.

Such a confused debate distracts from the efforts needed to allocate resources to what is a much more complex competition with China. U.S. policymakers still need to determine where and how to compete with China and, equally important, what risks they are willing to take and what costs they are willing to pay. Today, these foundational questions remain unanswered, and they could become far more dire for U.S. leaders if mishandled now. If the war in Ukraine has reminded us of anything about U.S. strategy, it is that both clarity of purpose and political consensus are needed. On China, the biggest risk today is not that China’s rise will fade away (and Washington will have overreacted). Instead, it is the possibility that the United States will fail to build and sustain support for a long-term competition across all dimensions of power. 🌐

# The Axis of Upheaval

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## How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order

ANDREA KENDALL-TAYLOR AND RICHARD FONTAINE

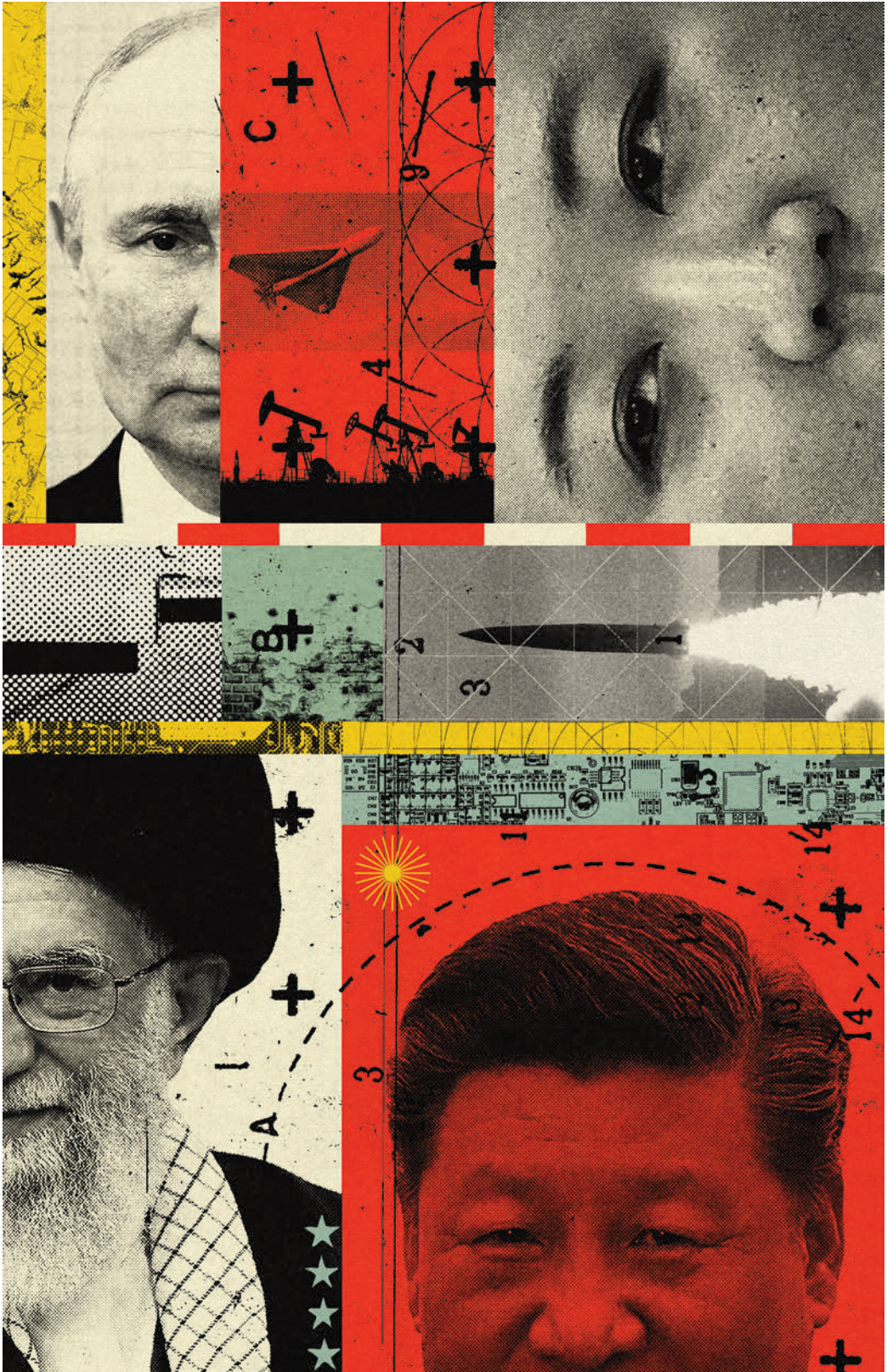
**I**n the early morning of January 2, Russian forces launched a massive missile attack on the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv that killed at least five civilians, injured more than 100, and damaged infrastructure. The incident was notable not just for the harm it caused but also because it showed that Russia was not alone in its fight. The Russian attack that day was carried out with weapons fitted with technology from China, missiles from North Korea, and drones from Iran. Over the past two years, all three countries have become critical enablers of Moscow's war machine in Ukraine.

Since Russia's invasion in February 2022, Moscow has deployed more than 3,700 Iranian-designed drones. Russia now produces at least 330

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RICHARD FONTAINE is CEO of the Center for a New American Security. He has worked at the U.S. Department of State, on the National Security Council, and as a foreign policy adviser to U.S. Senator John McCain.



REUTERS

on its own each month and is collaborating with Iran on plans to build a new drone factory inside Russia that will boost these numbers. North Korea has sent Russia ballistic missiles and more than 2.5 million rounds of ammunition, just as Ukrainian stockpiles have dwindled. China, for its part, has become Russia's most important lifeline. Beijing has ramped up its purchase of Russian oil and gas, putting billions of dollars into Moscow's coffers. Just as significantly, China provides vast amounts of warfighting technology, from semiconductors and electronic devices to radar- and communications-jamming equipment and jet-fighter parts. Customs records show that despite Western trade sanctions, Russia's imports of computer chips and chip components have been steadily rising toward prewar levels. More than half of these goods come from China.

The support from China, Iran, and North Korea has strengthened Russia's position on the battlefield, undermined Western attempts to isolate Moscow, and harmed Ukraine. This collaboration, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Cooperation among the four countries was expanding before 2022, but the war has accelerated their deepening economic, military, political, and technological ties. The four powers increasingly identify common interests, match up their rhetoric, and coordinate their military and diplomatic activities. Their convergence is creating a new axis of upheaval—a development that is fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape.

The group is not an exclusive bloc and certainly not an alliance. It is, instead, a collection of dissatisfied states converging on a shared purpose of overturning the principles, rules, and institutions that underlie the prevailing international system. When these four countries cooperate, their actions have far greater effect than the sum of their individual efforts. Working together, they enhance one another's military capabilities; dilute the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy tools, including sanctions; and hinder the ability of Washington and its partners to enforce global rules. Their collective aim is to create an alternative to the current order, which they consider to be dominated by the United States.

Too many Western observers have been quick to dismiss the implications of coordination among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. The four countries have their differences, to be sure, and a history of distrust and contemporary fissures may limit how close their relationships will grow. Yet their shared aim of weakening the United States and its leadership role provides a strong adhesive. In places across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, the ambitions of axis members have already proved to

be destabilizing. Managing the disruptive effects of their further coordination and preventing the axis from upsetting the global system must now be central objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

#### THE ANTI-WESTERN CLUB

Collaboration among axis members is not new. China and Russia have been strengthening their partnership since the end of the Cold War—a trend that accelerated rapidly after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. China’s share of Russian external trade doubled from ten to 20 percent between 2013 and 2021, and between 2018 and 2022 Russia supplied a combined total of 83 percent of China’s arms imports. Russian technology has helped the Chinese military enhance its air defense, antiship, and submarine capabilities, making China a more formidable force in a potential naval conflict. Beijing and Moscow have also expressed a shared vision. In early 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping signed a joint manifesto pledging a “no limits” partnership between their two countries and calling for “international relations of a new type”—in other words, a multipolar system that is no longer dominated by the United States.

Iran has strengthened its ties with other axis members as well. Iran and Russia worked together to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power after the onset of civil war in 2011. Joining Russia’s efforts, which include major energy agreements with Iran to shield Tehran from the effects of U.S. sanctions, China has purchased large quantities of Iranian oil since 2020. North Korea, for its part, has counted China as its primary ally and trade partner for decades, and North Korea and Russia have maintained warm, if not particularly substantive, ties. Iran has purchased North Korean missiles since the 1980s, and more recently, North Korea is thought to have supplied weapons to Iranian proxy groups, including Hezbollah and possibly Hamas. Pyongyang and Tehran have also bonded over a shared aversion to Washington: as a senior North Korean official, Kim Yong Nam, declared during a ten-day trip to Iran in 2017, the two countries “have a common enemy.”

But the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 hastened the convergence among these four countries in ways that transcend their historical ties. Moscow has been among Tehran’s top suppliers of weapons over the past two decades and is now its largest source of foreign investment; Russian exports to Iran rose by 27 percent in the first ten months of 2022. Over the past two years, according to the White House, Russia has been

sharing more intelligence with and providing more weapons to Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies, and Moscow has defended those proxies in debates at the UN Security Council. Last year, Russia displaced Saudi Arabia as China's largest source of crude oil and trade between the two countries topped \$240 billion, a record high. Moscow has also released millions of dollars in North Korean assets that previously sat frozen in Russian banks in compliance with Security Council sanctions. China, Iran, and Russia have held joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman three years in a row, most recently in March 2024. Russia has also proposed trilateral naval drills with China and North Korea.

The growing cooperation among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia is fueled by their shared opposition to the Western-dominated global order, an antagonism rooted in their belief that that system does not accord them the status or freedom of action they deserve. Each country claims a sphere of influence: China's "core interests," which extend to Taiwan and the South China Sea; Iran's "axis of resistance," the set of proxy groups that give Tehran leverage in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere; North Korea's claim to the entire Korean Peninsula; and Russia's "near abroad," which for the Kremlin includes, at a minimum, the countries that composed its historic empire. All four countries see the United States as the primary obstacle to establishing these spheres of influence, and they want Washington's presence in their respective regions reduced.

All reject the principle of universal values and interpret the West's championing of its brand of democracy as an attempt to undermine their legitimacy and foment domestic instability. They insist that individual states have the right to define democracy for themselves. In the end, although they may make temporary accommodations with the United States, they do not believe that the West will accept their rise (or return) to power on the world stage. They oppose external meddling in their internal affairs, the expansion of U.S. alliances, the stationing of American nuclear weapons abroad, and the use of coercive sanctions.

Any positive vision for the future, however, is more elusive. Yet history shows that a positive agenda may not be necessary for a group of discontented powers to cause disruption. The 1940 Tripartite Pact uniting Germany, Italy, and Japan—the original "Axis"—pledged to "establish and maintain a new order of things" in which each country would claim "its own proper place." They did not succeed, but World War II certainly brought global upheaval. The axis of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia does not need a coherent plan for an alternative international order to



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upset the existing system. The countries' shared opposition to the present order's core tenets and their determination to bring about change form a powerful basis for collaborative action.

Fissures do exist among members of the axis. China and Russia vie for influence in Central Asia, for instance, while Iran and Russia compete for oil markets in China, India, and elsewhere in Asia. The four countries have complicated histories with each other, too. The Soviet Union invaded Iran in 1941; Russia and China settled their long-standing border dispute only in 2004 and had both previously supported efforts to limit Iran's nuclear programs and to isolate North Korea. Today, China may look askance at North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia, worrying that an emboldened Kim Jong Un will aggravate tensions in Northeast Asia and draw in a larger U.S. military presence, which China does not want. Yet their differences are insufficient to dissolve the bonds forged by their common resistance to a Western-dominated world.

#### CATALYST IN THE KREMLIN

Moscow has been the main instigator of this axis. The invasion of Ukraine marked a point of no return in Putin's long-standing crusade against the West. Putin has grown more committed to destroying not only Ukraine but also the global order. And he has doubled down on relationships with like-minded countries to accomplish his aims. Cut off from Western trade, investment, and technology since the start of the war, Moscow has had little choice but to rely on its partners to sustain its hostilities. The ammunition, drones, microchips, and other forms of aid that axis members have sent have been of great help to Russia. But the more the Kremlin relies on these countries, the more it must give away in return. Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran are taking advantage of their leverage over Moscow to expand their military capabilities and economic options.

Even before the Russian invasion, Moscow's military assistance to Beijing was eroding the United States' military advantage over China. Russia has provided ever more sophisticated weapons to China, and the two countries' joint military exercises have grown in scope and frequency. Russian officers who have fought in Syria and in Ukraine's Donbas region have shared valuable lessons with Chinese personnel, helping the People's Liberation Army make up for its lack of operational experience—a notable weakness relative to more seasoned U.S. forces. China's military modernization has reduced the urgency of deepening defense cooperation with Russia, but the two countries

are likely to proceed with technology transfers and joint weapons development and production. In February, for instance, Russian officials confirmed that they were working with Chinese counterparts on military applications of artificial intelligence. Moscow retains an edge over Beijing in other key areas, including submarine technology, remote sensing satellites, and aircraft engines. If China can pressure a more dependent Russia to provide additional advanced technologies, the transfer could further undermine the United States' advantages.

A similar dynamic is playing out in Russia's relations with Iran and North Korea. Moscow and Tehran have forged what the Biden administration has called an "unprecedented defense partnership" that upgrades Iranian military capabilities. Russia has provided Iran with advanced aircraft, air defense, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and cyber-capabilities that would help Tehran resist a potential U.S. or Israeli military operation. And in return for North Korea's ammunition and other military support to Russia, Pyongyang is reportedly seeking advanced space, missile, and submarine technology from Moscow. If Russia were to comply with those requests, North Korea would be able to improve the accuracy and survivability of its nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles and use Russian nuclear propulsion technology to expand the range and capability of its submarines. Already, Russia's testing of North Korean weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine has supplied Pyongyang with information it can use to refine its missile program, and Russian assistance may have helped North Korea launch a military spy satellite in November after two previous failures last year.

Strong relations among the four axis countries have emboldened leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran. Kim, who now enjoys strong backing from both China and Russia, abandoned North Korea's decades-old policy of peaceful unification with South Korea and stepped up its threats against Seoul, indulged in nuclear blackmail and missile tests, and expressed a lack of any interest in talks with the United States. And although there does not appear to be a direct connection between their deepening partnership and Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, growing support from Russia likely made Iran more willing to activate its regional proxies in the aftermath. The coordinated diplomacy and pressure from Russia

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The West has been too quick to dismiss the coordination among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

and the West that brought Iran into the 2015 nuclear deal are now a distant memory. Today, Moscow and Beijing are helping Tehran resist Western coercion, making it easier for Iran to enrich uranium and reject Washington's efforts to negotiate a new nuclear agreement.

#### AMERICA UNDERMINED

Collaboration among the axis members also reduces the potency of tools that Washington and its partners often use to confront them. In the most glaring example, since the start of the war in Ukraine, China has supplied Russia with semiconductors and other essential technologies that Russia previously imported from the West, undercutting the efficacy of Western export controls. All four countries are also working to reduce their dependence on the U.S. dollar. The share of Russia's imports invoiced in Chinese renminbi jumped from three percent in 2021 to 20 percent in 2022. And in December 2023, Iran and Russia finalized an agreement to conduct bilateral trade in their local currencies. By moving their economic transactions out of reach of U.S. enforcement measures, axis members undermine the efficacy of Western sanctions, as well as anticorruption and anti-money-laundering efforts.

Taking advantage of their shared borders and littoral zones, China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia can build trade and transportation networks safe from U.S. interdiction. Iran, for example, ships drones and other weapons to Russia across the Caspian Sea, where the United States has little power to stop transfers. If the United States were engaged in conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing could seek support from Moscow. Russia might increase its overland exports of oil and gas to its southern neighbor, reducing China's dependence on maritime energy imports that U.S. forces could block during a conflict. Russia's defense industrial base, now in overdrive to supply weapons for Russian troops in Ukraine, could later pivot to sustain a Chinese war effort. Such cooperation would increase the odds of China's prevailing over the American military and help advance Russia's goal of diminishing the United States' geopolitical influence.

The axis is also hindering Washington's ability to rally international coalitions that can stand against its members' destabilizing actions. China's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, made it far easier for countries across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to do the same. And Beijing and Moscow have impeded Western efforts to isolate Iran. Last year, they elevated Iran from observer to

member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a predominantly Asian regional body, and then orchestrated an invitation for Iran to join the BRICS—a group that China and Russia view as a counterweight to the West. Iran’s regional meddling and nuclear pursuits have made other countries wary of dealing with its government, but its participation in international forums enhances the regime’s legitimacy and presents it with opportunities to expand trade with fellow member states.

Parallel efforts by axis members in the information domain further weaken international support for U.S. positions. China, Iran, and North Korea either defended or avoided explicitly condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and they all parroted the Kremlin in accusing NATO of inciting the war. Their response to Hamas’s attacks on Israel last October followed a similar pattern. Iran used the state media and social media accounts to express support for Hamas, vilify Israel, and denounce the United States for enabling Israel’s military response, while the Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese media sharply criticized the United States’ enduring support for Israel. They used the war in Gaza to portray Washington as a destabilizing, domineering force in the world—a narrative that is particularly resonant in parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Even if axis members do not overtly coordinate their messages, they push the same themes, and the repetition makes them appear more credible and persuasive.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE ORDER?

Global orders magnify the strength of the powerful states that lead them. The United States, for instance, has invested in the liberal international order it helped create because this order reflects American preferences and extends U.S. influence. As long as an order remains sufficiently beneficial to most members, a core group of states will defend it. Dissenting countries, meanwhile, are bound by a collective action problem. If they were to defect en masse, they could succeed in creating an alternative order more to their liking. But without a core cluster of powerful states around which they can coalesce, the advantage remains with the existing order.

For decades, threats to the U.S.-led order were limited to a handful of rogue states with little power to upend it. But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the restructuring of interstate relations it prompted have lifted the constraint on collective action. The axis of upheaval represents a new center of gravity, a group that other countries dissatisfied with

the existing order can turn to. The axis is ushering in an international system characterized by two orders that are becoming increasingly organized and competitive.

Historically, competing orders have invited conflict, especially at the geographical seams between them. Wars arise from specific conditions, such as a territorial dispute, the need to protect national interests or the interests of an ally, or a threat to the survival of a regime. But the likelihood that any of those conditions will lead to war increases in

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the presence of dueling orders. Some political science researchers have found that periods in which a single order prevailed—the balance-of-power system maintained by the Concert of Europe for much of the nineteenth century, for example, or the U.S.-dominated post-Cold War era—were less prone to conflicts than those characterized by more than

one order, such as the multipolar period between the two world wars and the bipolar system of the Cold War.

The world has gotten a preview of the instability this new era of competing orders will bring, with potential aggressors empowered by the axis's normalization of alternative rules and less afraid of being isolated if they act out. Already, Hamas's attack on Israel threatens to engulf the wider Middle East in war. Last October, Azerbaijan forcibly took control of Nagorno-Karabakh, a breakaway region inhabited by ethnic Armenians. Tensions flared between Serbia and Kosovo in 2023, too, and Venezuela threatened to seize territory in neighboring Guyana in December. Although internal conditions precipitated the coups in Myanmar and across Africa's Sahel region since 2020, the rising incidence of such revolts is connected to the new international arrangement. For many years, it seemed that coups were becoming less common, in large part because plotters faced significant costs for violating norms. Now, however, the calculations have changed. Overthrowing a government may still shatter relations with the West, but the new regimes can find support in Beijing and Moscow.

Further development of the axis would bring even greater tumult. So far, most collaboration among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia has been bilateral. Trilateral and quadrilateral action could expand their capacity for disruption. Countries such as Belarus, Cuba, Eritrea, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—all of which chafe against the U.S.-led,

Western-dominated system—could also begin working more closely with the axis. If the group grows in size and tightens its coordination, the United States and its allies will have a more difficult time defending the recognized order.

#### TAKING ON THE REVISIONISTS

For now, U.S. national security strategy ranks China as a higher priority than Iran, North Korea, or even Russia. That assessment is strategically sound when considering the threat that individual countries pose to the United States, but it does not fully account for the cooperation among them. U.S. policy will need to address the destabilizing effects of revisionist countries' acting in concert, and it should try to disrupt their coordinated efforts to subvert important international rules and institutions. Washington, furthermore, should undercut the axis's appeal by sharpening the attractions of the existing order.

If the United States is to counter an increasingly coordinated axis, it cannot treat each threat as an isolated phenomenon. Washington should not ignore Russian aggression in Europe, for example, in order to focus on rising Chinese power in Asia. It is already clear that Russia's success in Ukraine benefits a revisionist China by showing that it is possible, if costly, to thwart a united Western effort. Even as Washington rightly sees China as its top priority, addressing the challenge from Beijing will require competing with other members of the axis in other parts of the world. To be effective, the United States will need to devote additional resources to national security, engage in more vigorous diplomacy, develop new and stronger partnerships, and take a more activist role in the world than it has of late.

Driving wedges between members of the axis, on the other hand, will not work. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, some strategists suggested that the United States align itself with Russia to balance China. After the war began, a few held out hope that the United States could join China in an anti-Russian coalition. But unlike President Richard Nixon's opening to China in the 1970s, which took advantage of a Sino-Soviet split to draw Beijing further away from Moscow, there is no equivalent ideological or geopolitical rivalry for Washington to exploit today. The price of trying would likely involve U.S. recognition of a Russian or Chinese sphere of influence in Europe and Asia—regions central to U.S. interests and ones that Washington should not allow a hostile foreign power to dominate. Breaking Iran or North Korea off from the rest of

the axis would be even more difficult, given their governments' revisionist, even revolutionary aims. Ultimately, the axis is a problem the United States must manage, not one it can solve with grand strategic gestures.

Neither the West nor the axis will become wholly distinct political, military, and economic blocs. Each coalition will compete for influence all over the world, trying to draw vital countries closer to its side. Six "global swing states" will be particularly important: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey are all middle powers with enough collective geopolitical weight for their policy preferences to sway the future direction of the international order. These six countries—and others, too—can be expected to pursue economic, diplomatic, military, and technological ties with members of both orders. U.S. policymakers should make it a priority to deny advantages to the axis in these countries, encouraging their governments to choose policies that favor the prevailing order. In practice, that means using trade incentives, military engagement, foreign aid, and diplomacy to prevent swing states from hosting axis members' military bases, giving axis members access to their technology infrastructure or military equipment, or helping them circumvent Western sanctions.

Although competition with the axis may be inevitable, the United States must try to avoid direct conflict with any of its members. To that end, Washington should reaffirm its security commitments to bolster deterrence in the western Pacific, in the Middle East, on the Korean Peninsula, and on NATO's eastern flank. The United States and its allies should also prepare for opportunistic aggression. If a Chinese invasion of Taiwan prompts U.S. military intervention, for instance, Russia may be tempted to move against another European country, and Iran or North Korea could escalate threats in their regions. Even if the axis members do not coordinate their aggression directly, concurrent conflicts could overwhelm the West. Washington will therefore need to press allies to invest in capabilities that the United States could not provide if it were already engaged in another military theater.

Confronting the axis will be expensive. A new strategy will require the United States to bolster its spending on defense, foreign aid, diplomacy, and strategic communications. Washington must direct aid to the frontlines of conflict between the axis and the West—including assistance to Israel, Taiwan, and Ukraine, all of which face encroachment by axis members. Revisionists are emboldened by the sense that political divisions at home or exhaustion with international engagement



will keep the United States on the sidelines of this competition; a comprehensive, well-resourced U.S. strategy with bipartisan support would help counter that impression. The alternative—a reduction in the U.S. global presence—would leave the fate of crucial regions in the hands not of friendly local powers but of axis members seeking to impose their revisionist and illiberal preferences.

#### THE FOUR-POWER THREAT

There is a tendency to downplay the significance of growing cooperation among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. By turning to Beijing, this argument goes, Moscow merely signals its acceptance of the role of junior partner. Obtaining drones from Iran and munitions from North Korea demonstrates the desperation of a Russian war machine that incorrectly assumed that conquering Ukraine would be easy. China's embrace of Russia shows only that Beijing could not achieve the positive relationship it originally sought with Europe and other Western powers. North Korea remains the world's most isolated country, and Iran's disruptive activities have backfired, strengthening regional cooperation among Israel, the United States, and Gulf countries.

Such analysis ignores the severity of the threat. Four powers, growing in strength and coordination, are united in their opposition to the prevailing world order and its U.S. leadership. Their combined economic and military capacity, together with their determination to change the way the world has worked since the end of the Cold War, make for a dangerous mix. This is a group bent on upheaval, and the United States and its partners must treat the axis as the generational challenge it is. They must reinforce the foundations of the international order and push back against those who act most vigorously to undermine it. It is likely impossible to arrest the emergence of this new axis, but keeping it from upending the current system is an achievable goal.

The West has everything it needs to triumph in this contest. Its combined economy is far larger, its militaries are significantly more powerful, its geography is more advantageous, its values are more attractive, and its democratic system is more stable. The United States and its partners should be confident in their own strengths, even as they appreciate the scale of effort necessary to compete with this budding anti-Western coalition. The new axis has already changed the picture of geopolitics—but Washington and its partners can still prevent the world of upheaval the axis hopes to usher in. 🌐

# The Five Futures of Russia

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## And How America Can Prepare for Whatever Comes Next

STEPHEN KOTKIN

Vladimir Putin happened to turn 71 last October 7, the day Hamas assaulted Israel. The Russian president took the rampage as a birthday present; it shifted the context around his aggression in Ukraine. Perhaps to show his appreciation, he had his Foreign Ministry invite high-ranking Hamas representatives to Moscow in late October, highlighting an alignment of interests. Several weeks later, Putin announced his intention to stand for a fifth term in a choiceless election in March 2024 and later held his annual press conference, offering a phalanx of pliant journalists the privilege of hearing him smugly crow about Western fatigue over the war in Ukraine. “Almost along the entire frontline, our armed forces, let’s put it modestly, are improving their position,” Putin boasted in the live broadcast.

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On February 16, Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service announced the sudden death of the opposition activist Alexei Navalny, aged 47, in a penal colony above the Arctic Circle, from which he had continued to reach his millions of followers with instructions on how to protest Putin's plebiscite. A month later, the most one could say was that the Kremlin had at least waited until after the voting was staged to announce Putin's victory.

Putin styles himself as a new tsar. But a real tsar would not have to worry about a looming succession crisis and what it might do to his grip on power in the present. Putin does; that is partly why he must simulate elections. He is now set in his office until 2030, when he will be in his 78th year. Male life expectancy in Russia does not even reach 67 years; those who live to 60 can expect to survive to around 80. Russia's confirmed centenarians are few. Putin might one day join their ranks. But even Stalin died.

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Washington  
has learned the  
hard way that it  
lacks the levers to  
transform Russia.

Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, turned out to be that rare would-be tsar who named a successor and smoothed his path to power. In 1999, Yeltsin, facing chronic health challenges and fearing that he and his "family" of corrupt cronies might face prison after he stepped down, chose Putin to preserve his liberty and legacy. "Take care of Russia," Yeltsin offered as a parting instruction. In 2007, aged 76, he died a free man. But the protector has refrained from emulating his patron's example. In 2008, Putin briefly stepped aside from the presidency, in recognition of the same two-consecutive-term limit that Yeltsin faced. Putin appointed a political nonentity in his place, shifted himself to the position of prime minister, and came right back for a third presidential term in 2012 and then a fourth. Finally, he induced his counterfeit legislature to alter the constitution to effectively remove any term limits. Stalin, too, had stubbornly clung to power, even as his infirmities worsened. He refused to countenance the emergence of a successor; eventually, he suffered a massive, final stroke and fell into a puddle of his own urine.

Putin is not Stalin. The Georgian despot built a superpower while dispatching tens of millions to their deaths in famines, forced labor camps, execution cellars, and a mismanaged defensive war. Putin, by contrast, has jerry-rigged a rogue power while sending hundreds of thousands to their deaths in a war of choice. The juxtaposition is nevertheless instructive. Stalin's system proved unable to survive without him, despite having an institutionalized ruling party. And yet, amid the

breakdown that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union but lasted well beyond 1991, Putin consolidated a new autocracy. This fusion of fragility and path dependence derives from many factors that are not easily rewired: geography, a national-imperial identity, an ingrained strategic culture. (The nineteenth-century Russian satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin remarked of his country that everything changes dramatically every five to ten years but nothing changes in 200 years.) Still, whenever and however Putin might go, his personalistic autocracy and, more broadly, Russia already face questions about the future.

Putin's regime styles itself an icebreaker, smashing to bits the U.S.-led international order on behalf of humanity. Washington and its allies and partners have allowed themselves to be surprised by him time and again—in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and central Africa. This has provoked fears about the next nasty surprise. But what about the long term? How, in the light of inescapable leadership mortality and larger structural factors, might Russia evolve, or not, over the next decade and possibly beyond?

Readers seeking odds on Russia's trajectory should consult the betting markets. What Western officials and other decision-makers need to do, instead, is to consider a set of scenarios: to extrapolate from current trends in a way that can facilitate contingency planning. Scenarios are about attempting to not be surprised. Needless to note, the world constantly surprises, and something impossible to foresee could occur: the proverbial black swan. Humility is in order. Still, five possible futures for Russia are currently imaginable, and the United States and its allies should bear them in mind.

Over the course of multiple presidential administrations, Washington has learned the hard way that it lacks the levers to transform places such as Russia and, for that matter, China: countries that originated as empires on the Eurasian landmass and celebrate themselves as ancient civilizations that long predate the founding of the United States, let alone the formation of the West. They are not characters out of the playwright George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, ripe for conversion from street urchins to refined ladies: that is, from authoritarian, imperialist regimes to responsible stakeholders in the U.S.-dominated international system. Efforts to remake their "personalities" invariably result in mutual recriminations and disillusionment. Leaders such as Putin and China's Xi Jinping did not capriciously reverse a hopeful process; in no small measure, they resulted from it. So Washington and its partners must not exaggerate their ability to shape Russia's trajectory. Instead, they should prepare for whatever unfolds.

RUSSIA AS FRANCE

France is a country with deep-seated bureaucratic and monarchical traditions—and also a fraught revolutionary tradition. Revolutionaries abolished the monarchy only to see it return in the guise of both a king and an emperor and then disappear again, as republics came and went. France built and lost a vast empire of colonial possessions. For centuries, France's rulers, none more than Napoleon, threatened the country's neighbors.

Today, these traditions live on in many ways. As the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville shrewdly observed in his 1856 work *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, the revolutionaries' efforts to break definitively with the past ended up unwittingly reinforcing statist structures. Despite the consolidation of a republican system, France's monarchical inheritance endures symbolically in palaces in Versailles and elsewhere, in ubiquitous statues of Bourbon dynasty rulers, and in an inordinately centralized form of rule with immense power and wealth concentrated in Paris. Even shorn of its formal empire, France remains a fiercely proud country, one that many of its citizens and admirers view as a civilization with a lingering sense of a special mission in the world and in Europe, as well as a language spoken far beyond its borders (60 percent of daily French speakers are citizens of elsewhere). But crucially, today's France enjoys the rule of law and no longer threatens its neighbors.

Russia, too, possesses a statist and monarchical tradition that will endure regardless of the nature of any future political system and a fraught revolutionary tradition that has also ceased to be an ongoing venture yet lives on in institutions and memories as a source of inspiration and warning. To be sure, the autocratic Romanovs were even less constrained than the absolutist Bourbons. Russia's revolution was considerably more brutal and destructive than even the French one. Russia's lost empire was contiguous, not overseas, and lasted far longer—indeed, for most of the existence of the modern Russian state. In Russia, Moscow's domination of the rest of the country exceeds even that of Paris in France. Russia's geographical expanse dwarfs France's, enmeshing the country in Europe but also the Caucasus, Central Asia, and East Asia. Very few countries have much in common with Russia. But France has more than perhaps any other.

Contemporary France is a great country, although not without its detractors. Some decry what they deem its excessive statism, the high taxes necessary to underwrite uneven services, as well as a broad socialistic ethos. Others find fault with what they perceive as France's great-power

pretensions and cultural chauvinism. Still others lament France's difficulty in assimilating immigrants. But it is possible to be disappointed in these or other aspects of the country and still recognize that it provides the closest thing to a realistic model for a prosperous, peaceful Russia. If Russia were to become like France—a democracy with a rule-of-law system that luxuriated in its absolutist and revolutionary past but no longer threatened its neighbors—that would constitute a high-order achievement.

France tramped a tortuous path to become what it is today. Recall Robespierre's revolutionary terror, Napoleon's catastrophic expansionism, Napoleon III's self-coup (from elected president to emperor), the seizure of power by the Paris Commune, the country's rapid defeat in World War II, the Vichy collaborationist regime that followed, the colonial Algerian war, and the extraconstitutional acts of President Charles de Gaulle after he came out of retirement in 1958. One might be seduced by the notion that Russia needs its own de Gaulle to help consolidate a liberal order from above, even though no such *deus ex machina* looms on Russia's immediate horizon. But only hagiographers believe that one man created today's France. Notwithstanding the country's moments of instability, over generations, France developed the impartial, professional institutions—a judiciary, a civil service, a free and open public sphere—of a democratic, republican nation. The problem was not mainly that Yeltsin was no de Gaulle. The problem was that Russia was much further from a stable, Western-style constitutional order in 1991 than France had been three decades earlier.

#### RUSSIA RETRENCHED

Some Russians might welcome a transformation into a country that resembles France, but others would find that outcome anathema. What the world now sees as Putinism first surfaced in the Russian-language periodicals and volunteer societies of the 1970s: an authoritarian, resentful, mystical nationalism grounded in anti-Westernism, espousing nominally traditional values, and borrowing incoherently from Slavophilism, Eurasianism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. One could imagine an authoritarian nationalist leader who embraces those views and who, like Putin, is unshakable in the belief that the United States is hell-bent on Russia's destruction but who is also profoundly troubled by Russia's cloudy long-term future—and willing to blame Putin for it. That is, someone who appeals to Putin's base but makes the case that the war against Ukraine is damaging Russia.

Demography is a special sore point for Russia's blood-and-soil nationalists, not to mention the military brass and many ordinary people. Since 1992, despite considerable immigration, Russia's population has shrunk. Its working-age population peaked in 2006 at around 90 million and stands at less than 80 million today, a calamitous trend. Spending on the war in Ukraine has boosted Russia's defense industrial base, but the limits of the country's diminished labor force are becoming ever more evident even in that high-priority sector, which has around five million fewer qualified workers than it needs. The proportion of workers who are in the most productive age group—20 to 39—will further decline over the next decade. Nothing, not even kidnapping children from Ukraine, for which the International Criminal Court indicted Putin, will reverse the loss of Russians, which the war's exorbitant casualties are compounding.

Productivity gains that might offset these demographic trends are nowhere in sight. Russia ranks nearly last in the world in the scale and speed of automation in production: its robotization is just a microscopic fraction of the world average. Even before the widened war in Ukraine began to eat into the state budget, Russia placed surprisingly low in global rankings of education spending. In the past two years, Putin has willingly forfeited much of the country's economic future when he induced or forced thousands of young tech workers to flee conscription and repression. True, these are people that rabid nationalists claim not to miss, but deep down many know that a great power needs them.

Given its sprawling Eurasian geography and long-standing ties to many parts of the world, as well as the alchemy of opportunism, Russia is still able to import many indispensable components for its economy despite Western sanctions. Notwithstanding this resourcefulness and despite the public's habituation to the war, Russian elites know the damning statistics. They are aware that as a commodity-exporting country, Russia's long-term development depends on technology transfers from advanced countries; Putin's invasion of Ukraine has made it harder to use the West as a source, and his symbolic embrace of Hamas's nihilism gratuitously strained Russia's relations with Israel, a major supplier of high-tech goods and services. At a more basic level, Russia's elites are physically cut off from the developed world: hideaways in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), however agreeable, cannot replace European villas and boarding schools.

Although a Russian authoritarian regime has once again proved resilient in war, Putin's grave lack of domestic investment and diversification,



his furtherance of demographic distress, and his role in the country's descent into technological backwardness could yet compel hardcore nationalists—among them many elites—to admit that Russia is on a self-defeating trajectory. Many have privately concluded that Putin conflates the survival of his aging personal regime with the storied country's survival as a great power. Historically, at least, such realizations have precipitated a change of course, a turn from foreign overextension to domestic revitalization. Last summer, when the mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's death squad marched on Moscow, it did not elicit bandwagoning by military officers, which is one reason Prigozhin called it off. But neither did it galvanize the regime's supporters to defend Putin in real time. The episode furnished an unwitting referendum on the regime, revealing a certain hollowness inside the repressive strength.

Retrenchment could result from hastening Putin's exit, or it could follow his natural demise. It could also be forced on him without his removal by meaningful political threats to his rule. However it happened, it would involve mostly tactical moves spurred by a recognition that Russia lacks the means to oppose the West without end, pays an exorbitant price for trying, and risks permanently losing vital European ties in exchange for a humiliating dependence on China.

#### RUSSIA AS VASSAL

Defiantly pro-Putin Russian elites boast that they have developed an option that is better than the West. The Chinese-Russian bond has surprised many analysts aware of Beijing and Moscow's prickly relations in the past, including the infamous Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, which culminated in a short border war. Although that conflict was formally settled with a border demarcation, Russia remains the sole country that controls territory seized from the Qing empire in what the Chinese vilify as unfair treaties. That has not stopped China and Russia from bolstering ties, including by conducting large-scale joint military exercises, which have grown in frequency and geographic scope in the past 20 years. The two countries are fully aligned on Russia's grievances regarding NATO expansion and Western meddling in Ukraine, where Chinese support for Russia continues to be crucial.

Chinese-Russian rapprochement predates the rise of Putin and Xi. In the 1980s, it was Deng Xiaoping who performed a turn away from Moscow more momentous than the one Mao Zedong had carried out in the 1960s and 1970s. Deng gained access to the American domestic

market for Chinese producers, the same trick that enabled the transformation of Japan and then South Korea and Taiwan. Deng's divorce from the communist Soviet Union for a *de facto* economic marriage with American and European capitalists ushered in an era of astonishing prosperity that birthed a Chinese middle class. But China and Russia remained intertwined. Deng's handpicked successor, Jiang Zemin, who had trained at a Soviet factory, brought Russia back as a mistress without breaking the U.S.-Chinese marital bond. Jiang placed orders that helped resuscitate Russia's forlorn military-industrial complex and modernize China's own weapons production and military. In 1996, Jiang and Yeltsin proclaimed a "strategic partnership." Despite modest bilateral trade, China's domestic economic boom indirectly helped bring civilian Soviet-era production back from the dead by lifting global demand and therefore prices for the industrial inputs the Soviet Union had produced in low quality but high quantity, from steel to fertilizer. Just as the United States had helped forge a Chinese middle class, so, too, did China play a part in conjuring into being Russia's middle class and Putin's economic boom.

Nevertheless, societal and cultural relations between the two peoples remain shallow. Russians are culturally European, and few speak Chinese (compared with English). Although some elderly Chinese speak Russian, a legacy of Moscow's erstwhile centrality in the communist world, that number is not large, and the days when Chinese students attended Russian universities in great numbers are a distant memory. Russians are apprehensive of China's power, and many Chinese who hold weakness in contempt ridicule Russia online. Stalwarts of the Chinese Communist Party remain unforgiving of Moscow's destruction of communism across Eurasia and eastern Europe.

And yet the profundity of the personal relationship between Putin and Xi has compensated for these otherwise brittle foundations. The two men have fallen into a bromance, meeting an astonishing 42 times while in power, publicly lauding each other as "my best friend" (Xi on Putin) and "dear friend" (Putin on Xi). The two kindred souls' authoritarian solidarity is undergirded by an abiding anti-Westernism, especially anti-Americanism. As China, the former junior partner, became the senior partner, the two autocratic neighbors upgraded relations, announcing a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2013. Officially, trade between Russia and China surpassed \$230 billion in 2023; adjusting for inflation, it had hovered around \$16 billion three decades earlier

and stood at just \$78 billion as recently as the mid-2010s. The 2023 figure, moreover, does not include tens of billions more in bilateral trade that is disguised using third parties, such as Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and the UAE.

China still buys military aircraft engines from Russia. But otherwise, the dependence goes in the other direction. Western sanctions accelerated the loss of Russia's domestic vehicle industry to China. Moscow is now holding a substantial pile of renminbi reserves, which can be used only for Chinese goods. But despite innumerable meetings over decades, there is still no final agreement on a major new natural gas pipeline that would originate in Siberia and make its way to China through Mongolia. The Chinese leadership has keenly avoided becoming dependent on Russia for energy or anything else. On the contrary, China is already the global leader in solar and wind power and is working to displace Russia as the top global player in nuclear energy.

Russian elites, even as they vehemently denounce an imaginary U.S. determination to subjugate or dismember their country, have by and large not raised their voices against Putin's subordination of Russia to China. And lately, Russian commentators have taken to retelling the tale of Alexander Nevsky, who in the thirteenth century reigned as prince of Novgorod, one of the states folded into Muscovy, the precursor to imperial Russia. When faced with a two-front challenge, Nevsky chose to fight the crusaders of the west, defeating the Teutons in the Battle of the Ice, and to accommodate the invading Mongols of the east, traveling across central Asia to the capital of the Mongol Golden Horde to be recognized as grand prince of Russia. In this telling, the Western Christians were determined to undermine Russia's Eastern Christian identity, whereas the Mongols merely wanted Russia to pay tribute. The implication is that today's accommodation of China does not require Russia to relinquish its identity, whereas a failure to confront the West would.

This is bunkum. It took Russians centuries to free themselves from what their school textbooks uniformly called the Mongol yoke, but Russia has survived relations with the West for centuries without itself ever becoming Western. Being non-Western, however, does not necessarily mean being anti-Western—unless, of course, one is struggling to protect an illiberal regime in a liberal world order. Russia existed

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Besides raw materials and political thuggery, the only things Russia exports are talented people.

within its post-Soviet borders for two decades before Putin decided the situation was intolerable. Now, having burned bridges with the West and blamed it for the arson, he has little recourse other than to rely on China's good graces.

The great and growing imbalance in the relationship has induced analysts to speak of Russia as China's vassal. But only China decides whether a country becomes its vassal, whereby Beijing dictates Russian policy and even personnel, and assumes the burden of responsibility. It has no binding treaty obligations with Russia. Putin possesses only the 70-year-old Xi's word—and Xi, too, is mortal. Nonetheless, the two leaders continue to denounce the United States' bid for hegemony and cooperate closely. A shared commitment to render the world order safe for their respective dictatorships and dominate their regions is driving a *de facto* vassalage that neither fancies.

#### RUSSIA AS NORTH KOREA

In deepening Russia's dependence on China, Putin or his successor could draw paradoxical inspiration from the experience of North Korea, which in turn could give Xi or his successor pause. During Beijing's intervention to rescue Pyongyang in the Korean War, Mao, employing a proverb, stated that if the lips (North Korea) are gone, the teeth (China) will be cold. This metaphor implies both an act of buffering and a condition of interdependence. Over the years, some Chinese commentators have doubted the value of propping up North Korea, particularly after the latter's defiant nuclear test in 2006. Faced with UN sanctions, which China joined, North Korea's leadership pressed forward aggressively with its programs for nuclear weapons and missiles, which can reach not just Seoul and Tokyo but also Beijing and Shanghai. Still, China's leadership eventually reaffirmed its backing of Pyongyang, in 2018. Given North Korea's extreme dependence on China for food, fuel, and much else, Beijing would seem to have its leader, Kim Jong Un, in a vice grip.

Yet Pyongyang loyalists sometimes warn that the teeth can bite the lips. As ruling circles in Beijing have discovered time and again, Kim does not always defer to his patrons. In 2017, he had his half brother, Kim Jong Nam, who was under China's protection abroad, murdered. Kim can get away with defiance because he knows that no matter how much he might incense Beijing, China does not want the regime in Pyongyang to fall. If the North Korean state imploded, the peninsula would be reunited under the aegis of South Korea, a U.S. treaty ally.

That would amount to China, at long last, losing the Korean War, which for more than 70 years has remained suspended by an armistice. A loss of the Korean buffer could complicate Beijing's options and internal timelines regarding its hoped-for absorption of Taiwan, since China would face a more hostile external environment close by. Historically, instability on the Korean Peninsula has tended to spill over into China, and an influx of refugees could destabilize China's northeast and potentially much more. So Beijing appears to be stuck in a form of reverse dependence with Pyongyang. Xi would not want to find himself in a similar position with Moscow.

Russia and North Korea could scarcely be more different. The former is more than 142 times as large as the latter in territory. North Korea possesses the kind of dynasty that Russia does not, even though each Kim family successor gets rubber-stamped as leader by a party congress. North Korea is also a formal treaty ally of China, Beijing's only such ally in the world, the two having signed a mutual defense pact in 1961. (Some Chinese commentary has suggested China is no longer obliged to come to North Korea's defense in the event of an attack because of Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons, but the pact has not been repealed.) North Korea faces a rival Korean state in the form of South Korea, making it more akin to East Germany (which of course is long gone) than to Russia.

Despite these and other differences, Russia could become something of a gigantic North Korea: domestically repressive, internationally isolated and transgressive, armed with nuclear weapons, and abjectly dependent on China but still able to buck Beijing. It remains unclear how much Putin divulged in Beijing, in February 2022, about his plans for Ukraine when he elicited a joint declaration of a Chinese-Russian "partnership of no limits" that soon made it appear as if Xi endorsed the Russian aggression. Not long after China released a peace plan for Ukraine, Xi traveled to Moscow for a summit, at one point appearing with Putin on an ornate Kremlin staircase that, in 1939, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister under the Nazis, had descended with Stalin and his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, while cementing the Hitler-Stalin pact. And yet a Kremlin spokesperson spurned the possibility of peace, even though Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's government accepted China's vague document as worthy of discussion. (China's low-level peace mission to Kyiv fell flat.) Later, after Chinese diplomats bragged to all the world and especially to Europe that Xi had

extracted a Russian pledge to not use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Putin's regime announced it was deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. (China went on to criticize the deployments.) It is not likely that any of these episodes were intended as explicit slights. But they made observers wonder about Russia's evolution toward a North Korean scenario, for even if unintended, they revealed the potential for Moscow to embarrass Beijing without suffering consequences.

Since the Prigozhin mutiny, Xi has stressed what he calls "the fundamental interest of the two countries and their peoples," implying that the special relationship would outlast the Kremlin's current leadership. In truth, an authoritarian China could hardly afford to lose Russia if that meant ending up with a pro-American Russia on its northern border, a scenario parallel to, yet drastically more threatening than, a pro-American, reunited Korean Peninsula. At a minimum, access to Russian oil and gas, China's partial hedge against a sea blockade, would be at risk. But even if China were gaining little materially from Russia, preventing Russia from turning to the West would remain a topmost national security priority. An American-leaning Russia would enable enhanced Western surveillance of China (the same way, in reverse, that U.S. President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with Mao enabled Western surveillance on the Soviet Union from Xinjiang). Worse, China would suddenly need to redeploy substantial assets from elsewhere to defend its expansive northern border. And so China must be prepared to absorb Pyongyang-like behavior from Moscow, too.

#### RUSSIA IN CHAOS

Putin's regime wields the threat of chaos and the unknown to ward off internal challenges and change. But while keenly sowing chaos abroad, from eastern Europe to central Africa and the Middle East, Russia itself could fall victim to it. The Putin regime has looked more or less stable even under the extreme pressures of large-scale war, and predictions of collapse under far-reaching Western sanctions have not been borne out. But Russian states overseen from St. Petersburg and Moscow, respectively, both disintegrated in the past 100-odd years, both times unexpectedly yet completely. There are many plausible hypothetical causes for a breakdown in the near future: a domestic mutiny that spirals out of control, one or more natural catastrophes beyond the authorities' capacity to manage, an accident or intentional sabotage of nuclear facilities, or the accidental or nonaccidental death of a leader. Countries

such as Russia with corroded institutions and legitimacy deficits can be susceptible to cascades in a sudden stress test. Chaos could well be the price for a failure to retrench.

Even amid anarchy, however, Russia would not dissolve like the Soviet Union. As the КГВ's final chief analyst lamented, the Soviet federation resembled a chocolate bar: its collective pieces (the 15 union republics) were demarcated as if with creases and thus were ready to be broken off. By contrast, the Russian Federation mostly comprises territorial units not based on ethnicity and without quasi-state status. Its constituents that are national in designation mostly do not have titular majorities and are often deeply interior, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Mari El, and Yakutia. Still, the federation could partly disintegrate in volatile border regions such as the North Caucasus. Kaliningrad—a small Russian province geographically disconnected from the rest of the federation and sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland, more than 400 miles from Russia proper—could be vulnerable.

Were chaos to engulf Moscow, China could move to retake the expansive lands of the Amur basin that the Romanovs expropriated from the Qing. Japan might forcibly enact its claims to the Northern Territories, which the Russians call the southern Kurils, and Sakhalin Island, both of which Japan once ruled, and possibly part of the Russian Far Eastern mainland, which Japan occupied during the Russian civil war. The Finns might seek to reclaim the chunk of Karelia they once ruled. Such actions could spark a general unraveling or backfire by provoking a Russian mass mobilization.

Amid chaos, even without major territorial loss, criminal syndicates and cybercriminals could operate with yet more impunity. Nuclear and biological weapons, as well as the scientists who develop them, could scatter—the nightmare that might have accompanied the Soviet collapse but was essentially avoided, partly because many Soviet scientists believed a better Russia might emerge. If there were to be a next time, it's impossible to predict how Russians might weigh their hopes against their anger. Chaos need not mean a doomsday scenario. But it could. Armageddon might have only been postponed, instead of averted.

#### CONTINENTAL CUL-DE-SAC

A Russian future missing here is the one prevalent among the Putin regime's mouthpieces as well as its extreme-right critics: Moscow as a pole in its version of a multipolar world, bossing around Eurasia and

operating as a key arbiter of world affairs. “We need to find ourselves and understand who we are,” the Kremlin loyalist Sergei Karaganov mused last year. “We are a great Eurasian power, Northern Eurasia, a liberator of peoples, a guarantor of peace, and the military-political core of the World Majority. This is our manifest destiny.” The so-called global South—or as Karaganov rendered it, “the World Majority”—does not exist as a coherent entity, let alone one with Russia as its core. The project of Russia as a self-reliant supercontinent, bestride Europe

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Separating Russia  
from China would  
be a tall order.

and Asia, has already failed. The Soviet Union forcibly held not just an inner empire on the Baltic and Black Seas but also an outer empire of satellites, ultimately to no avail.

Russia’s world is effectively shrinking despite its occupation of nearly 20 percent of Ukraine. Territorially, it is now farther from the heart of

Europe (Kaliningrad excepted) than at any time since the conquests of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. More than three centuries after appearing on the Pacific, moreover, Russia has never succeeded at becoming an Asian power. That was true even when World War II presented it with opportunities to avenge itself against Japan for the defeat Russia suffered at its hands in 1905, to reestablish the tsar’s position in Chinese Manchuria, and to extend its grasp to part of the Korean Peninsula. Russia will never be culturally at home in Asia, and its already minuscule population east of Lake Baikal has contracted since the Soviet collapse.

Russia’s influence in its immediate neighborhood has been diminishing, too. The bulk of non-Russians in the former Soviet borderlands want less and less to do with their former overlord and certainly do not want to be reabsorbed by it. Armenians are embittered, Kazakhs are wary, and Belarusians are trapped and unhappy about it. Eurasianism and Slavophilism are mostly dead letters: the overwhelming majority of the world’s non-Russian Slavs joined or are clamoring to join the European Union and NATO. Without Russia menacing its European neighbors, NATO’s reason for being becomes uncertain. But that means Russia could break NATO only by developing into a durable rule-of-law state, precisely what Putin resists with all his being.

There is no basis for Russia to serve as a global focal point, drawing countries toward it. Its economic model offers little inspiration. It can ill afford to serve as a major donor of aid. It is less able to sell weapons—it needs them itself and is even trying to buy back systems it has sold—and



has been reduced in some cases to bartering with other pariah states. It has lost its strong position as a provider of satellites. It belongs to a pariah club with Iran and North Korea, exuberantly exchanging weapons, flouting international law, and promising much further trouble. It's not difficult to imagine each betraying the other at the next better opportunity, however, provided they do not unravel first; the West is more resilient than the "partnerships" of the anti-West. Even many former Soviet partners that refused to condemn Russia over Ukraine, including India and South Africa, do not view Moscow as a developmental partner but as scaffolding for boosting their own sovereignty. Russia's foreign policy delivers at best tactical gains, not strategic ones: no enhanced human capital, no assured access to leading-edge technology, no inward investment and new infrastructure, no improved governance, and no willing mutually obliged treaty allies, which are the keys to building and sustaining modern power. Besides raw materials and political thuggery, the only things Russia exports are talented people.

Russia has never sustained itself as a great power unless it had close ties to Europe. And for Putin or a successor, it would be a long way back. He undid more than two centuries of Swedish neutrality and three-quarters of a century of Finlandization (whereby Helsinki deferred to Moscow on major foreign policy considerations), prompting both countries to join NATO. Much depends on the evolving disposition of Germany: imagine the fate of Europe, and indeed the world order, if post-World War II Germany had evolved to resemble today's Russia rather than undergone its remarkable transformation. Germany played the role of bridge to Russia, securing peaceful unification on its terms and lucrative business partnerships. But as things stand, Moscow can no longer cut deals with Berlin to revive its European ties without fundamentally altering its own political behavior, and maybe its political system. Even if Russia did change systemically, moreover, Poland and the Baltic states now stand resolutely in the way of Russian reconciliation with Europe as permanent members of the Western alliance and the EU.

Russia's future forks: one path is a risky drift into a deeper Chinese embrace, the other an against-the-odds return to Europe. Having its cake and eating it, too—enduring as a great power with recaptured economic dynamism, avoiding sweeping concessions to the West or lasting subservience to China, dominating Eurasia, and instituting a world order safe for authoritarianism and predation—would require reversals beyond Russia's ability to engineer.

IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Russia's basic grand strategy appears simple: vastly overinvest in the military, roguish capabilities, and the secret police, and try to subvert the West. No matter how dire its strategic position gets, and it is often dire, Russia can muddle through, as long as the West weakens, too. Beyond Western disintegration, some Russians quietly fantasize about a war between the United States and China. West and East would maul each other, and Russia would greatly improve its relative standing without breaking a sweat. The upshot would seem to be self-evident: Washington and its allies must stay strong together, and Beijing must be deterred without provoking a war. The conventional options, however, have severe limits. One is accommodation, which Russian rulers occasionally need but rarely pursue—and, when they do, they make it difficult for the West to sustain. The other is confrontation, which Russian regimes require but cannot afford, and the opportunity costs of which are too high for the West. The path to a better option begins with a candid acknowledgment of failures, but not in accordance with received wisdom.

Calls to recognize Russia's "legitimate" interests are frequently heard in critiques of U.S. policy, but the great-power stability purchased by indulging coercive spheres of influence always proves ephemeral, even as the agonies of sacrificed smaller countries and the ignominy of compromising U.S. values always linger. Consider that in the aftermath of Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's maneuvering, China and Russia are closer than ever. Arms control is effectively dead. *Détente* died before many people even knew what the word connoted, but the damage in Indochina, Latin America, South Asia, and elsewhere remains palpable even now. Kissinger might have argued that these disappointing results were the fault of others for failing to adhere to his practice of shrewd balancing in international affairs. But any equilibrium that depends on the dexterity of a single person is not, in fact, an equilibrium.

Many advocates for and past practitioners of engagement assert that the multidecade U.S. policy of engaging China was smarter than it looked, that American policymakers were always skeptical that economic growth would lead China toward an open political system but believed it was worth trying anyway. Some also claim they hedged against the risk of failure. Such retrospective image burnishing is belied by the glaring insecurity of global supply chains (as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic) and the pitiful state of the U.S. defense

industrial base (as revealed by the war against Ukraine). In the case of Russia, Washington did hedge, expanding NATO to include almost all of eastern Europe and the Baltic states. But that had less to do with an unsentimental assessment of Russia's possible trajectory than with the shame of Yalta, when Washington proved powerless to deliver on its promises of free and fair elections after World War II, and the post-1989 pleas of the potential new entrants for admission. Critics of NATO expansion, for their part, blame it for Russia's revanchism, as if a repressive authoritarian regime that invades its neighbors in the name of its security is something unexpected in Russian history and wouldn't have happened anyway had the alliance not expanded—leaving even more countries vulnerable.

Peace comes through strength, combined with skillful diplomacy. The United States must maintain concerted pressure on Russia while also offering incentives for Moscow to retrench. That means creating leverage through next-generation military tools but also pursuing negotiations in close cooperation with U.S. allies and partners and aided by so-called Track II exchanges among influential but nongovernmental figures. Meanwhile, Washington should prepare for and assiduously promote the possibility of a Russian nationalist recalibration. In the event that Russia does not become France any time soon, the rise of a Russian nationalist who acknowledges the long-term price of extreme anti-Westernism remains the likeliest path to a Russia that finds a stable place in the international order. In the near term, a step in that direction could be ending the fighting in Ukraine on terms favorable to Kyiv: namely, an armistice without legal recognition of annexations and without treaty infringement on Ukraine's right to join NATO, the EU, or any other international body that would have it as a member. Putin might well achieve his war aims before a Russian nationalist officer or official gets the chance to accept such terms, but the high costs to Russia would persist, as the conflict could shift from attritional warfare into a Ukrainian insurgency.

As strange as it might sound, to create the right incentives for retrenchment, Washington and its partners need a pro-Russian policy: that is, instead of pushing Russians further into Putin's arms, confirming his assertions about an implacably anti-Russian collective West, Western policymakers and civil society organizations should welcome and reward—with visas, job opportunities, investment opportunities, cultural exchanges—those Russians who want to deconflate Putin and

Russia but not necessarily embrace Jeffersonian ideals. It would be a mistake to wait for and reward only a pro-Western Russian government.

The West should also prepare for a Russia that inflicts even greater spoliation on a global scale—but not drive it to do so. Some analysts have been urging U.S. President Joe Biden (or a future president) to pull off a reverse Nixon-Kissinger: to launch a diplomatic outreach to Moscow against Beijing. Of course, China and the Soviet Union had already split well before that previous American gambit. Separating Russia from China today would be a tall order. Even if successful, it would necessitate looking the other way as Moscow coercively reimposed a sphere of influence on former Soviet possessions, including Ukraine. The tightness of the Chinese-Russian relationship, meanwhile, has been mutually discrediting, and it has bound Washington's allies in Asia and Europe much more closely to the United States. Rather than a reverse, Washington could find itself in an updated Nixon-Kissinger moment: asking China to help restrain Russia.

#### OPPORTUNITY ABROAD, OPPORTUNITY AT HOME

The supreme irony of American grand strategy for the past 70 years is that it worked, fostering an integrated world of impressive and shared prosperity, and yet is now being abandoned. The United States was open for business to its adversaries, without reciprocation. Today, however, so-called industrial policy and protectionism are partially closing the country not just to rivals but also to U.S. allies, partners, friends, and potential friends. American policy has come to resemble China's—right when the latter has hit a wall.

To be sure, technology export controls have a place in the policy toolkit, whether for China or Russia. But it's not clear what the United States is offering in a positive sense. A strategic trade policy—reflected by initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which Washington crafted but then abandoned—might be a nonstarter in the current domestic political climate. A nimble administration, however, could repackage such an approach as an ambitious quest to secure global supply chains.

World order requires legitimacy, an example worth emulating, a system open to strivers. The United States was once synonymous with economic opportunity for its allies and partners but also for others who aspired to attain the prosperity and peace that the open U.S.-led economic order promised—and, for the most part, delivered by

reducing inequality on a world historic scale, raising billions of people out of poverty globally, and fostering robust middle classes. But over time, the United States ceded that role, allowing China to become synonymous with economic opportunity (as the leading trade partner of most countries) and manufacturing prowess (as a hub of technical know-how, logistics mastery, and skilled workers). To recapture lost ground and to restart the engine of social mobility at home, the United States, which has a mere 1.5 million mathematics teachers and must import knowledge of that subject from East Asia and South Asia, needs to launch a program to produce one million new teachers of math within a decade. It makes little sense to admit students to college if, lacking the universal language of science, engineering, computers, and economics, they are limited to majoring in themselves and their grievances.

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The government and philanthropists should redirect significant higher education funding to community colleges that meet or exceed performance metrics. States should launch an ambitious rollout of vocational schools and training, whether reintroducing them in existing high schools or opening new self-standing ones in partnership with employers at the ground level. Beyond human capital, the United States needs to spark a housing construction boom by drastically reducing environmental regulations and to eliminate subsidies for builders, letting the market work. The country also needs to institute national service for young people, perhaps with an intergenerational component, to rekindle broad civic consciousness and a sense of everyone being in this together.

Investing in people and housing and rediscovering a civic spirit on the scale that characterized the astonishing mobilizations of the Cold War around science and national projects would not alone guarantee equal opportunity at home. But such policies would be a vital start, a return to the tried-and-true formula that built U.S. national power in conjunction with American international leadership. The United States could once again be synonymous with opportunity abroad and at home, acquire more friends, and grow ever more capable of meeting whatever future Russia emerges. The American example and economic practice bent the trajectory of Russia before, and it could do so again, with fewer illusions this time. 🌐

# War Unbound

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## Gaza, Ukraine, and the Breakdown of International Law

OONA A. HATHAWAY

**H**amas's attack on Israel and Israel's response to it have been a disaster for civilians. In its October 7 massacre, Hamas sought out unarmed Israeli civilians, including women, children, and the elderly, killing close to 1,200 people and taking around 240 hostages. Israel's subsequent air and ground campaign in Gaza has, as of March 2024, killed more than 30,000 people, an estimated two-thirds of whom were women and children. The Israeli offensive has also displaced some two million people (more than 85 percent of the population of Gaza), left more than a million people at risk of starvation, and damaged or destroyed some 150,000 civilian buildings. Today, there is no functional hospital left in northern Gaza. Hamas, Israel maintains, uses civilian structures as shields, operating in them or in tunnels beneath them—perhaps precisely

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*Illustration by Brian Stauffer*

because such buildings have been considered off-limits for military operations under international law.

International humanitarian law, also known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict, is supposed to spare civilians from the worst calamities of conflict. The aim of this body of law has always been clear: civilians not involved in the fighting deserve to be protected from harm and to enjoy unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. But in the Israel-Hamas war, the law has failed. Hamas continues to hold hostages and has used schools, hospitals, and other civilian buildings to shield its infrastructure, while Israel has waged an all-out war in densely populated areas and slowed the flow of desperately needed aid to a trickle. The result has been utter devastation for civilians in Gaza.

The conflict in Gaza is an extreme example of the breakdown of the law of war, but it is not an isolated one. It is the latest in a long series of wars in the years since 9/11, from the U.S.-led “war on terror” to the Syrian civil war to Russia’s war in Ukraine, that have chipped away at protections for civilians. From this grim record, it might be tempting to conclude that the humanitarian protections that governments worked so hard to enshrine in law after World War II hold little meaning today. Yet even a hobbled system of international humanitarian law has made conflict more humane. Indeed, for all the frequent transgressions, the existence of these legal protections has provided continuous pressure on belligerents to limit civilian casualties, provide safe zones for non-combatants, and allow for humanitarian access—knowing they will face international consequences when they do not.

After the horrors of World War II, the United States and its allies established the Geneva Conventions, the four treaties of 1949 that lay out elaborate rules governing the conduct of war. At a moment when the laws of war are once again being severely tested, the United States—which, especially in the years after 9/11, helped weaken them—should act now to renew and strengthen them.

#### LICENSE TO KILL

The law of war offers a tradeoff. Soldiers of a sovereign nation can be lawfully killed in armed conflict. In exchange, they are granted immunity that allows them to commit acts that in any other context would likely be considered crimes—not only to kill but also to trespass, break and enter, steal, assault, maim, kidnap, destroy property, and commit arson. This immunity applies whether their cause is just or unjust.



There are limits—which, for most of history, were modest. Hugo Grotius, the early-seventeenth-century Dutch diplomat who has been called “the father of international law,” wrote that soldiers should be prohibited from using poison, killing by deception (for example, after feigning surrender), and rape. In Grotius’s framework, these three offenses made up the only exceptions to a soldier’s license to kill. Enslavement, torture, pillaging, and the execution of prisoners were all allowed; so was the intentional killing of unarmed civilians, including women and children. Although few treaties governed the conduct of war at the time, countries in western Europe widely accepted these rules as customary international law.

According to Grotius, soldiers were not allowed to massacre civilians whenever they liked. They were legally permitted to take the steps necessary to enforce the rights on which the enemy had infringed—and nothing more. If killing women and children did not advance the war effort, there was no justification for doing so. Yet even if the senseless slaughter of innocent civilians was technically illegal under international law at the time, those who committed it could not be held accountable; such deeds, Grotius observed, could be “made with impunity.” The lack of legal remedy for attacks on civilians began to be addressed only in the middle of the eighteenth century, when countries gradually adopted the principle of distinction, which requires soldiers to distinguish between combatants and civilians.

The rules governing war continued to evolve over the course of the nineteenth century. The first Geneva Convention, signed in 1864, prohibited attacks on hospitals, medical personnel, and their patients. The 1868 St. Petersburg Declaration banned the use of fragmenting, explosive, or incendiary small-arms munitions. The 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions, ratified by most world powers at the time, prohibited attacking towns and buildings that were not defended by military forces. They also banned pillaging, executing prisoners of war, and compelling civilians to swear allegiance to a foreign power.

But countries that were engaged in war struggled to figure out how to enforce these rules. Their solution was generally reprisal: if an adversary violated the laws of war in a military operation, a country would respond with a violation of its own. Often, the reprisals would

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Protecting civilians  
in war is much  
harder when one  
of the belligerents  
is a nonstate actor.

be meted out on prisoners of war, who were near at hand and could easily be killed. But civilians were not insulated from attacks. When Spanish guerrillas attacked a French column in Spain's Sil Valley in 1808, during the Napoleonic Wars, the French commanding officer, General Louis-Henri Loison, ordered his soldiers to torch the countryside.

#### THE POSTWAR RECKONING

During World War II, more than 30 million civilians were killed. In the aftermath of such catastrophic violence, it was clear that new and stronger rules were needed to regulate war. In 1949, a series of international conferences convened by the International Committee of the Red Cross established the four Geneva Conventions in an effort to prevent the most brutal violence of war. Although Grotius offered just three prohibitions to guide states in war, the Geneva Conventions and, later, its three Additional Protocols filled hundreds of pages with specific rules for almost any scenario. The new rules governed the treatment of wounded and sick military personnel in the field and at sea, prisoners of war, and civilians.

Unlike the early laws of war, the Geneva Conventions prohibited not just senseless violence but also some forms of violence that advanced war aims. To adhere to the conventions, parties to a conflict must distinguish between civilians and combatants and between civilian places and military ones. Above all, they may never intentionally target civilians or "civilian objects," such as schools, private homes, construction equipment, businesses, places of worship, and hospitals that do not directly contribute to military action. And civilians must never be the target of reprisals. The principle of proportionality, codified in 1977 in Additional Protocol I, acknowledges that sometimes armies will harm civilians and civilian objects when pursuing military objectives. But the rule requires that the damage not be "excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated." The principle of precaution, moreover, requires that armies must take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects, even if doing so might slow down military operations.

The Geneva Conventions, their protocols, and the customary international law that has grown around them take an important step beyond the rules that came before. They aim to protect civilians from harm even when that harm might serve a strategic purpose. Thus, an

attack on a military target that would help a belligerent's war effort is prohibited if it would hurt too many civilians.

In many ways, the Geneva Conventions have been remarkably successful. All four conventions have been ratified by all UN member states. Most countries have adopted military manuals that translate the conventions into concrete rules meant to guide the conduct of their armies. Many have enforced these rules against their own soldiers. Yet these elaborate and ambitious rules were shaped by wars that were very different from most conflicts today.

Since the end of World War II, wars between states have sharply declined, but conflicts involving nonstate armed groups have risen. The Geneva Conventions say little about the latter. Only one article, Common Article 3, specifically applies to wars with nonstate groups. Protecting civilians in war, it turns out, is much harder when one of the belligerents is a nonstate actor. Combatants belonging to nonstate groups generally don't wear uniforms. Although their members may assemble, train in camps, and be organized under a hierarchical leadership, they tend to operate in places where civilians are also present. As a result, it can be extremely difficult to tell them apart from ordinary civilians.

#### SELF-DEFENSE CLASSES

The 9/11 attacks and the U.S. response to them inaugurated a new era of war that has pushed international humanitarian law to a breaking point. Before 2001, legitimate self-defense under international law was generally understood to apply only when one country was defending an attack from another. Until then, few countries had cited nonstate actors as their primary reason for using force in self-defense. (Israel was a notable exception; its adversaries included irregular forces located in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.)

After 9/11, self-defense claims changed. The United States justified its invasion of Afghanistan by arguing that it was responding to, as the Bush administration informed the UN Security Council, the "ongoing threat to the United States and its nationals posed by the Al-Qaeda organization." Within a year, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, Poland, and the United Kingdom had also filed claims of self-defense against al Qaeda. And it was not long before countries began making claims against other nonstate groups. In 2002, for example, Rwanda cited a right of self-defense against

the Interahamwe, a militia group. And in 2003, Côte d'Ivoire cited the same right against "rebel forces."

To confront groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), the United States and its allies came to rely on what they dubbed the "unwilling or unable doctrine"—the theory that action against a nonstate threat is justified as long as the country in which the nonstate actor is found is unwilling or unable to suppress the threat. In most cases, the United States sought the consent of governments to

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In Gaza, there are few objects or structures that Israel does not consider dual use.

target nonstate actors in their territories. Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and, while the Taliban was out of power, Afghanistan all agreed to U.S. intervention. When states would not consent—for example, Syria—the United States used the unable or unwilling theory, explicitly endorsed by fewer than a dozen countries, to justify using military force.

As Washington went to war with nonstate actors, it struggled with how to distinguish the civilians it was allowed to kill according to the Geneva Conventions—those "who take a direct part in hostilities"—from those it was not. If a civilian who was not a member of ISIS performed a task for the group—say, placing an improvised explosive device on a road—and then returned to work as an ordinary laborer, could that person still be targeted?

In 2009, the International Committee of the Red Cross issued guidance to governments on how to protect civilians when fighting nonstate actors. The ICRC document reiterated the rule that civilians must be protected against direct attack "unless and for such time as they take direct part in hostilities." It set out the principle that civilians who do not take a direct part in hostilities must be distinguished not only from armed forces but also from those who participate in hostilities "on an individual, sporadic or unorganized basis only." The devil was very much in the details.

The ICRC concluded that direct participation in hostilities "refers to specific acts carried out by individuals as part of the conduct of hostilities between parties to an armed conflict." A person integrated into an organized armed group has a "continuous combat function" and can be targeted throughout the war. Hence, ISIS fighters are considered legitimate military targets as long as the conflict with ISIS continues. But ISIS members who provide noncombat support,

including recruiters, trainers, and financiers, are not. A civilian who places an improvised explosive device for ISIS is directly participating in the war when positioning the weapon and while in transit for the task. But once this task is finished, so is the direct participation in the war, and the person can no longer be targeted. Many countries rejected the ICRC's guidance, including the United States and the United Kingdom, which came up with their own rules for their counterterrorism campaigns in the Middle East.

BLURRED LINES?

To address the changing reality of urban combat, the United States and other countries adopted new policies that once more put civilians in the cross hairs. At the center of this shift was the concept of so-called dual-use objects. According to international humanitarian law, all sites are either military or civilian; there is nothing in between. Objects normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as places of worship, houses, or schools, are presumed to be civilian. But they can lose their civilian status if they are used for a military purpose.

The clear-cut division between civilian and military often fails to match the reality on the ground. There are many sites and structures that serve important civilian purposes but, by virtue of having some military use, may be considered military objectives—for example, trains, bridges, power stations, and communications infrastructure. Even an apartment building, if part of it serves for weapons storage, can be considered dual use.

More controversially, the United States now considers sectors of the adversary's economy that may help sustain a war as legitimate targets. In the course of its operations against ISIS, for example, the United States struck oil wells, refineries, and tanker trucks. States generally agree that industries directly related to the military or defense may be targeted, such as those producing arms or supplying fuel to military vehicles. But they diverge on whether a belligerent may target an industry that contributes only indirectly to military activities, by providing financial support, for example. The *United States Department of Defense Law of War Manual* maintains that a given industry's or sector's "effective contribution to the war-fighting or war-sustaining capability of an opposing force is sufficient." This means that banks, businesses, and, indeed, any source of economic activity that contributes to an adversary's ability to sustain itself could be fair game. And because members

of nonstate groups often rely on the same sources as ordinary civilians for food, fuel, and money, these areas of the economy that are essential to civilian life are regularly in the direct line of fire.

As a result, the dual-use concept has increasingly made a wide variety of civilian activities subject to potential military action. An enterprise that is mostly used for civilian purposes, such as an oil refinery or even a bakery, can become a target in war if it contributes in some way to the war effort. It is still the case that harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure must be proportional to the potential military advantage attained. But the United States and Israel take the position that any site that can plausibly qualify as dual use is a legitimate military objective. Damage to such a target, then, is not part of the proportionality calculus. If noncombatant civilians are expected to be harmed, that must be weighed before taking the strike, but the long-term loss of vital civilian services, such as those provided by a water treatment plant, an electric grid, a bank, or a hospital, does not.

The military logic behind Israel's air and ground campaign in Gaza is, in part, a result of these incremental changes, which both the United States and Israel have contributed to for decades. Hamas is both a nonstate actor and the *de facto* governing authority in Gaza. Determining who is a Hamas fighter and who is not, particularly from the air, is difficult. Even on the ground, Israeli forces have often failed to distinguish between civilians and combatants, as in December 2023, when Israeli troops shot three Israeli hostages as they waved a white flag. And even when Israeli forces have made every possible effort to distinguish between combatants and civilians, targeting the one without killing the other has proved nearly impossible. Given Gaza's extraordinary population density, almost any military target is in, near, above, or below buildings in which large numbers of civilians live or work.

In Gaza, there are few objects or structures that Israel does not consider dual use. Israel has worsened Gaza's humanitarian crisis by holding at the border items such as oxygen cylinders and tent poles. Meanwhile, it treats hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, and even places of worship as legitimate military targets if Hamas has used them for military purposes. Israel maintains that Hamas knows the law of war and has sought to protect its military infrastructure by hiding its activities in tunnels under civilian structures, such as hospitals, that the law protects from attack. Israel emphasized this point in its defense

before the International Court of Justice against South Africa's claims that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

Israel's decision to treat locations traditionally protected from attack as legitimate targets has meant devastation for civilians in Gaza. Hospitals and schools where those displaced by the war sought refuge have been targeted in large-scale attacks, killing thousands. The problem has been compounded by Israel's expansive interpretation of proportionality. As Eylon Levy, an Israeli government spokesperson, told the BBC, proportionality in Israel's view means that the collateral damage of a given strike must be proportionate to the expected military advantage. "And the expected military advantage here," he explained, "is to destroy the terror organization that perpetrated the deadliest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust."

Israel has turned a principle that was meant to shield civilians into a tool to justify violence. Its approach to assessing proportionality—not strike by strike but in light of the entire war aim—is not how militaries are supposed to carry out their assessments. Rather, according to international law as codified in Additional Protocol I, the principle of proportionality prohibits a given attack where the expected harm to civilian people and places is "excessive" compared with the "direct military advantage" that the attack is supposed to achieve. By weighing any single instance of harm to civilians against a perceived existential threat, Israel can justify virtually any strike as meeting the requirements of proportionality; the purported benefits always outweigh any costs. Unsurprisingly, this approach has led to a war with few restraints.

#### CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

Although civilians have been killed at extraordinary rates in the war in Gaza, they have also suffered extensively in other recent conflicts. During the Syrian civil war, the Syrian government repeatedly gassed its own people, wiping out entire neighborhoods in an effort to suppress the opposition. In 2018, a UN report found that Syrian forces, supported by the Russian military, had attacked hospitals, schools, and markets.

Saudi Arabia, too, has been accused of violating legal protections for civilians in its operations against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. In 2015, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of states in a campaign to defeat the Houthis, who had launched cross-border attacks against

it and seized the Yemeni capital, Sanaa. A team of UN investigators found that coalition airstrikes—which the United States supported with midair refueling, intelligence, and arms sales—had hit residential areas, markets, funerals, weddings, detention facilities, civilian boats, and medical facilities, killing more than 6,000 civilians and wounding over 10,000. The strikes on essential infrastructure, including water treatment plants, created a cholera epidemic that killed thousands, most of them children.

Ukraine has also been the site of barbaric attacks against civilians. Russian forces carried out summary executions, disappearances, and torture in Bucha and beyond. They indiscriminately bombed Mariupol, damaging 77 percent of the city’s medical facilities in the process. Throughout the war, Russia’s attacks on Ukraine’s energy grid have left millions of civilians without electricity, water, or heat.

Meanwhile, technological innovations threaten to further erode the line between civilians and combatants. In Ukraine, for example, the same app that Ukrainians use to file taxes can also be used to track Russian troops. Using an “e-Enemy” feature, Ukrainians can submit reports, photos, and videos of Russian troop movements. Yet this makes those same civilians vulnerable to attack, since any civilian who uses the app to alert Ukrainian forces of Russian military activity might be regarded as “directly participating in hostilities” and therefore considered a legitimate target. Ukrainian data servers store both military and civilian information, likely rendering computer networks and the information stored in them dual-use objects. Ukraine created an “IT army” of more than 400,000 volunteers who work with Ukraine’s Defense Ministry to launch cyberattacks on Russian infrastructure. These Ukrainians may not realize that by volunteering their services, they have, according to international law, become combatants in an armed conflict.

#### CAUSE FOR CONSTRAINT

One pessimistic takeaway from the wars in Gaza and Ukraine may be that the hard-won lessons of World War II have been forgotten and efforts to use law to protect civilians from war are pointless. But as brutal as the current conflicts are, they would likely be even more horrific without these rules. A careful reading of the current era would show that rather than altogether abandoning the protections of civilians enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, belligerents in recent



wars have been making those protections less effective by severely restricting what counts as civilian. And the United States has played a key part in this shift.

Since 9/11, Washington has used its power to weaken constraints on the use of force, aggressively interpret the right to self-defense, and allow for more expansive targeting of dual-use sites and structures. These positions have created greater flexibility for the U.S. military, but they have also placed more civilians in harm's way. Following the United States' lead, other countries, including France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, have likewise loosened constraints on their own militaries.

To reverse this trend and strengthen the law of armed conflict, Washington must decide that embracing constraints and pressing others to do the same is essential to the fundamental principles of human dignity that the United States, at its best, has championed. To its credit, the Biden administration has already taken some modest steps in this direction. In 2022, the Defense Department announced a detailed plan for how the U.S. military would better protect civilians, and this February, the Biden administration said that it would require foreign governments to promise that any U.S. weapons they received would not be used to violate international law. But much more remains to be done.

For starters, the United States should expand collaboration and cooperation with the International Criminal Court, the most effective international mechanism for enforcing international humanitarian law. Indeed, members of the U.S. Congress have cheered the ICC's exercise of jurisdiction over Russia for crimes committed during the war in Ukraine and passed a law allowing the United States to share evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine with its prosecutor. Yet in 2020, the Trump administration sanctioned ICC judges and lawyers in retaliation for having investigated whether U.S. soldiers committed war crimes in Afghanistan. To the rest of the world, the hypocrisy is glaring and instructive. One way for the United States to improve its relationship with the court would be to repeal the American Service-Members' Protection Act, a 2002 law, known colloquially as "the Hague Invasion Act," that allows the president to order military action to protect Americans from ICC prosecution. It also prohibits

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government agencies from assisting the court unless specifically permitted, as with the Ukraine investigation.

The United States should also reconsider some of the expansive legal positions it adopted after 9/11. It should, for example, endorse more stringent limits on when dual-use objects can be targeted. It should revise the treatment of the principles of proportionality and feasible precautions in the Defense Department's *Law of War Manual* to better reflect international humanitarian law. And it should fully implement its new plan to mitigate civilian harm during U.S. military operations.

The United States should also restrict its military assistance to those countries that comply with international humanitarian law—not just when providing arms but also when offering financial support, intelligence, and training. The United States has counterterrorism programs in some 80 countries on six continents. If Washington conditioned its support on greater adherence to the law—and withdrew it from countries that didn't comply—the effect would be powerful and immediate. And Israel should not be exempt from those standards; the United States should insist that the country make clear the concrete steps it intends to take to ensure that its conduct of the war in Gaza comports with international law.

These changes should be made not only as a matter of policy but also as a matter of law. When the executive branch offers legal explanations for U.S. behavior, it almost always does so to justify taking military action, often in ways that push existing legal boundaries. By contrast, when it endorses restraints that better protect civilians in war, it has generally emphasized that it is doing so only as a matter of policy—not because it is required but as a choice. This means the restraints can be easily discarded when they become inconvenient. The legal rationales for acting, meanwhile, stand as precedents to justify the United States' future military operations—and those of other countries around the world.

If the law of war is to survive today's existential challenges, the United States and its allies need to treat it not as an optional constraint to be adjusted or shrugged off as needed but as an unmovable pillar of the global legal order. True, there will be wartime actors who break the law, and civilians will continue to suffer as a result. But before the United States can hold these offenders to account, it must show that it is prepared to hold its own forces—and those of its allies—to the same standards. 🌐

# Iran's Order of Chaos

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## How the Islamic Republic Is Remaking the Middle East

SUZANNE MALONEY

**T**he Israel-Hamas war—and the possibility that it may explode into a wider conflagration—has upended the determined efforts of three U.S. presidents to pivot American resources and focus away from the Middle East. Immediately after Hamas's October 7 attack, U.S. President Joe Biden moved quickly to support Israel, a critical American ally, and deter the expansion of hostilities. But as of this writing, the conflict has become a hellish impasse. The security imperatives driving the war command wide support among the Israeli public, yet months of intense Israeli operations have failed to eliminate Hamas, killed tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, and precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip. And as the crisis expands, so, too, have the United States' engagements in the Middle East. In the months after October 7, Washington delivered aid shipments to besieged Gazans, launched military operations to protect

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maritime transit, worked to contain the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, strove to degrade the capabilities of other disruptive militias from Iraq to Yemen, and pursued ambitious diplomatic initiatives to foster the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Reengaging with the Middle East presents risks for Biden, especially as he campaigns for reelection against his predecessor, Donald Trump, whose critiques of the human and economic costs of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan resonated with voters and boosted his 2016 presidential campaign. In a Quinnipiac poll conducted three weeks after Hamas's attack, an overwhelming 84 percent of Americans expressed concern that the United States could be drawn into direct military involvement in the Middle East conflict, and only one in five respondents to a February 2024 Pew survey agreed that the United States should make a "major" diplomatic push to end the Israel-Hamas war. But the risks posed by timidity are even greater. One regional actor particularly benefits from Washington's hesitation or disengagement: the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, the quagmire in the Middle East presents an opportunity for a breakthrough in a four-decade strategy by Tehran to debilitate one of its foremost regional adversaries, Israel—and to humiliate the United States and drastically diminish its influence in the region.

Iran's Islamic regime aimed to inspire copycat religious uprisings after its own 1979 revolution, and to many observers, it may appear to have failed. Indeed, the conventional wisdom in Washington and elsewhere has often held that Iran has become contained, even isolated. But this was never true. Instead, Tehran developed a calculated strategy to empower proxy militias and to influence operations in its neighborhood while maintaining plausible deniability—a scheme whose canniness was vindicated by the devastating scope of Hamas's assault and subsequent attacks by Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The post-October 7 strategic landscape in the Middle East is one that was largely created by Iran and that plays to its strengths. Tehran sees opportunity in chaos. Iranian leaders are exploiting and escalating the war in Gaza to elevate their regime's stature, weaken and delegitimize Israel, undermine U.S. interests, and further shape the regional order in their favor. The truth is that the Islamic Republic is now in a better position than ever to dominate the Middle East, including by attaining the ability to disrupt shipping at multiple critical chokepoints.

Left unchecked, the dramatic expansion of Iran's influence would have a catastrophic impact on Israel, the wider region, and the global economy.

To disrupt this amplification of Iranian power, Biden urgently needs to articulate and then implement a clear strategy to protect Palestinian civilians from bearing the brunt of Israel's military operations, counter Iran's corrosive war-by-proxy strategy, and blunt the capabilities of Tehran's accomplices. Achieving these goals will require a tricky set of moves by Washington, and Americans are weary of the military, economic, and human toll of their country's commitments in the Middle East. But no world power other than the United States has the military and diplomatic capacity to frustrate Iran's most destructive ambitions by managing the spiraling conflict between Israel and Hamas and containing its most devastating long-term consequences.

#### CHAOS THEORY

Since Hamas's 2007 takeover of Gaza, Iran has served as the group's primary patron. Tehran proffered money, materiel, and other support that made the October 7 attack possible, including military technologies, intelligence, and as much as \$300 million per year in financial assistance. It provided drones and rockets as well as infrastructure and training to help Hamas build its own weapons—weapons Hamas used to continue striking Israel for several months after the initial attack. After October 7, Iranian-backed militias also quickly ramped up hostile activities targeting Israeli and U.S. forces in the region. These assaults have caused well over a hundred casualties among U.S. service members. The Houthis, the Iranian-backed armed group ruling much of Yemen's population—have attacked ships sailing in the Red Sea, causing transit through the Suez Canal to fall by 50 percent in the first two months of 2024. According to Congressional testimony in March by General Michael Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command, the escalation in strikes by Iran's allies and subsequent U.S. military responses have emboldened terrorist organizations not aligned with Tehran, prompting an uptick in attacks by groups such as the Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

Iran also made explicit moves to raise its diplomatic profile in the wake of October 7. Days after Hamas's attack, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke directly by phone for the first time with the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and in November, he participated in a regional summit in Riyadh. Other Iranian officials, such as Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, have ricocheted around the region and beyond, seeking to position their country as a trusted mediator even as the regime maintains its support for Hamas.

## STATE OF CHAOS

### Iran and its proxy militias



Main area of activity	Militia	Estimated size
BAHRAIN	Al-Ashtar Brigades	Unknown
IRAQ	Kataib Hezbollah Badr Organization Asaib Ahl al-Haq Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada	20,000–30,000 30,000–60,000 20,000–30,000 10,000–20,000 10,000–20,000
LEBANON	Hezbollah	30,000–45,000
PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES	Hamas Palestinian Islamic Jihad	30,000–40,000 1,000–15,000
SYRIA	Fatemiyoun Brigade Zainabiyoun Brigade Quwat al-Ridha Baqir Brigade	10,000–15,000 2,000–5,000 3,000–3,500 3,000
YEMEN	Houthi movement	10,000–30,000

Sources: *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Financial Times; International Institute for Strategic Studies; Council on Foreign Relations.

None of these developments are merely the result of Iran's glimpsing new openings in turmoil and making opportunistic, impulsive moves. They are the product of a time-tested playbook. From the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran's leadership has harbored expansive ambitions. Since 1979, the country has viewed chaos and volatility, whether at home or nearby, as an opportunity to advance its interests and influence. Even Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran worked to the fledgling theocracy's advantage by rallying internal support for the new order in Tehran, providing the occasion to build a strong domestic defense industry, and enabling the regime to survive its infancy.

Tehran has used successive conflagrations in its neighborhood to strengthen its position. Historically, some of the most valuable openings have come as a result of missteps by Washington and its partners in the region, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. That conflict, which brought 150,000 U.S. troops to Iran's doorstep, quickly broke in Tehran's favor. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the Iranian leadership's most existential threat, was deposed, and his regime was replaced by a weak state led by disaffected Shiites with existing ties to Tehran. Iran made the most of other moments of regional chaos in the years that followed. Beginning in 2013, the country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) worked with its primary surrogate, Hezbollah, to mobilize brigades of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites into a larger transnational Shiite militia to defend Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime in Syria. Tehran eventually built an effective partnership with Russia during the Syrian civil war, which expanded into a broader strategic cooperation after Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine.

A key component of Iran's strategy in its neighborhood has been the cultivation of an "axis of resistance," a loose network of regional militias with discrete organizational structures, overlapping interests, and ties to Iran's security and religious establishments. The Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, maintained that exporting the revolution was necessary for its survival, arguing that if the theocracy remained "in an enclosed environment" it would "definitely face defeat." Determined to spark a wider wave of Islamist-led upheavals against secular monarchies and republics in the Middle East, Khomeini and his acolytes developed an infrastructure dedicated to toppling the status

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Iran is now in a better position than ever to dominate the Middle East.

quo across the Muslim world. During the Islamic Republic's initial two decades in power, its leaders worked with proxy groups in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere to help incite a 1981 coup attempt in Bahrain, the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy and other American interests in Kuwait, a 1985 assassination attempt against Kuwait's emir, incendiary anti-Saudi and anti-American rallies during the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the 1996 bombing of a U.S. military barracks in Saudi Arabia, and other subversive actions against its neighbors.

The revolutionary wave Khomeini hoped for never materialized. Although Iranian leaders' expectations for a wide-scale revolt against the existing regional order were disappointed, they would find their aspirations validated by the emergence of sympathetic militant groups that sought the revolutionary state's patronage. And the Islamic Republic's early investments yielded a valuable asset that has served as a model for its later efforts: Hezbollah. After Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Iran's fledgling IRGC began training and coordinating Hezbollah, an incipient Shiite armed group. Iran's assistance immediately made Hezbollah more potent: the group mounted a series of devastating suicide bombings of French and U.S. government facilities in 1983 and 1984 in Lebanon, as well as kidnappings, hijackings, and violence further afield, such as the bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina in 1994 and the suicide bombing of a bus in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists in 2012.

Through its political wing, Hezbollah insinuated itself deep into the Lebanese government, installing members in the parliament and the cabinet. This political role did not temper the group's reliance on violence: several Hezbollah members were convicted in the 2005 assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Despite Israeli and U.S. efforts to eliminate the militia, it maintains tens of thousands of active fighters, and with Tehran's help, has amassed an arsenal of some 150,000 mostly short- and medium-range rockets and missiles, as well as drones and antitank, antiaircraft, and antiship artillery. Tehran continues to provide Hezbollah with \$700 million to \$1 billion per year in support, and the group remains the paramount social, political, and military actor in Lebanon.

Hezbollah has proved extraordinarily useful to Iran. Its head, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, is one of the few regional power players who openly pay homage to Iran's supreme leader as their organizations' spiritual guide, although Hezbollah no longer espouses its early objective of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon. Hezbollah's role in driving





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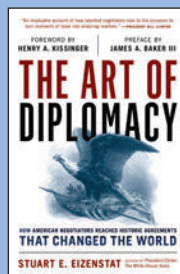
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Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, completed in 2000, earned the group brief regional acclaim and enduring domestic legitimacy, and its global reach continues to amplify Tehran's leverage. Since the early 1990s, it has played a vital role in funneling funds, training, and arms from Iran to a variety of other groups, including but hardly limited to Hamas.

#### THE LONG GAME

With its cultivation of Hezbollah as a template, Iran then invested an enormous amount of effort and resources in cultivating militant groups across the Middle East. The support it has given to Palestinian militant groups, especially Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, paid tremendous dividends over subsequent decades, as did its aid to Shiite opponents of Saddam in Iraq. These relationships provided the springboard for Iranian influence at key turning points for regional stability. In the 1990s, PIJ terrorist attacks disrupted the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and nudged Israeli politics rightward. After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Tehran's patronage of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council and the Dawa Party, both significant Shiite factions, positioned Iran as the most influential player in Iraq's contentious postwar polity.

The Syrian civil war elevated Hezbollah's status to the jewel in the crown of the Iranian proxy network. Working closely with the IRGC, Hezbollah trained and coordinated the wider network of Iranian-backed Shiite militias that flooded into Syria from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen. Iran has proved remarkably flexible and pragmatic in developing this network, enabling it to align itself with partners and surrogates on multiple continents. Sometimes, Tehran uses umbrella groups and joint operation rooms to coordinate diverse factions, and at other times intentionally fragments existing groups to maintain its influence over them. Iran's money and materiel have long been a central dimension of its relationships with individual militias. Increasingly, however, Tehran not only transfers finished weaponry but also the means for its proxy groups to manufacture and modify weapons independently.

Iran's national security establishment sees investing in asymmetric warfare as an economical means of gaining leverage against more powerful adversaries, especially the United States. Iran's influence over militias has been boosted by the elimination of most of its radical competitors in the Middle East. After deep-pocketed dictators such as Saddam and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi were removed from power,

the Islamic Republic became one of the few regional players possessing the interest and the resources to back armed militias.

In many respects, the relationship between Iran and its proxies reflects shared preferences for autonomy and self-interest. The evolutionary nature of Iranian investments in its clients has worked to its advantage, enabling the security establishment to sustain partnerships of enduring value that can withstand disruptions. For example, even as Hamas distanced itself from Iran for several years after the eruption of the Syrian civil war, Iran continued to provide the group with residual funding, and in time the relationship rebounded.

#### ARC OF TRIUMPH

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Tehran sought to more fully establish itself as a power broker in a region in turmoil. Israel waged a determined campaign to blunt Iranian influence by “mowing the lawn,” or routinely striking Iranian positions in Syria to disrupt the Islamic Republic’s attempt to develop a land bridge to supply Hezbollah and its wider network of surrogates. This campaign scored a number of tactical successes, yet it does not seem to have had a meaningful deterrent impact on Iran and its proxies.

The United States, meanwhile, was seeking to deepen its relationship with alternative power centers and foster new alignments to counter Tehran. From President Bill Clinton’s “dual containment” (which sought to isolate both Iran and Iraq while advancing Arab-Israeli peacemaking) to President George W. Bush’s “forward strategy for freedom” (which focused on advancing democratization in the Middle East and beyond), Washington has repeatedly invested in schemes intended to excise Iranian-backed violent extremism from the Middle East, to little effect. In a November 2023 speech, Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, reflected on these efforts, sneering that Washington had “failed completely in trying to create a ‘New Middle East.’” He went on: “Yes, the region’s geopolitical map is undergoing a fundamental transformation, but not to the benefit of the United States. It is to the benefit of the resistance front. Yes, West Asia’s geopolitical map has changed—but it has changed in favor of the resistance.”

Since October 7, Iran’s leaders have exulted in Israelis’ terror and grief and exploited the immense suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza to further elevate their status as power brokers. The war has provided an opening for the Islamic Republic to resume a formal role in

pan-Muslim and cross-regional consultations. As they often do, Iranian leaders have coupled active diplomacy with a show of force intended to test America's resolve.

Attacks by Iran's surrogate militias pose a devilishly complex challenge for Washington and the world. From October 2023 through mid-February 2024, attacks by Iranian-backed proxies resulted in at least 186 casualties among U.S. troops serving in the Middle East. These included 130 traumatic brain injuries, the loss of three army reservists in

Jordan, and the deaths of two navy SEALs on a mission to interdict illicit Iranian weapons off the coast of Somalia.

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With their attacks, Iran's proxies seek to provoke the United States to make mistakes.

Before October 7, the Biden administration had invested considerable time, energy, and political capital in a plan to help normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such a deal would have represented a huge breakthrough for both governments and the

wider region by opening up new economic opportunities and, over time, helping marginalize the influence of malign actors, including Tehran and its proxies. Biden's effort to achieve an Israeli-Saudi normalization deal was the most recent component of a long American campaign to strengthen cooperation between self-described moderate regional actors. The normalization talks built on the success of the 2020 Abraham Accords, which paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates and opened unprecedented opportunities for bilateral trade, military cooperation, and people-to-people engagement. The opening with Riyadh would have boosted this trend, putting Iran on the back foot even as it strove to secure its own rapprochement with Riyadh.

The case for establishing full diplomatic ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia remains compelling. But the Israel-Hamas war added staggering complexities to what was already going to be a historically ambitious undertaking. For many Israelis in and outside of government, Hamas's horrific attack only reinforced the conviction that Palestinian sovereignty presents an unacceptable security threat. Israel's subsequent operations in Gaza, however, triggered new Saudi demands for a meaningful effort to redress Palestinian suffering. And the U.S. contribution to the proposed rapprochement—security commitments to Saudi Arabia and investments in the kingdom's civil nuclear infrastructure—requires

buy-in from American lawmakers that has become harder to secure amid concerns that an escalation of the Israel-Hamas war could draw U.S. forces directly into another Middle East conflict.

The combination of rhetoric, diplomacy, and terrorism that Iran has deftly employed since October 7 advances some of its most long-standing ideological and strategic priorities. Like Hamas, Iran's leadership clamors for Israel's destruction and for the triumph of the Islamic world over what it sees as a West in decline. Its views are not opportunistic or transient; anti-Americanism and antipathy toward Israel are ingrained in the Islamic Republic's bedrock. But the monumental scale of destruction in Gaza has breathed new life into Tehran's anti-Western and anti-Israeli invective. This rhetoric now holds fresh appeal for regional audiences who were otherwise unsympathetic toward a Shiite theocracy and gives Iran a convenient opportunity to shame its Sunni Arab rivals. Tehran sees regional assertiveness as a chance to align itself yet more closely with Russia and China, too. Those countries' interests are, for the most part, served by keeping Washington mired in a crisis in the Middle East that damages its reputation and bleeds its military capacity. Notably, China, Iran, and Russia launched a small joint naval drill, the fourth of its kind in the past five years, in the Gulf of Oman in early March.

#### FIGHT RISK

From Tehran's perspective, the Israel-Hamas war is only accelerating a shift in the power balance away from U.S. hegemony and toward a new regional order that benefits the Islamic Republic. Ten days after Hamas's attack on Israel, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, warned that a ground invasion of Gaza could "open the gates of hell"—that is, trigger an overwhelming response directed not just at Israel but also at American interests and assets in the region. Still, for Iran's pugnacious revolutionaries, regime survival trumps every other priority, so their approach from October to March was guided by careful targeting. After the Biden administration dispatched two aircraft carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean in October, Iran and its allies took pains to avoid a precipitous escalation. Hezbollah deftly calibrated its attacks on Israel's north, seemingly to avoid drawing Israel into a hotter fight that could erode Hezbollah's ability to deter an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program.

Biden's rapid deployment of U.S. military assets to the region, together with his diplomatic overtures in Lebanon and other key regional actors,

helped avert the wider war that Hamas may have hoped to precipitate. A series of U.S. strikes on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen degraded those groups' capabilities and signaled to Tehran's partners that they will pay a price for continued aggression against Americans. Yet the risk of American miscalculations and overconfidence will creep up over time. Iran's militias have a long record of tenacity and adaptability, and the weapons at their disposal are relatively plentiful and inexpensive, especially compared with the costs of the American strikes to eliminate them.

Over the decades, Iran and its proxies have developed keen instincts for calibrating risk. Now, having gauged the waning American interest in the Middle East, Iranian leaders see an advantage to be gained by gambling. With their attacks, they seek to provoke the United States to make mistakes that give Tehran and its allies an advantage—mistakes similar to the ones Washington made two decades ago, when it invaded Iraq, or in 2018, when Trump withdrew from President Barack Obama's Iran nuclear deal. A miscalculation by any of the actors involved, including Iran itself, could ignite a much wider and more intense conflict across the Middle East, causing profound damage to regional stability and the global economy.

To counter Iran's ambitions, the Biden administration must work with Israel and regional allies to further erode Hamas's ability to launch another shock attack against Israeli civilians while ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches desperate Palestinian civilians and outlining a path to a postwar future that ensures peace and stability for both Israelis and Palestinians. As of late March 2024, Washington was continuing to press for an agreement that would require Hezbollah to pull its elite forces back from Lebanon's border with Israel, facilitating the return of thousands of Israeli civilians whose homes have come under bombardment by Hezbollah rockets since October 7. Achieving such an agreement is critical to prevent a wider conflict, and Washington must press hard for it, leveraging the obvious interests of all parties involved to forestall escalation. In 2022, the United States had success in negotiating a maritime border deal between Israel and Lebanon to permit gas exploration, which suggests there are other opportunities for pragmatic compromise.

The Biden administration has already begun to take a more forceful role in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Tragically, these efforts may prove to be too little and too late to forestall famine. A famine in Gaza would constitute both a strategic and a moral failure for the United States as well as for Israel, and Biden must not repeat the errors that have allowed the specter of such a cataclysm to grip the region.

Any truly successful effort to put a stop to the threat from Hamas—which, in turn, would curb Iran's ability to inflict violence on Israel—will require mitigating the devastating fallout for Palestinian civilians.

Working with nongovernmental organizations and partner governments, the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development must rush assistance to Palestinian civilian authorities independent of Hamas and other Iranian-backed militias—including aid to ensure they have the resources to undertake a reconstruction effort in Gaza when the armed conflict stops. After the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, Iran's rapid delivery of aid enabled Hezbollah to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and outmaneuver the Lebanese government by providing instantaneous compensation and rebuilding programs. The United States must not allow Tehran or its proxies a similar opening after the war in Gaza ends.

Compounding the challenge for Washington is the reality that Iran has accelerated the development of its nuclear program since Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. It is vital for American officials to cultivate a sense of realism. The grand strategic play to align Saudi Arabia and Israel may yet come to pass. Normalizing Israeli-Saudi relations is an appealing way to undergird peace and stability in the region and to counter Iran's malign influence in the long term, but accomplishing it requires complicated political scaffolding that has yet to be fully designed, much less erected. Achieving that normalization requires more effective short- and medium-term game plans to provide governance and security in Gaza, open the way for leadership transitions in both the Palestinian territories and in Israel, and contain the pressures that a variety of actors, especially Iran, are exerting to expand conflict in the Middle East. These must be Washington's priorities over the next year.

In a sense, Iran now has the default advantage over the United States because it does not actually have to achieve anything material in the near term. Chaos itself will constitute a victory. By contrast, the bar for U.S. success is high. Like it or not, however, the United States remains an indispensable player in the region despite its dubious record over the past several decades. Standing by its allies—and safeguarding access to oil that remains vital to the world economy—with a delicate balance of support and restraint requires commitment. Several U.S. presidents hoped to downsize America's role in the Middle East on the cheap—in Biden's case, to focus on China's challenge and Russia's growing threat. But Hamas and Iran have drawn the United States back in. 🌐

# Israel's Forever War

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## The Long History of Managing—Rather Than Solving—the Conflict

TOM SEGEV

**T**o Israelis, October 7, 2023, is the worst day in their country's 75-year history. Never before have so many of them been massacred and taken hostage on a single day. Thousands of heavily armed Hamas fighters managed to break through the Gaza Strip's fortified border and into Israel, rampaging unimpeded for hours, destroying several villages, and committing gruesome acts of brutality before Israeli forces could regain control. Israelis have compared the attack to the Holocaust; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has described Hamas as "the new Nazis." In response, the Israel Defense Forces have pursued an open-ended military campaign in Gaza driven by rage and the desire for revenge. Netanyahu promises that the IDF will fight Hamas until it achieves "total victory," although even his own military has been hard put to define what this means. He has offered no clear idea of what should happen when the fighting stops,

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other than to assert that Israel must maintain security control of all of Gaza and the West Bank.

For Palestinians, the Gaza war is the worst event they have experienced in 75 years. Never have so many of them been killed and uprooted since the *nakba*, the catastrophe that befell them during Israel's war of independence in 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to give up their homes and became refugees. Like the Israelis, they also point to terrible acts of violence: by late March, Israel's military campaign had taken the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinians, among them thousands of children, and rendered well over a million homeless. As the Palestinians see it, the Israeli offensive is part of a larger plan to incorporate all Palestinian lands into the Jewish state and get them to abandon Gaza entirely—an idea that has in fact been raised by some members of Netanyahu's government. The Palestinians also hold on to the illusion of return, the principle that they will one day be able to reclaim their historic homes in Israel itself—a kind of Palestinian Zionism that, like Israel's maximalist aspirations, can never come true.

Ever since the first Zionists began to conceive of a Jewish homeland in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, Jewish leaders and their Arab counterparts have understood that an all-encompassing settlement between them was likely impossible. As early as 1919, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's future first prime minister, recognized that there could be no peace in Palestine. Both the Jews and the Arabs, he observed, were claiming the land for themselves, and both were doing so as nations. "There is no solution to this question," he repeatedly declared. "There is an abyss between us, and nothing can fill that abyss." The inevitable conflict, he concluded, could at best be managed—limited or contained, perhaps, but not resolved.

In the months since the October 7 attacks, critics of Netanyahu, noting his efforts to bolster Hamas and his push for Arab normalization deals that sideline the Palestinian issue, have accused him of trying to manage the conflict rather than end it. But that complaint misreads history. Netanyahu's cardinal blunder was not his attempt to parry the issues that divide Jews and Arabs. It was that he did so more incompetently—and with more disastrous consequences—than anyone else over the past century. Indeed, conflict management is the only real option that either side, and their international interlocutors, has ever had. From its beginnings, the conflict has always been perpetuated by

religion and mythology—violent fundamentalism and messianic prejudices, fantasies and symbols, and deep-rooted anxieties—rather than by concrete interests and calculated strategies. The irrational nature of the conflict has been the main reason why it could never be resolved. Only by confronting this enduring reality can world leaders begin to approach a crisis that demands not more empty talk of solutions for the future but urgent action to better cope with the present.

#### THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Not far from the grave of Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, on the mountain in Jerusalem that bears his name, is a national memorial to generations of Jewish victims of terrorism. The monument reflects an Israeli tendency to try to prove that Jews were persecuted by Arabs in Palestine long before the first Zionists set foot there. The earliest victim mentioned is a Jew from Lithuania who was killed by an Arab in 1851 after a financial dispute, and the eviction of some Arabs, related to the rebuilding of a synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. The memorial also mentions several Jewish victims of Arab robberies and 13 Jews who were killed in British bombing raids on Palestine during World War I. Palestinian historiography and commemorative culture rely on a similarly tendentious use of history.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, fewer than 7,000 Jews were living in Palestine, making up about 2.5 percent of the population of what was then an Ottoman province. Some of their communities had been there for many centuries. As more Arabs and Jews migrated there, the territory's population grew, and with it the relative proportion of Jews. Most Arabs came from neighboring countries in search of employment. Most of the Jews came for religious reasons and as refugees from pogroms in Eastern Europe, and they tended to settle in the Old City of Jerusalem. These immigrants had no intention of establishing Jewish statehood in Palestine. In fact, most Jews at the time did not believe in the Zionist ideology, and many of them even opposed secular Zionism on religious grounds.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were about half a million Arabs in Palestine, whereas the number of Jews, although it had increased steadily, was around 50,000, or about one-tenth of the population. Nonetheless, Herzl's international activities, including a visit in 1898 to Jerusalem, where he was received by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, began to worry leaders of the Palestinian Arabs.

The following year, Yusuf Diya al-Khalidi, the mayor of Jerusalem, expressed his concerns about the Zionists in a remarkable letter written to the chief rabbi of France. “Who could contest the rights of the Jews in Palestine?” Khalidi began in polite, even sympathetic, French prose. “My God, historically it is your country!” But that history was now deep in the past, he continued. “Palestine is an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, and more gravely, it is inhabited by others,” Khalidi wrote. The world was big enough, with plenty of uninhabited land for Jewish independence, he concluded. “For God’s sake—let Palestine be left alone!” Herzl, who received the letter from the French chief rabbi, assured Khalidi in his reply that the Zionists would develop the land for the benefit of all inhabitants, including the Arabs. Previously, however, he had written that the Zionist project might require the resettlement of poor Palestinians to neighboring countries.

Around the time of Herzl’s death, in 1904, young Zionists, mostly socialists from Eastern Europe, began to come to Palestine. One was David Gruen, who later changed his name to David Ben-Gurion. Born in Poland, he arrived in 1906 at the age of 20 and joined a Jewish workers’ group in the Galilee. His first political activity was the promotion of “Hebrew labor”—an attempt to require Jewish employers to hire Jews rather than Arabs. At the time, the Zionists’ acquisition of land also led to the dispossession of some Arab agricultural workers, some of whom reacted violently. In the spring of 1909, Ben-Gurion’s settlement was attacked, and two of his fellow members were killed, one of them apparently in front of Ben-Gurion. The future prime minister of Israel concluded that the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs had irreconcilable differences; there was no escaping the conflict.

Ben-Gurion’s attitude toward the Arabs was further shaped by two other experiences. During World War I, he was expelled from Palestine by the Ottoman authorities. On one of his last days in Jerusalem, he ran into a young Arab with whom he had studied in Istanbul. When Ben-Gurion reported that he was about to be expelled, his acquaintance replied that as his dear friend, he was deeply sorry for him, but as an Arab nationalist, he was very happy. “That was the first time in my life that I heard an honest answer from an Arab

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For Ben-Gurion,  
a Jewish majority  
was more  
important than  
gaining territory.

intellectual,” Ben-Gurion said. “His words burned themselves into my heart, very, very deeply.” Years later, Ben-Gurion had a conversation with Musa Alami, a prominent Arab Palestinian and politician. Ben-Gurion promised as usual that the Zionists would develop Palestine for all its inhabitants. According to Ben-Gurion, Alami replied that he would rather leave the land poor and desolate for another century, if need be, until the Arabs could develop it themselves.

Ben-Gurion often dismissed the “easy solutions” that he attributed to some of his colleagues, such as the notion that Jews could be encouraged to learn Arabic or even that Jews and Arabs could live together in one state. They were refusing to acknowledge the facts. Ben-Gurion’s own concept of the Jewish future in Palestine was based simply on acquiring as much land as possible, if not necessarily the entire territory, and populating it with as many Jews and as few Arabs as possible. His views about the conflict remained unchanged to the end of his life and continuously informed his efforts to manage it.

#### SWITZERLAND IN JUDEA

In 1917, the Zionist movement achieved one of its most important successes when British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour declared the United Kingdom to be in favor of establishing a “national home” for the Jewish people in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration, as it became known, was part of a strategic British plan to take the Holy Land from Ottoman dominion. In reality, like almost everything to do with that land, Balfour’s policy was driven more by sentimental religious ideas than by rational statecraft. A staunch Christian Zionist, Balfour was committed to the idea that the people of God should return to their homeland after a 2,000-year exile so that they could fulfill their biblical destiny. He aspired to go down in history as the man who made this messianic transformation possible.

As was often the case with Western officials at the time, Balfour’s apparent reverence for the Jews simultaneously drew on deep anti-Semitic prejudice. Like others of his era, he attributed almost unlimited power and influence to “the Jew,” including an ability to determine history and even convince the United States to enter World War I. (It was hoped that the Balfour Declaration would sway American Jews to push the United States to join the Allied powers in the war.)

By the end of 1917, the United Kingdom had conquered Palestine, thus beginning nearly 30 years of British rule. During this period, the

## GREEN LINES AND REDLINES

A century of failed efforts to unify—or divide—the Holy Land



1. British Mandate Palestine in 1933. 2. The UN's 1947 two-state partition plan, with Jerusalem and surrounding areas under international trusteeship. 3. Israeli-held territory after the 1967 war, including Sinai, which was eventually returned to Egypt in 1982.

Zionist movement laid the political, economic, cultural, and military foundations for the future state of Israel. Tensions with the Arabs increased over the years as hundreds of thousands of new Jewish immigrants, mainly from Europe, continued to arrive. In the 1920s, these immigrants were motivated not by support for Zionism but by the severe new immigration restrictions imposed by the United States. In the 1930s, more than 50,000 Jewish refugees arrived in Palestine from Nazi Germany, although in less desperate circumstances most of them would have preferred to stay in their country.

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No one questioned why it was in Israel's interest to occupy the West Bank.

Large-scale immigration of Jews sparked more waves of Arab violence against Jews and against the British authorities, who were seen as supporting Zionist aims. This came to a head in the Arab revolt of 1936–39, in which Palestinians rose up against the British colonial administration through a general strike, an armed insurrection, and attacks on railways

and Jewish settlements. Amid this turmoil, the British began to regard Palestine as a nuisance. To get rid of the problem, they appointed the so-called Peel Commission, which recommended dividing the land into Jewish and Arab states—the very first “two-state” solution.

Although the Jewish state it envisioned was small, amounting to just 17 percent of British Mandate Palestine, Ben-Gurion supported the plan. Notably, Arab inhabitants of the area designated for the Jewish state were to be transferred to the Arab state, a provision that he described in his diary as a “forced transfer,” drawing a thick line under the words. Most of his colleagues, however, wanted much more land for the Jewish state, setting off a contentious debate between the center-left Zionist leadership and right-wing “Revisionists” who cultivated a dream of a Greater Israel on both banks of the Jordan River. Although they stood to gain control of about 75 percent of the land, the Arabs rejected the idea of a Jewish state in principle, and the British withdrew the plan. Here, again, was the “abyss” between Jews and Arabs that Ben-Gurion had identified years earlier and that would become even deeper after the Holocaust and the war of 1948.

In January 1942, a few weeks before Nazi leaders met at the infamous Wannsee Conference to discuss the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” *Foreign Affairs* published an article by the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in

Palestine. At the time, no one outside Germany knew about the Nazis' planned extermination camps, but their treatment of Jews in occupied Western Europe and during Germany's ruthless assault on the Soviet Union had already made clear that the Nazis were threatening the existence of the entire Jewish people. Only total victory over the Third Reich could halt the extermination of the Jews, and although Weizmann expressed a hope that a better world could be built after the war, his article was an urgent appeal for a Jewish homeland. Palestine, he wrote, was the only place where Jews, particularly Jewish refugees, could survive.

From a Zionist perspective, Weizmann's proposal contained elements of compromise: more than 20 years earlier, at the Versailles peace conference after World War I, he had presented a map of the Land of Israel with biblical borders that extended to the east bank of the Jordan River—territory much larger than the country would ever attain. In his article, by contrast, Weizmann did not specify borders but proposed unlimited Jewish immigration to a democratic country that would offer equal rights to all its inhabitants, including Arabs. Although he wrote that the Arabs must be “clearly told that the Jews will be encouraged to settle in Palestine, and will control their own immigration,” he asserted that Arabs would not be discriminated against and would “enjoy full autonomy in their own internal affairs.” He also did not rule out the possibility that the new Jewish state could join “in federation” with neighboring Arab states. But like Ben-Gurion, he also foresaw the need to contain the Palestinian Arabs: should they wish, he wrote, “every facility will be given to them to transfer to one of the many and vast Arab countries.”

Attempting to convince his readers that the Jews were worthy of help, Weizmann somewhat pathetically promised that “the Jew” no longer fit the anti-Semitic stereotypes that were prevalent in the West before the start of the Zionist project. “When the Jew is reunited with the soil of Palestine,” he wrote, “energies are released” that if “given an outlet, can create values which may be of service even to richer and more fortunate countries.” Weizmann compared the hoped-for Zionist state to Switzerland, “another small country, also poor in natural resources,” that had nevertheless become “one of the most orderly and stable of European democracies.” Seven years later, he was elected the first president of Israel. In the meantime, the Nazis had murdered six million Jews.

UNREALIZED GAINS

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly recommended the partition of Palestine, this time in a division that would give each side broadly equitable areas of land, with the Old City of Jerusalem under international control. The Arabs rejected the plan, in accordance with their traditional objection to Jewish statehood in Palestine. The Zionists accepted partition, although Ben-Gurion expected war and hoped that it would end with territory that was empty of Arabs.

Soon afterward, Arab militias began a series of attacks on the Jewish population, and Zionist groups retaliated with actions against Arab communities. In May 1948, Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence. It was a dangerous gamble. Regular Arab armies and volunteers from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Transjordan were about to invade the new country, and top commanders of the Jewish armed forces warned that the odds of defeating them were even at best. U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall demanded an immediate cease-fire; Ben-Gurion feared that the Zionists were not ready for war. Before the UN partition plan was announced, he had tried in vain to persuade the British to stay in Palestine for five to ten more years, which could have given the Jews more time to increase immigration and strengthen their forces.

But faced with the historic opportunity to declare a Jewish state, Ben-Gurion chose to obey a Zionist imperative that he said had guided him since the age of three. He later explained that the Israelis won not because they were better at fighting but because the Arabs were even worse. In keeping with his abiding view that establishing a Jewish majority was more important than gaining territory, he led the army to push out or expel most of the Arabs—some 750,000—who fled to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, which Ben-Gurion left unoccupied, as well as to neighboring Arab countries. A direct line could be traced from the Zionists' campaign in the 1920s to replace Arab workers with Jews to the far larger effort in 1948 to remove Arabs from the land of the new Jewish state. Israel lost close to 6,000 soldiers in that war, nearly one percent of the new country's Jewish population at the time.

When the war ended in early 1949, green pencils were used to draw armistice boundaries between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the famous "Green Line." Gaza became an Egyptian protectorate, and the West Bank was annexed by Jordan. Israel now controlled more



territory than it had been allocated in the UN partition plan. It was also almost free of Arabs; the ones who remained were subjected to a rather arbitrary and often corrupt military rule. Most Israelis at the time saw this as an acceptable situation—a rational way of managing the conflict. The Arabs in turn considered Israel's existence a humiliation that had to be remedied. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, authorities did not allow Palestinian refugees to be integrated into their new countries of residence, forcing them instead to live in temporary camps, where they were encouraged to nurture the idea of return.

In the first two decades after independence, Israel made remarkable achievements. But it failed to reach the Zionist goal of providing the entire Jewish people with a safe national homeland. Most of the world's Jews, including many survivors of the Holocaust, still preferred to remain in other countries; those in the Soviet Union and other communist countries were forbidden to emigrate by the authorities in those places. After the 1948 war, most Middle Eastern Jews, many of whose families had been in the region for thousands of years, no longer felt safe in Muslim countries and chose—or were forced—to leave. Most settled in Israel, at first often as destitute refugees. By the mid-1960s, immigrants who had arrived since independence made up around 60 percent of the Israeli population. Most had not yet mastered the Hebrew language, and they often disagreed on basic values and even on how to define a Jew.

Ben-Gurion continued to manage the conflict, but many Israelis, particularly newcomers, felt that Israel's existence was still in danger. Only a few close confidants knew about Ben-Gurion's nuclear project. Border wars frequently broke out; the IDF prepared contingency plans for the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. During the Suez crisis of 1956, Israeli forces invaded Egypt, occupying Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, but withdrew a few months later. In a cabinet meeting, Ben-Gurion said that if he believed in miracles, he would ask for Gaza to be swallowed up by the sea.

After Ben-Gurion resigned in 1963, Israelis were left with a weak and hesitant leadership and a deep economic crisis. More and more of them began to lose confidence in Israel's future. In 1966, the number of Jews emigrating from the country exceeded the number entering it. A popular joke referred to a sign supposedly hanging at the exit gate of the international airport that read: "Would the last person to leave the country please turn off the lights?"

LAND FOR WAR

By the mid-1960s, a new generation of Palestinian refugees had grown up on the legacy of the *nakba* and the dream of return. They founded the Palestine Liberation Organization, a movement that declared a war to free Palestinians and establish an Arab state encompassing their entire historical land, and began carrying out attacks on military and civilian targets in Israel. Some Palestinian militants infiltrated Israel from Syria and Jordan. Israel responded with military reprisals, and in May 1967, Egyptian officials openly threatened to “annihilate” Israel. As tensions rose, many Israelis doubted that their country could survive, and the weariest ones relived their Holocaust experiences. Playgrounds around the country were hastily prepared to serve as burial grounds for the tens of thousands of the expected dead. Israel’s decision to attack Egypt in June 1967 was not only a preemptive strike but also an act of nightmarish panic.

But the surprise attack, launching what would come to be called the Six-Day War, resulted in a dramatic victory for the IDF. Within hours, the Egyptian air force had been destroyed on the ground, and Israelis’ existential dread was replaced by an almost uncontrolled triumphalism. Led by Revisionist opposition leader Menachem Begin, who had joined Israel’s emergency cabinet on the eve of the war and would later become prime minister, as well as some other cabinet ministers, prominent Israeli politicians demanded the “liberation” of what they called Greater Israel—the biblical land that included the entire West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Such an ambition reflected national and religious feelings, but strategically it was contested. A few months before the war, senior officials from the IDF, the prime minister’s office, and the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, had met to discuss the possibility that King Hussein of Jordan would be overthrown by Palestinians living in the West Bank. At the time, the Israeli leadership concluded that the king was working to eradicate Palestinian nationalism in Jordan and the West Bank and that it would be advisable, indeed almost vital, for Israel to stay out of it. After the June victory, however, none of the cabinet ministers questioned why it would be in Israel’s interest to occupy land that was populated by millions of Palestinians. Having just experienced a kind of national resurrection, they were determined to acquire as much land as possible. The impulse came from the heart, not from the head.



The last battle: a Syrian tank from the Six-Day War in the Golan Heights, February 1967

Ben-Gurion had opposed the attack on Egypt because he feared defeat, including the destruction of Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona. After the war, he said that if he had to choose between a smaller state of Israel with peace or the newly expanded boundaries without peace, he would choose the first option. But even he could not contain his emotions when Israeli forces entered the Arab-controlled areas of Jerusalem at the beginning of the war. Shortly afterward, he demanded that the wall of the Old City immediately be torn down to ensure that Jerusalem remained "united" forever.

Taking Arab Jerusalem was a fatal decision, for neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians were likely to agree to any compromise there. There were efforts to manage this flash point, but these arrangements often broke down, and the eternal city has since remained the emotional core of insoluble conflict. The Israeli conquest of the West Bank sparked similar messianic passions, and within months, Israelis began to settle there. Only a few realized that in the long run, occupying the Palestinian territories would put Israel's Jewish majority and its shaky democracy in jeopardy. Just as there was no rational justification for the existential hysteria that had preceded the Six-Day War, there was no rational basis for the unbridled expansionism that took hold after it.

Despite Israel's victory, the 1967 war simply reinforced the underlying tensions that had long driven the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arab countries reaffirmed their refusal to recognize the existence of Israel; the Palestinians' longing for their lost homeland intensified. Every few years, another war broke out. And each side did what it could to manage a situation that had no ready answers. Egypt was able to make peace with Israel in 1979 mostly because Israel was not required to give up any part of Palestine; under a similar logic, Jordan was able to follow suit in 1994. In reaching these agreements, both Arab countries abandoned the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank, perpetuating the people's identity as the orphans of the Middle East.

#### CONTAINMENT OR CATASTROPHE

Like Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders, Netanyahu does not believe the conflict can be solved. But he has proved even less adept than his predecessors at managing it. In an attempt to divide and rule the Palestinians and prevent them from attaining independence, he accepted and then encouraged the Hamas takeover of Gaza. Later, he developed the illusion that peace with some Gulf Arab states in the 2020 Abraham Accords would weaken the Palestinian cause. Implicit in these moves was the idea that it would be possible to control Hamas by bribing its leaders: Israel thus allowed Qatar to deliver Hamas millions of dollars in cash packed in suitcases. The Israeli government also issued work permits for residents of Gaza on the premise that this economic arrangement would restrain Hamas. This kind of bribery reflects a long tradition of Israeli condescension toward the Arabs—a fundamental contempt for them and their national feelings.

In reality, Hamas used much of the money to acquire thousands of rockets, some of them obtained from Iran, that were frequently fired at Israeli cities. In reaction, Israel imposed a blockade on the territory that made Gazans even poorer. Hamas organized a fighting force and constructed a web of tunnels that some experts have described as the most extensive underground fortress in the history of modern warfare. Most important, Netanyahu's approach disregarded Hamas's ideological and emotional commitments, some of which outweigh even life itself, as was illustrated by the organization's barbarity last October and in the months since. Israel

has responded to this indescribable catastrophe with the vengeful devastation of Gaza and its people, a military campaign that, after more than five months, has singularly failed in its primary goal of “total victory” over Hamas.

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is rife with futile peace plans. These have varied from a single binational state—a concept that was first proposed by Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s—to transforming the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into a Palestinian state, an idea that has repeatedly resurfaced since the 1967 war. Seemingly reasonable two-state solutions have also been conceived over the years that might allow Israelis and Palestinians to control their own destinies, in some cases with some form of international oversight of the contested holy sites in Jerusalem.

For decades, successive U.S. administrations have sponsored such initiatives, but rarely have they gotten beyond the concept stage, regardless of how favorable they might seem to one side or the other. Consider the “deal of the century,” a two-state solution briefly proposed by the Trump administration in 2020. It would have left Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem largely intact and given Israel complete security control over both. Yet Jewish settlers themselves did not support it because it gave parts of the West Bank, as well as the outskirts of East Jerusalem, to the Palestinians. That “deal” was merely another iteration of an enduring fantasy. There is little reason to believe that the Biden administration’s efforts to lay down a post-Gaza peace plan will be any more successful.

Historically, Israelis and Palestinians have occasionally shown a readiness to make at least some compromises. And in the early 1990s, it seemed that peace had won after all: the Oslo accords brought leaders of the two sides to the White House lawn in 1993 and subsequently earned them the Nobel Peace Prize. But even then, the results were evanescent. The following year, an Israeli fanatic massacred 29 Palestinians in a mosque in Hebron in the West Bank, setting off new waves of terrorist attacks by Palestinians. Shortly thereafter, another Israeli extremist assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—just as, after the 1979 peace accord with Israel, Egyptian

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Netanyahu  
assumed it would  
be possible to  
bribe Hamas’s  
leaders.

President Anwar Sadat had been assassinated by an Egyptian fanatic. Acts of terrorism and the rise of extremist forces on each side led to the end of the Oslo peace process, but in hindsight, the plan had never had much chance of success.

The common flaw in these international peace initiatives is a failure to contend with the inability of the Israelis and the Palestinians to embrace a lasting solution. Outside powers, including the United States, have never acted forcefully enough to stop the systematic violation of human rights in the Palestinian territories. But the primary reason the conflict endures is neither Israeli oppression of the Palestinians nor Palestinian terrorism, but rather the irrevocable commitment of both peoples to undivided land. These absolute positions have increasingly become the essence of collective identities on each side, and any compromise is likely to be denounced by significant Israeli and Palestinian constituencies as a national and religious betrayal.

Evidently, existential conflicts shaped around competing visions of nationhood cannot be ended by grand solutions that neither side will support—least of all, during the most devastating war that Israelis and Palestinians have experienced in three-quarters of a century. But such a conflict can be managed in more or less reasonable ways. If a century of failure has made clear that the two sides are unlikely to be reconciled in the foreseeable future, the war in Gaza has exposed the terrifying cataclysm that poor handling of the conflict can bring about. When the fighting is over, imaginative, resourceful, and compassionate management of the conflict between the two sides will be more crucial than ever. Rather than devoting energy and political capital to deeply unpopular—and unsustainable—peace plans, the United States and other leading powers must do more to ensure that Palestinians and Israelis can find a safer and more tolerable existence in a world without peace.

Countless failures in the search for a solution to the conflict have given rise to a hypothesis that only a catastrophe of biblical proportions could persuade either side to rethink their delusional national creeds. The unfolding events in Israel and Gaza may suggest that both sides have not yet suffered enough. But perhaps this hypothesis is not rooted in reality, either. 🌐

# The Case for Progressive Realism

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## Why Britain Must Chart a New Global Course

DAVID LAMMY

**T**his year, voters in the United Kingdom will head to the polls as Keir Starmer's Labour Party seeks to win power from the Conservative Party for the first time since 1997. It is difficult to overstate how much the world has changed in the intervening years. When former Prime Minister Tony Blair entered Downing Street 27 years ago, the British economy was larger than India's and China's combined. The United Kingdom still administered a major Asian city, Hong Kong, as a colony. The increase in global temperatures from the long-term average was less than half what it is today. And American dominance was so striking that some people saw the spread of the liberal democratic model as inevitable.

Today, the global order is messy and multipolar. China has become a superpower, with an economy more than five times as large as the United

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Kingdom's. But there has also been a shift in power to a wider variety of states since I was first a minister almost 19 years ago. As a result, geopolitics takes place on a much more crowded board. Countries described in these pages by CIA Director William Burns as the "hedging middle" are striking bargains and setting their own agendas in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Much of the news is grim: wars are increasing in scale and intensity. Democracies are on the back foot. Climate breakdown is no longer a future worry; it is already here. But the task of saving the planet has begun in earnest as states both compete and cooperate in an energy transition on which humanity's future depends.

Yet rather than seeing this world clearly and rising to the challenge, the Conservative Party has, over 14 years, turned the British government inward. Successive Conservative governments sank deeply into nostalgia and denial about the United Kingdom's place in the world. The government, for example, crashed out of the European Union without a clear plan for what to do next. It treated with contempt the country's global reputation for upholding the rule of law, threatening to imperil the Good Friday Agreement (which brought peace to Northern Ireland) and leave the European Convention on Human Rights. When China, the United States, and the EU built competing green industrial policies to claim the industries of the future, the British government failed to follow suit. Instead, it squandered the United Kingdom's climate leadership by tearing up net-zero carbon emissions commitments, throwing business plans into disarray.

Conservative officials proved especially callous in their approach to the global South. Over the last decade, they have undermined the United Kingdom's standing as a development superpower with a mismanaged merger of government departments that devalued expertise and forced cuts to crucial programs. And instead of fighting for the hearts and minds of the new global middle class, they addressed this group in often offensive tones, such as when then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson publicly recited a colonialist poem by Rudyard Kipling during a 2017 visit to Myanmar. And the government compromised one of the United Kingdom's greatest strengths—its soft power—by attacking institutions such as universities, courts, and the BBC.

Fixing this damage will not be easy. The British economy is stuck in a quagmire of low growth. The British Army has fewer soldiers than at any point since the Napoleonic era. Many public services are on their knees. But if the Labour Party wins in the coming election, it can



deliver a decade of national renewal along with a clear-eyed approach to international relations: progressive realism.

Progressive realism advocates using realist means to pursue progressive ends. For the British government, that requires tough-minded honesty about the United Kingdom, the balance of power, and the state of the world. But instead of using the logic of realism solely to accumulate power, progressive realism uses it in service of just goals—for example, countering climate change, defending democracy, and advancing the world's economic development. It is the pursuit of ideals without delusions about what is achievable.

#### IN THE INTEREST OF JUSTICE

The path to a progressive realist foreign policy runs through two of the United Kingdom's great foreign secretaries. The first was Ernest Bevin. Born into crippling rural poverty and orphaned as a young child, he rose to become foreign secretary in 1945 after a career as a union leader and a Labour politician. A few weeks after taking office, Bevin was catapulted into negotiations on the new world order with U.S. President Harry Truman and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

Bevin was committed to realism, a politics based on respect for facts. This dedication proved pivotal to European security. He stiffened wavering American resolve during the 1948–49 Soviet blockade of Berlin by spelling out the stakes for U.S. officials, pushed for a West German state as an anchor for the West, and persuaded British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that the United Kingdom should acquire nuclear weapons. His crowning achievement was convincing a skeptical Truman administration to commit to a NATO alliance that explicitly declared that an attack on any member was an attack on all members—the treaty's totemic Article 5. Thanks to Bevin's work, the alliance has held firm. April of this year marked the 75th anniversary of NATO's creation.

But Bevin, like many great politicians, was a product of his time. He too breezily justified the wrongs of colonialism through claims that such measures were taken in the national interest. He also did not live in a world where the West had to cooperate with its rivals on climate change and artificial intelligence. Today, realism alone will not be enough to safeguard the planet.

To do that, democracies must also tap into the tradition of another great modern British foreign secretary: Robin Cook. When he came into power in 1997, Cook laid out a vision for a foreign policy with “an ethical

dimension,” even as he recognized that the United Kingdom’s security must always come first. Through the force of his convictions, he made climate change a core focus of the Foreign Office for the first time in history, brought human rights into the diplomatic mainstream, championed a global ban on landmines, and marshaled the British government’s allies to fight against war crimes in Kosovo. With Blair, he helped the United Kingdom become a superpower when it came to international development by committing the country to meeting the UN’s 0.7 percent aid target.

There was realism in Cook, too; he opposed the Iraq war, with warnings that now stand as prescient. Yet Cook’s vision of adding more ethics to foreign policy at times snagged on the limits of idealism, particularly when it came to hard choices about arms exports. But these limits do not mean idealism has no place in foreign policy. Just because someone is progressive does not mean that person cannot be a realist. Governments, likewise, do not have to choose between values and interests.

And the United Kingdom shouldn’t. In the spirit of Bevin, it must be realistic about the state of the world and the country’s role in it. Yet like Cook, the country should adopt a progressive belief in its capacity to champion multilateral causes, build institutions, defend democracy, stand up for the rule of law, combat poverty, and fight climate change.

#### COMING TO TERMS

A progressive realism worth its name begins by being honest about assumptions the West made in the past that turned out to be wrong. The broad consensus that economic globalization would inevitably breed liberal democratic values proved false. Instead, democracies have become more economically dependent on authoritarian states, with the share of world trade between democracies declining from 74 percent in 1998 to 47 percent in 2022. China provides a particularly stark case in point. The country was admitted into the World Trade Organization in 2001 under the hope that political reforms would follow economic ones. But the state became more repressive as the economy opened up.

The rise of China—which now has the world’s largest economy by purchasing power parity—has ended the era of U.S. hegemony. The world is shaped by competition between Beijing and Washington. Beijing challenges the U.S.-led order in nearly every domain, from developing the technologies and green supply chains of the future to sourcing and processing critical raw materials. But the competition is especially fierce when it comes to security. The Chinese navy has the greatest number of



warships in the world. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, China's shipbuilding capacity is approximately 230 times as large as that of the United States. Beijing's growing military power has, in turn, helped Russia's challenge in Europe. To compete with China, the United States will inevitably have to pay more attention to the Indo-Pacific. This shift will come even though Europe is worryingly dependent on U.S. support to stop Moscow's war against Ukraine.

China is not the world's only rising power. A broadening group of states—including Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have claimed seats at the table. They and others have the power to shape their regional environments, and they ignore the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States ever more frequently. In the twentieth century, some of these states aligned with rival superpower-led blocs. But today, to maximize their autonomy, they strike deals with all the great powers. Their noted indifference to many U.S. pleas is partly the result of the chaotic Western military interventions during the first decades of this century. The failures of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya undermined the idea that liberal interventionism was, as Blair remarked in 1999, "a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose." Instead, it came to be seen as a recipe for disorder.

A British government that adheres to progressive realism will not repeat these errors. That said, the last decade has made it clear that

inaction has high costs, too. The fact that the United States did not police its redline against the use of chemical weapons in Syria not only entrenched Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's monstrous regime; it also emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin. He concluded that the West no longer had the stomach to defend the rules-based order and, by annexing Crimea, applied the logic of what David Miliband, another former Labour foreign secretary, has called "the age of impunity." When the West responded to that provocation with only light sanctions, Putin came to believe he could fundamentally upend the world order in 2022.

The West is finally taking Moscow's threats seriously. European states increasingly recognize Russia as a long-term, generational threat that requires a long-term, generational response. This will demand the stamina and determination of Bevin. But the West has yet to win back support from many key countries. As Fiona Hill, a former senior director of the U.S. National Security Council, said in 2023, the war has become a proxy for a rebellion of "the rest" against the West. In UN General Assembly votes over the past two years, countries that collectively represent approximately two-thirds of the world's population have either abstained or voted against motions to censure Putin. Many of those countries have rebuffed Western attempts to persuade them, accusing the West of having double standards and noting that its interest in their needs has been erratic at best. Given the West's hoarding of COVID-19 vaccines and its inadequate action to mitigate climate-related loss and damage, they have a point.

#### NEAR AND FAR

Addressing the worsening global security situation facing the United Kingdom is the central task and first responsibility of British foreign policy. That policy will always be founded on the country's relations with the United States and Europe. These two powers are the rocks on which the United Kingdom builds its security, but the government's ties with both must evolve. Americans increasingly need convincing that Europeans do enough to protect their own continent's security. And as the United States becomes more focused on Asia, it will have less bandwidth for action elsewhere. The United Kingdom is ready for difficult conversations about burden sharing, as long as they are part of a serious process that reinforces collective security.

To handle these changes, it is ever more important that the United Kingdom develop closer foreign and security cooperation with the EU. Both parties must be honest about the gravity of this moment. From Ukraine

to Gaza and the Sahel, there is an arc of conflict and instability inside and near Europe's borders that affects the United Kingdom and the continent's interests equally. Yet the European Union and the British government have no formal means of cooperation. To address that problem, the United Kingdom must seek a new geopolitical partnership with the EU. The centerpiece of this relationship should be a security pact that drives closer coordination across a wide variety of military, economic, climate, health, cyber, and energy security issues—and that complements both parties' unshakable commitment to NATO, which will remain the foremost vehicle for European security. The United Kingdom should also double down on its close relationships with France, Germany, Ireland, and Poland. It should, for example, pursue a British-German defense agreement to go along with the similar Lancaster House treaties it signed with France in 2010.

Above all else, the United Kingdom must continue supporting Ukraine. The future of European security depends on the outcome of the war there, and the British government must leave the Kremlin with no doubt that it will support Kyiv for as long as it takes to achieve victory. Once Ukraine has prevailed, the United Kingdom should play a leading role in securing Ukraine's place in NATO.

European security will be the Labour Party's foreign policy priority. But the British government cannot focus exclusively on the continent. Realism also means recognizing that the Indo-Pacific will be fundamental to global prosperity and security in the decades ahead, so the United Kingdom must strengthen its engagement with that region, as well. The country made a good start by helping establish AUKUS, a nuclear submarine and technology pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Yet the British government should treat the cooperation of AUKUS as a floor, not a ceiling. It must also build up other regional relationships, including by deepening its security partnerships with Japan and South Korea. India, with which the United Kingdom is intimately connected through countless family ties, is set to be the world's third-largest economy by 2030. But the British government has still failed to deliver a long-promised trade deal with New Delhi.

Then there is China. The United Kingdom's approach to the country has oscillated wildly over the past 14 years. Former Prime Minister David Cameron sought to create what he called a "golden era" of

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Conservative officials proved especially callous in their approach to the global South.

engagement with Beijing in 2015, which swung to overt hostility when Liz Truss became prime minister in September 2022. British policy has shifted again under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who made Cameron his foreign secretary in late 2023, into confused ambiguity.

The United Kingdom must instead adopt a more consistent strategy, one that simultaneously challenges, competes against, and cooperates with China as appropriate. Such an approach would recognize that Beijing poses a systemic challenge for British interests and that the Chinese Communist Party poses real security threats. But it would also recognize China's importance to the British economy. It would accept that no grouping of states can address the global threats of the climate crisis, pandemics, and artificial intelligence unless it cooperates with Beijing. There is a crucial difference between "de-risking" and decoupling, and it is in everyone's interest that China's relationship with the West endure and evolve.

As the British Shadow Foreign Secretary, I have traveled extensively across North Africa and the Middle East, including to Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. All will be vital partners for the United Kingdom in this decade, not least as the country seeks to reconstruct Gaza and—as soon as possible—realize a two-state solution. From the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, the Labour Party has stuck to progressive principles, urgently calling for international law to be respected in full by all parties. The United Kingdom cannot end this terrible conflict. But it does have the capacity to surge aid to support rebuilding, and a key goal for the Labour Party is to work with international partners to recognize Palestine as a state, as a contribution to securing a negotiated two-state solution.

Progressive realism acknowledges that, at times in the twentieth century, Western powers undermined the sovereignty of weaker states, especially in the global South. But in the twenty-first century, a Labour government would see its mission as supporting states' sovereignty against forces such as Russian neoimperialism, climate change, and corruption. This is why progressive realism seeks the same thing for Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine: for each to be a sovereign, secure, and internationally recognized state, at peace with its neighbors.

Furthermore, in today's world, Western governments must partner with the global South. There is a potential convening role here for a revitalized Commonwealth. Our government would, in particular, work to tackle the climate crisis, perhaps the most profound and uni-

versal source of disorder. The world's response so far—spending nearly \$2 trillion on the green transition last year alone—has at times been its brightest point of hope. But leading powers have still not done nearly enough to prevent disaster, and the scramble for critical raw materials, now at the heart of every great power's foreign policy, will not help poorer countries pay for the transition. Progressive realism demands a more cooperative approach. Realists recognize that if fairness is not part of a global climate bargain, it will fail.

Progressive realism also means recognizing that climate change is not the only threat to the planet. Technological change also contributes to the new world disorder by fueling inequality and populism. Movements that attack liberal values are rising on the back of social media websites that profit from algorithms built to amplify extreme positions. The emergence of artificial intelligence offers enormous potential for growth and innovation, but AI is already making it easier for bad actors to suppress freedom, disseminate misinformation, and undermine democratic processes. To minimize these risks, progressive realists must establish global guardrails for technology with the widest possible coalition of countries—before it is too late.

Finally, progressive realism means anticipating how the dynamics between continents are about to change. By 2050, more than one in four people on the planet will live in Africa. The continent can and will generate vast growth. Yet Cook would be dismayed to see the poverty that endures there, despite his generation's efforts. The next Labour government must therefore produce a new Africa strategy that does more than merely offer aid. The United Kingdom must once again become a leader in development, but to do so, it has to adopt a model that emphasizes trading with other countries to build long-term win-win partnerships—rather than following an outdated model of patronage.

#### FASTER GROWTH, SLOWER WARMING

To realize its ambitions, the next British government will have to revitalize its economy. It is shocking that the United Kingdom, historically a trading nation, now has the lowest levels of investment of any state in the G-7. A successful economy is the bedrock of our domestic prosperity and global influence, which is why Starmer has pledged that the country will generate the highest sustained growth in the G-7 if he is elected prime minister. The Foreign Office can help meet this target by revitalizing economic diplomacy. To that

end, if I become foreign secretary, I will make it a priority for every British ambassador in every relevant market to promote investment into the state. I will also convene a new business advisory council to ensure that the needs of companies inform our diplomatic thinking. To deliver prosperity at home, the United Kingdom must reestablish itself as a trusted and reliable partner—particularly with allies. That is why Labour will seek to improve the country's trade and investment relationship with Europe, as well as with India and the United States.

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Realism without  
a sense of progress  
can become  
cynical and tactical.

Brexit is settled; a Labour government would not seek to rejoin the EU, the Single Market, or the Customs Union. Yet there are plenty of pragmatic steps we can take to rebuild trust and cooperation and reduce barriers to trade.

A Labour government would also invest in the green transition. Countries around the world are competing intensely to attract private capital for clean technology, a competition that has been sharpened by the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act and the EU's Green Deal. The United Kingdom should not be afraid to enter this race. A Labour government would, for example, create a new national wealth fund that invests in hydrogen, renewable energy, green steel, and other climate-friendly industries that provide a long-term return for taxpayers. Our key principle would be to use public investment to unlock further private investment.

But our approach to climate change would not simply be focused on domestic development. Climate diplomacy is at the center of progressive realism, and a Labour government would make advancing the fight against greenhouse gases central to our agenda. We would, for example, focus on reducing the emissions of our partners by seeking to establish a clean power alliance—in effect, a reverse OPEC—of states committed to leading the way on decarbonizing power systems. Our government would also help reform international financial institutions to provide far greater support for climate adaptation.

To become a green power, however, the United Kingdom needs to upgrade its reputation and its tools. The country should stop issuing new licenses to explore oil and gas in the North Sea. It must also decarbonize its electricity system by 2030.

Achieving the last goal will require a massive rollout of renewables. Labour's program involves tripling solar power, quadrupling offshore



wind power, doubling onshore wind power, and expanding nuclear, hydrogen, and tidal power. That means the United Kingdom must forge new overseas investment and regulatory partnerships. Because the resources needed to decarbonize economies stretch across borders, no country can go green without international cooperation. A Labour government would help foster such collaboration by creating a new network of climate and energy diplomats. They would help our government channel one of Cook's strongly held beliefs: that foreign policy must deliver better outcomes for all.

#### GREATER BRITAIN

Given the disorder, conflicts, and crises in the world, it is easy to despair. Wars are proliferating, and tensions between great powers are escalating. Climate change has subjected every continent to deadly extreme weather and provoked droughts and famines.

The United Kingdom, however, can navigate the demands of this new era. It has the world's sixth-largest economy. It is home to cutting-edge technology, services, leading universities, innovative legal sectors, and vibrant cultural industries. It has the potential for unparalleled partnerships and alliances. The country can thrive and restore its reputation as a net contributor to global security and development if it renews its alliances and recovers its self-confidence. It can once again choose to rise to today's generational challenges and navigate a new path, drawing from the best of its past.

To do so, the United Kingdom must draw from what is truly its historical best. If the government's response to the world's issues is rooted in the Conservative Party's nostalgia and denial, it will fail to deliver the multilateral agreements required to solve global problems. If progressives forget that diplomacy means working with those who do not always share democratic values, it will hurt British interests. If the government cannot sketch out a bold progressive vision, it will have forgotten its purpose. And if the state cannot guarantee national and regional security, it will have failed at its most essential task.

Progressive policy without realism is empty idealism. Realism without a sense of progress can become cynical and tactical. But when progressives act realistically and practically, they change the world. The United Kingdom urgently needs a foreign policy that brings together the best of Bevin and Cook. It needs progressive realism to kickstart an era of renewal, with a sharper and more hopeful vision for the country's role in the world. 🌍

## CANADA

Innovation from across the border



## Building a partnership for the future

Rooted in shared values and mutual interests, the relationship between Canada and its next-door neighbor, the United States, has grown beyond the economic and political spheres.

The alliance has opened a new chapter, one that lays out closer cooperation in high-tech and quantum computing.

In a press conference in March last year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau unveiled a groundbreaking agreement: "Canada and the United States have agreed to put in force a system for building semiconductors."

The agreement signifies a strong commitment to bolstering their nations' technological prowess, strengthening their economic competitiveness, and boosting job growth across the region. The partnership, symbolized by IBM's decision to expand its semiconductor facility in Bromont, Quebec, underscores the intertwined destinies of these two North American powerhouses.

**Canadian Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry François-Philippe Champagne** stressed the importance of building a robust wireless infrastructure.

"Canadians deserve strong, secure, and reliable wireless networks and services," he said.

**CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE**

## The North American semiconductor supply chain corridor



## HOW QUÉBEC IS SHAPING THE FUTURE

At the northern tip of North America's semiconductor corridor lies ground zero of innovation: Québec's digital technologies and quantum innovation zones. Positioned to create maximum impact, these zones benefit from synergies that transform new ideas into life-changing applications.

Imagine an ecosystem where over 500 partners, including academic institutions like **Université de Sherbrooke**, converge, driving innovation forward.

In Bromont, global tech giants play a key role in the North American semiconductor supply chain. The **Technum Québec** innovation zone hosts companies such as **IBM** and one of its largest semiconductor assembly and testing facilities globally and **Teledyne MEMS**, a world leader in the MEMS Pure Play foundry market and **C2MI**, Canada's largest dedicated semiconductor R&D centre.

Sherbrooke's quantum innovation zone, **Distriq**, is a thriving collaborative ecosystem, where innovators and start-ups come together to focus on quantum science. Here, world-leading companies including, **Multiverse Computing**, **Nord Quantique**, and **Qubic Technologies** change the future.

These innovation zones are critical components of global partnerships that advance digital and quantum technologies for the semiconductor industry. With extensive free trade agreements already in place, the time is right for a sectoral auto-pact style agreement. ■

Through investments in Ericsson Canada, the government affirms its dedication to improving the current 5G networks and building the future landscape of 6G technology.

"The United States is Canada's top global investor. We are uniquely positioned to offer American companies unmatched benefits, including short supply chains, green energy, global market access, and seamless integration to home operations," said **Invest in Canada CEO Laurel Broten**.

Meanwhile, Quebec has emerged as a hotbed of technological advancement, notably in digital technologies and quantum computing. This high-tech ecosystem involves educational institutions, like Université de Sherbrooke; research facilities, such as C2MI; and a mix of dynamic companies, including IBM, Multiverse Computing, Nord Quantique, Qubic Technologies, and Teledyne MEMS.

"We are leveraging our existing expertise in microelectronics. Quebec is poised to spearhead quantum computing initiatives, cementing its status as a global innovation hub. By embracing cutting-edge technologies, Quebec not only propels economic growth but also enriches cross-sector collaboration, fostering synergies that drive progress across various industries," said **Quebec's Minister of Economy, Innovation, and Energy Pierre Fitzgibbon**.

As both nations navigate the complexities of the digital age, the US-Canada partnership has laid down the path toward a more interconnected and prosperous North America.

### **Closer cross-border collaboration**

This thriving bilateral partnership has fostered closer collaboration across all the provinces and territories in Canada. In Alberta, particularly in the capital Edmonton, there has been a surge in activity in technological innovation, lessening the province's dependence on the oil and gas sector.

"What is unique about Alberta is that you can come here and make a difference at the table. If you don't have a seat at the table, you create your own. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive, and we are a place where "co-opetition" is the norm, and competitors help each other. Alberta is the place to jump into the bigger markets, and we are strategically located in a geographic home that allows you to expand your business globally," said **Edmonton International Airport (YEG) President and CEO Myron Keehn**.

The collaborative spirit and strategic positioning of Canadian cities like Edmonton have made them attractive destinations for many tech giants and startups looking for new, cost-effective locations to set up their businesses. The growth-conducive conditions have pulled in domestic and international companies.

None of this progress could have happened were it not

for Canada's education system.

Institutions such as Université de Sherbrooke and École de technologie supérieure (ÉTS Montreal), both in the province of Quebec, emphasize their mission to cultivating innovation and collaboration so that good ideas can be transformed into powerful solutions and the technologies of tomorrow.

"At École de technologie supérieure, we do things differently and we're proud of it. Our bold model has worked, and it drives us to push the boundaries of engineering. Our researchers and professors change the world every day, and our students are the engineering leaders of tomorrow. More than ever, our distinctive expertise is being recognized by companies and a variety of business partnerships and we want to go even further to better meet the growing needs of North America and the world," said **ETS Montreal CEO and President Prof. François Gagnon**.

For Université de Sherbrooke, founded in 1954, the mission was driven by pragmatic needs in the community.

"Sherbrooke needed higher education. The community wanted a 'complete' university, which meant law, medicine, arts, science, and business. Local businesses, schools and hospitals also wanted our approach to be practical," said **Université de Sherbrooke Rector Pierre Cossette**.

"So, at UdeS, we teach discovery research and its applications. We like to say we can go from the molecule to the patient or from the electron to the computer. We make complex areas of research, like quantum computing, accessible to both teachers and students. We generate start-ups and break down barriers to application in partnership with business," he added. ■

### **ETS MONTREAL: WHERE INNOVATION HAPPENS**

**École de technologie supérieure (ÉTS Montreal)** is marking its 50th anniversary this year having built a solid reputation as a place where future leaders in technology and innovation are trained with practical training.

"At ÉTS Montreal, students enjoy innovating. We encourage them to embrace open science and innovation, and train them to become the next generation of highly skilled researchers and engineers," said **ETS Montreal CEO and Director General Prof. François Gagnon**.

"Through entrepreneurial culture or industry internships, they develop life-changing products, from eco-friendly aircraft engines and electric vehicles to NFL helmets that reduce concussions, imaging technology solutions that provide 3D images of knee biomechanics, a minimally invasive modular heart pump, and almost invisible yarns for new fabrics and more," Gagnon added.

ÉTS fosters technological exchange and innovation between Canada and the United States. An example of this collaboration is in the aerospace industry between Pratt and Whitney. With new challenges to face, ÉTS trains students to meet the future demand for inventors and problem solvers.

Another example of this cross-border partnership is with Ultra Electronics, with which ETS has a longstanding relationship. The partnership has led to the design of wireless systems for the U.S. military. ■

<https://www.etsmtl.ca>



# Spy and Tell

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## The Promise and Peril of Disclosing Intelligence for Strategic Advantage

DAVID V. GIOE AND MICHAEL J. MORELL

**O**n October 25, 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, confronted his Soviet counterpart, Valerian Zorin, in the chamber of the Security Council. Live on television, Stevenson grilled Zorin about whether the Soviet Union had deployed nuclear-capable missiles to Cuba. “Yes or no?” Stevenson demanded. As Zorin waffled, Stevenson went in for the kill: “I am prepared to wait for an answer until hell freezes over if that’s your decision. And I’m also prepared to present the evidence in this room.” Stevenson then revealed poster-sized photographs taken by a high-altitude U-2 spy plane, images that showed Soviet missile bases in Cuba and directly contradicted Moscow’s denials. Stevenson’s revelations marked a turning point in the crisis,

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providing undeniable evidentiary support to the Kennedy administration's allegations, shifting global opinion, and pressuring the Soviets to de-escalate by isolating them diplomatically. It was the first time the U.S. government had declassified top-secret intelligence to publicly refute another country's claims.

Nearly 60 years later, Moscow looked poised to flex its muscle again, this time by amassing nearly 175,000 troops on the Russian border with Ukraine. Echoing the Kennedy administration's approach, the Biden administration responded by publicly disclosing intelligence, both to warn allies (and Ukraine) of the coming invasion and to preemptively rebut Russian President Vladimir Putin's planned pretexts for it. In early December 2021, administration officials started sharing the intelligence community's

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What used to be a break-glass option is now routine.

growing concern with the media, holding a briefing that was accompanied by satellite imagery showing Russian forces staging on Ukraine's borders. In mid-January 2022, John Kirby, then the Pentagon press secretary, told reporters that Russia was preparing a "false-flag operation" in eastern Ukraine, hoping to fabricate a massacre to justify an invasion. Later that month, U.S. officials revealed that the Russian military had moved blood supplies to the border of Ukraine, suggesting that war was imminent. And on February 18, President Joe Biden said he was "convinced" that Russia's invasion would begin in the "coming days"—as it did.

The Biden administration's disclosures didn't persuade Putin to shelve his war plans, but they did fortify Western resolve after the invasion. Advance warning of Russia's plans enabled many U.S. allies, particularly NATO members, to quickly offer military aid packages to Ukraine and harmonize their economic sanctions against Russia. The revelations about the contrived provocations that Putin was scheming helped turn public opinion in the West against Russia by denying him a pretext for the invasion. Inside the Biden administration, the disclosure strategy was seen as a resounding success.

In the six decades after the Kennedy administration's novel move at the UN, successive White Houses adopted the tactic from time to time. But their disclosures were "one and done" affairs. What is new now is that the Biden team has disclosed information multiple times on a single issue over an extended period. What's more, because the

Ukraine-related revelations seemed to work so well, the administration is now applying the tool to other issues, most notably China. It has even come up with terms for the practice, with officials speaking of “strategic downgrades” and “strategic declassification.” What used to be a break-glass option is now routine.

But as strategic downgrades become more common, policymakers and intelligence practitioners need to develop guardrails to protect against their pitfalls. Without proper precautions, a disclosure might compromise the source of the declassified information or, if the revelation turns out to be wrong, harm the intelligence community’s reputation and undermine the goal the disclosure was meant to achieve. The biggest risk, however, is that using intelligence as a policy tool increases the chances that it will also be used as a political weapon. Were that to happen, the intelligence community could lose its most precious asset: its reputation for objectivity.

#### A NOT-SO-SECRET HISTORY

Although high-level officials have long leaked classified intelligence to the media, strategic disclosures are something different. They aim to use intelligence to further a specific administration goal rather than advance a particular bureaucratic player’s individual interest. Accordingly, disclosures are known in advance by a group of senior officials, including those with declassification authority, and are usually coordinated with relevant stakeholders, including the agency that collected the intelligence. They can enter the public domain directly—for example, through an on-the-record press conference, a televised speech or interview, or an intelligence product posted on a government website. Or they can take a more circuitous route, such as through a background briefing to journalists, who can use the information but agree not to name the official providing it. Strategic downgrades may or may not go through a formal declassification process, but unlike unauthorized leaks, they are legal, because officials with declassification authority have been involved in the decision-making.

Since the Cuban missile crisis, administrations have resorted to strategic declassification for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, the goal is to preemptively justify a policy. That was the purpose of the memorable, but ultimately incorrect, speech that Secretary of State Colin Powell gave to the UN Security Council in February 2003. Flanked by George Tenet, the director of the CIA, Powell played a tape of

an intercepted conversation between Iraqi military officers conspiring to mislead weapons inspectors, showed satellite imagery of alleged weapons sites, and displayed drawings of supposed biological weapons labs. President Barack Obama made a similar move in 2013, after the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad fired rockets filled with sarin gas at a Damascus suburb and killed more than a thousand civilians. As the White House contemplated airstrikes, it released a summary of the intelligence community's "high-confidence assessment" that the Syrian government had carried out the attack. In the end, the administration decided not to respond militarily, but had it done so, the declassified intelligence would have been foundational to the case for action by contradicting Syria's repeated denials of responsibility.

At other times, disclosures are made to retroactively justify a policy. Such was the case in 1983, when Soviet pilots shot down a South Korean commercial airliner that had strayed into Soviet airspace. U.S. President Ronald Reagan declassified signals intelligence to show Soviet culpability and justify his confrontational posture toward Moscow. At the Security Council, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick, played a tape of Soviet pilots' intercepted radio conversations with their commander as they homed in on the plane. Three years later, the administration repeated the strategy with Libya. After ordering airstrikes against the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi for having orchestrated a terrorist attack that killed U.S. troops at a discotheque in West Berlin, Reagan, in a speech from the Oval Office, summarized diplomatic cables intercepted by the National Security Agency that proved Libyan responsibility for the attack.

Sometimes, policymakers disclose intelligence to undermine or pressure their adversaries. In 1984, the Reagan administration released declassified sketches based on classified satellite photography showing that the Soviets were constructing a radar station in Siberia, an outpost the administration claimed violated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The goal was to strengthen the United States' position in arms control talks and demonstrate that the U.S. government was closely monitoring Soviet military developments. (Years later, the Soviets dismantled the facility.) More recently, in 2009, Obama held a press conference with his British and French counterparts and announced that the Iranians had built a covert uranium enrichment site. As an administration official explained to reporters in an accompanying background briefing, the conclusion was based on "very sensitive intelligence information."



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The disclosure worked: it generated international pressure on the Iranians, compelling them to bring the site under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

At other times, the U.S. government has used official disclosures to deal with unauthorized ones. In 2007, the George W. Bush administration worried that an intelligence estimate about Iran's nuclear program would leak. The estimate concluded that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program four years earlier, and the White House feared that the revelation of that specific conclusion would undermine its argument that Iran still posed a threat. So it released an unclassified version of the paper's key judgments to make clear that the country was continuing to work on both uranium enrichment and dual-use weapons technologies. The Obama administration resorted to the same strategy in 2013. When the National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden leaked highly classified documents about the U.S. government's global surveillance programs, the administration responded with its own disclosures. It released an overview of the programs to counter media stories that characterized them as being more pervasive and less subject to legal scrutiny than they actually were. The NSA's director, Keith Alexander, even made an unprecedented appearance on *60 Minutes* to share several previously classified pieces of information (such as the fact that the NSA was targeting the communications of fewer than 60 "U.S. persons" worldwide).

Other disclosures are motivated by an administration's desire to protect its reputation. In 2004, a member of the 9/11 Commission questioned National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice about a seemingly damning item that appeared in the President's Daily Brief on August 6, 2001: "Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US." Just two days later, the Bush administration released the top-secret memo with minimal redactions to show that the document contained no specific warning of, or any actionable information about, a near-term attack. Likewise, in 2016, when the Obama administration wanted to counter criticism about civilian casualties caused by U.S. drone strikes, it released the intelligence community's own count, which was much lower than the number calculated by critics.

Finally, U.S. policymakers have at times released intelligence to pressure Congress. In December 2023, Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act was set to expire. The provision allows the U.S. government to access the communications of foreigners outside the

United States who have been targeted for intelligence purposes and whose communications pass through the United States. To encourage Congress to reauthorize Section 702, the administration declassified information showing its value. Officials revealed that the provision had proved crucial to tracking fentanyl smuggling across the Mexican border and identifying the hacker behind the 2021 ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline. The administration even disclosed that in 2022, 59 percent of the pieces in Biden's President's Daily Briefs contained information collected under the authorities of Section 702. But the disclosures don't appear to have worked: although the program was temporarily reauthorized, as of this writing, in March, permanent reauthorization remains stalled in Congress.

#### WEAPON OF CHOICE

The Biden administration's disclosures about Russia's war in Ukraine did not stop when the shooting started. In fact, they only gained pace. A month after the invasion, Biden revealed that Russia was considering using chemical and biological weapons in the conflict. By the end of 2023, with domestic enthusiasm for continued support for Ukraine flagging and Congress at an impasse over aid, it yet again resorted to strategic declassification. To demonstrate Ukraine's success in the war and the effectiveness of U.S. military aid, it released the U.S. intelligence community's estimate that Russia had suffered an astonishing 315,000 casualties since the invasion.

The Biden administration is now using strategic downgrades against China, too. In August 2022, on the eve of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan, Kirby, by then a National Security Council spokesperson, shared details from a declassified assessment of actions Beijing could take to register its displeasure, such as launching missiles into the Taiwan Strait. The goal: to preemptively remove the sting from any Chinese provocations. In February 2023, after a Chinese high-altitude balloon floated across U.S. airspace, the administration declassified details about it, in part to justify to the public its intense focus on competition with China and in part to signal to Beijing the U.S. intelligence community's impressive technical capabilities. The Pentagon released a close-up photo of the balloon taken by a U-2 pilot, and officials explained to reporters that the U.S. government could track the object and had determined that it was loitering above sensitive military sites.

Later that month, the administration sought to warn Beijing that it was monitoring possible Chinese support for Russia's war in Ukraine. CIA Director William Burns, undoubtedly with the approval of other senior officials, revealed in a televised interview that Beijing was considering offering Moscow lethal aid, adding, "We don't see evidence of actual shipments of lethal equipment." Burns clearly wanted to brush back the Chinese before they crossed a line they couldn't uncross.

In the first few months of the war in Gaza, the Biden administration used intelligence disclosures to give Israel breathing space from mounting pressure about the destructiveness of its military campaign. Shortly after Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack, Adrienne Watson, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, countered accusations that an Israeli bomb had struck a hospital in Gaza City, announcing that "overhead imagery, intercepts, and open-source information" suggested that the real culprit was an errant rocket fired by a terrorist group in Gaza. In November, the White House again came to Israel's defense, with Kirby sharing a declassified intelligence assessment saying that Hamas was using hospitals as command-and-control nodes, weapons depots, and hideaways for Israeli hostages.

Strategic disclosures are set to become a durable feature of the U.S. foreign policy landscape. The Biden administration's strategic downgrades have created an expectation on the part of the public, the media, and allies that there will be more to come, and it is unlikely that Biden or any of his successors will abandon the tool. The genie is out of the bottle.

#### THE COSTS OF CANDOR

But is any of this a good idea? Most policymakers seem to think so. For one thing, they have argued, disclosures have delivered results. Writing in these pages earlier this year, Burns argued that the Ukraine disclosures put Putin "in the uncomfortable and unaccustomed position of being on the back foot" and "bolstered both Ukraine and the coalition supporting it." And it is reasonable to conclude that administration officials give at least partial credit to Burns's disclosure about Beijing's consideration of lethal aid to Russia for convincing Chinese leader Xi Jinping to not cross the line.

The second argument made by proponents of disclosures is that any transparency on the part of the secret state is good. Although Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines's 2023 National Intelligence Strategy says nothing about strategic downgrades—a missed

opportunity—it does endorse increased openness. Haines has elaborated on the idea, saying, “With the increasing importance of national security in our everyday lives, the more we can help to inform the public debate around such issues, the better.” This push for transparency is driven in part by the deluge of publicly available open-source intelligence, which invites doubts about the value of the intelligence community in a world where Bellingcat and other investigative groups seem to know as much as governments. (By the same token, however, open-source intelligence frees agencies to say more about what they know while jeopardizing less.) The push is also motivated by the public’s growing desire for government accountability in the wake of the intelligence failures behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq, revelations about the NSA’s industrial-scale information-collection capabilities, and Trump’s claims that the intelligence community and the rest of the “deep state” undermined his presidency. Disclosures, the argument runs, can rebuild public trust in the U.S. intelligence community, in part by demonstrating its value.

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Authorized disclosures could result in more unauthorized ones.

The most common criticism of disclosures is that they jeopardize intelligence sources and methods. If officials in a targeted regime know what the U.S. government knows about them, they can sometimes work backward to discover the source of that information—whether it be a tapped phone line, a cyber-exploit, or a member of the inner circle. They might shut down that channel, feed disinformation into it, or, in the case of human intelligence, arrest or harm the source. Some disclosures have undoubtedly led to a subsequent loss of intelligence. The Kennedy administration’s sharing of U-2 photographs of Cuba accomplished its intended statecraft goal but also revealed to the world for the first time just how sophisticated U.S. aerial surveillance was. Afterward, U.S. adversaries learned to better camouflage sensitive sites and improved their high-altitude air defense systems.

But the intelligence community is acutely aware of these risks and works to mitigate them. Administrations have tended to declassify broad analytic judgments that carry little risk to sources and methods, leaving out the sensitive intelligence nuggets that could allow the source to be identified. The intelligence community, for its part, is not shy about standing firm and refusing a policy request for a particular disclosure

when the risks are just too high. One of us, Morell, was involved in declassifying information for Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council; concerned about sources and methods, the CIA denied some of Powell's (and the White House's) requests for declassification.

Less well understood are the subtler risks to sources and methods. One is that human sources will get skittish about divulging information, no matter what their handlers promise in terms of security or reward. Many CIA case officers—including one of us, Gioe—have had the experience of listening to their assets express grave concern about the growing volume of intelligence that has gone public, whether through an illegal mass leak or an authorized disclosure, and ask if the information they provide might go public, too. Some assets have even walked away in the aftermath of prominent leaks or disclosures. And it is impossible to calculate how many would-be assets have changed their mind as a result of them.

Another risk to sources and methods is that authorized disclosures could result in more unauthorized ones by raising questions about just how appropriate it was to classify something in the first place. It can be perfectly reasonable to conclude that the national security benefits of a given disclosure outweigh the risks. Still, the nuances of such judgment calls could be glossed over by leakers, who may see coordinated and authorized disclosures as justification or cover for their own reckless revelations. Snowden, for instance, complained in his autobiography, "It is rare for even a day to go by in which some 'unnamed' or 'anonymous' senior government official does not leak, by way of a hint or tip to a journalist, some classified item that advances their own agenda or the efforts of their agency or party." In other words, if government officials can release intelligence when it suits them, why can't anyone else?

A separate risk is that some of the information released turns out to be wrong, damaging the reputation of the intelligence community. Although intelligence agencies were right about Russia's intention to invade Ukraine—even getting the timing right—such high accuracy is not the norm. (Indeed, they were wrong to predict that the Ukrainians wouldn't last long in battle, a judgment that the White House almost certainly never wished would go public but ended up leaking anyway.) Despite an annual budget of around \$100 billion, the U.S. intelligence community does not have a crystal ball and cannot supply evidence fit for a courtroom.

For one thing, intelligence on almost any issue is by nature imperfect and fragmentary; adversaries go to great lengths to protect the

information the United States is after and, in some cases, are actively deceiving Washington. For another thing, intelligence is dynamic. During the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, for instance, the intelligence community was continually revising its assessments of the Afghan government's ability to resist the Taliban. Critics claimed that the chaotic exit was partly the result of intelligence agencies' failure to predict the Taliban's swift victory. That may be true, but the situation was changing by the hour, and it is inherently hard to predict if or when an unstable system will collapse. Intelligence failures happen for any number of reasons, legitimate and otherwise, but when they do occur, the reputation of the intelligence community gets dented. In a world of routine strategic downgrades, it should expect some dents.

The greatest risk with disclosures is the politicization of intelligence. In its most benign form, politicization takes the form of releasing accurate but incomplete information. Since the point of disclosures is to advance an administration's policy, it is only natural that officials will select the intelligence that does so and keep classified any intelligence to the contrary. (When the Biden administration released an estimate of Russian casualties in Ukraine, it notably remained mum on the Ukrainians' own high losses.) This preference is acceptable when trying to influence a foreign adversary, but not when the audience is the American people. Informing citizens is a laudable, apolitical act; trying to shape their views by cherry-picking intelligence is not. In the lead-up to the Iraq war, Tenet fielded competing requests from members of Congress to declassify only those portions of intelligence assessments that buttressed a particular argument. One camp, for example, wanted to release a judgment that Saddam was unlikely to initiate a terrorist attack against the United States, whereas another wanted to release one that Saddam was likely to use weapons of mass destruction if he felt cornered. Tenet did the right thing by declassifying both judgments.

In the more egregious form of politicization, policymakers actively misrepresent the intelligence they disclose or stake a position beyond what it can support. This has happened too frequently to dismiss it as a minimal risk. In 1964, for example, President Lyndon Johnson used a confrontation between U.S. and North Vietnamese naval forces in the Gulf of Tonkin to push Congress to grant him more power in prosecuting the Vietnam War. Although there had been just one incident, in a speech to the American people, Johnson claimed

that there were two—deliberately going well beyond what ambiguous intelligence reports had suggested. In the Bush administration, several senior officials, intent on making a stronger case for invading Iraq, publicly stated that Saddam’s regime had an ongoing relationship with al Qaeda—the exact opposite of what the CIA had concluded.

Amid these cautionary tales, one historical example offers a model for disclosure: the Bush administration’s 2008 revelations about a Syrian nuclear reactor, apparently built with North Korean help, that an Israeli airstrike had leveled a year before. The disclosure was intended to strengthen efforts to persuade the North Koreans to provide a full accounting of their nuclear weapons activity and efforts to end Iran’s uranium enrichment activities. In a declassified briefing to reporters, CIA Director Michael Hayden outlined the intelligence surrounding the discovery, making it clear what the intelligence community knew and didn’t know, as well as how confident it was about its judgments. He said that analysts had “high confidence” that the building destroyed by Israel was indeed a nuclear reactor, “medium confidence” that North Koreans had assisted in building it, and only “low confidence” that it was part of a Syrian nuclear weapons program. The last caveat was the kind that policymakers typically want to strip out, but Hayden wisely put it in. His specificity in connecting each judgment to a corresponding confidence level made it harder for anyone to politicize the information.

#### USE WITH CAUTION

The risks from strategic downgrades are real and, given their accelerating use, growing. The decision to disclose intelligence is a policy call, and in making it, officials have to strike a delicate balance, supporting a given policy goal while protecting sources and methods and maintaining analytical integrity. As Jon Finer, Biden’s deputy national security adviser, has observed, strategic downgrades “must be wielded carefully within strict parameters and oversight.” So what should those guardrails be?

First, any disclosure should pose little threat to intelligence sources or methods—a finding that must reflect the consensus of the intelligence community. The decision to disclose should be made by the director of national intelligence and only after a full consideration of the risks to sources and methods. Disclosures that do reveal sources are usually a judgment call, but a tie shouldn’t go to the policy runner. One rule of



thumb is to release analytical judgments but not the underlying raw intelligence on which they are based. This is what the Obama administration did with the intelligence community's report about Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election. This approach represents a sort of halfway house for disclosure, but of course it will not satisfy those skeptics who understandably wish to see the underlying evidence before believing the intelligence community's conclusions. Nevertheless, for many, even all the information would not be enough, and in any case, the imperative must be to protect sources and methods.

Second, judgments released publicly should have a high likelihood of being correct. If they turn out to be wrong, the intelligence community's reputation will suffer and the effectiveness of future disclosures will be undermined, since there would be a historical basis to doubt them. One remedy would be to release only high-confidence judgments. In 2023, Burns signaled that he had done just that when he said he was "confident" that Chinese leaders were considering providing Russia with lethal aid, a word choice that suggested analysts believed there was a high likelihood their judgment was correct. Another option would be to follow Hayden's example and disclose intelligence of various levels of confidence but make clear which conclusions enjoy which level.

Third, in a world of disinformation and spin, the release of intelligence must represent the truth or, more precisely, what the intelligence community assesses to be true. Although it may be tempting to embed disinformation in a disclosure, that line should never be crossed. Nor should officials attempt to spin the intelligence in any way to create a misleading impression. And crucial caveats should always be included, since withholding them creates the illusion of certainty.

Fourth, a disclosure should have to pass a common-sense test: that there be a reasonable chance it will have the intended effect. Disclosures have a mixed record and are probably less successful than officials believe. One requirement for success is that a strategic downgrade be connected to an overarching strategy involving the rest of the U.S. government; if it isn't, its chances of working are markedly reduced. The Biden administration's disclosures about the impending invasion of Ukraine, for instance, had some positive effect, but they could not compensate for

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Disclosures have a mixed record and are probably less successful than officials believe.

years of poor policies, such as the failure to impose tough sanctions or give Kyiv enough military aid after Putin seized Crimea.

Although bureaucratic rules are rarely the best solution to real-world problems, there is one that would help here. The director of national intelligence should issue an intelligence community directive (the intelligence community's equivalent of an executive order) stipulating that a disclosure can be made only after she has signed a memorandum that addresses all the guardrails. This requirement would not only instill discipline but also create a record of important decisions. The office of the director of national intelligence could then develop an internal dataset—trackable over time and available to her successors—to assess the short- and long-term effects of disclosures.

#### BRAVE NEW WORLD

The conundrum of strategic downgrades is but one of many challenges facing the U.S. intelligence community. The list is long: how to recruit spies in a world of ubiquitous technical surveillance, how to collect signals intelligence in a world of decentralized telecommunications and computing, how to sift through mountains of data in a world of open-source information, and how to hire and retain the best and the brightest in a world of declining trust in government. And all these difficulties are set against the backdrop of great-power competition, with China, Russia, and other authoritarian countries working every day to threaten the United States' democracy, prosperity, and security.

Officials outside intelligence agencies, for their part, generally do not approach disclosures with the same caution as the people serving inside them. Policymakers' natural confidence and enviable optimism about the efficacy of their own actions may invite them to focus on the upsides of disclosures while ignoring or rationalizing away the dangers. Their desire to maximize the policy utility of secret intelligence may lead them to resist efforts to add new restraints to the disclosure process.

Given all these pressures, it would be tempting for policymakers and intelligence practitioners alike to throw up their hands and decide to manage strategic declassification in an ad hoc way. But that would be a mistake. The point of no return has been passed, and intelligence is being released faster than norms can be created. If the process for disclosures is not handled with utmost care, the United States could diminish the unparalleled advantage in statecraft and national security it derives from a crucial pillar of American power: the U.S. intelligence community. 🌐

# Climate Policy Is Working

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Double Down on What's Succeeding  
Instead of Despairing Over What's Not

KELLY SIMS GALLAGHER

Climate change is not just transforming the environment: it is also exacting a marked toll on mental health. In July 2023, scientists at Yale published a study of the psychological effects of climate change on adults in the United States and found that seven percent were experiencing mild to severe climate-related psychological distress. Among millennials and members of Gen Z, the figure is ten percent. A global study published in 2021 by *The Lancet Planetary Health* found that 59 percent of respondents between the ages of 16 and 25 were very worried or extremely worried about climate change.

These young people despaired of attempts by their governments to address the climate crisis and reported feeling that older generations had betrayed their generation and future ones: 77 percent of young Brazilians felt this way, as did 56 percent of young Americans.

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The distress and anger are in many respects understandable. The world is warming faster than scientists had anticipated. In the summer of 2023, the average global temperature was 1.2 degrees Celsius higher than the average of the summers between 1951 and 1980, according to NASA, and a new record. Last summer, Arctic sea ice shrank to its sixth-smallest coverage on record, and the extent of Antarctic sea ice dropped suddenly to alarmingly low levels. The loss of ice is not just a symptom of global warming but also a cause of it. With less ice covering the surface of the Earth, less sunlight is reflected into space and more heat is absorbed by the ocean, land, and atmosphere, magnifying the warming effect.

Global greenhouse gas emissions are higher than ever. After a brief downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic, emissions surged back, reaching their highest level on record at 57.4 gigatons in 2022. Preliminary estimates for 2023 indicate they rose by one percent beyond that. To be sure, emissions from most industrialized countries have already peaked and are now declining, but emissions from many developing countries are still growing, some very rapidly. If global emissions do not peak and start to rapidly decline in this decade, the earth's average temperature increase since the preindustrial era will likely reach 1.5 degrees Celsius before 2030 and 2.1 to 3.4 degrees Celsius later in this century—even if governments meet their commitments under the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change. Heat waves and droughts will become more frequent, wildfires will spread farther, and fresh water will become harder to find in some regions. Rising sea levels will inundate low-lying coastal regions and some small island states, and tropical cyclones and hurricanes will probably intensify.

Despite this gloomy future, global negotiations to curb climate change are faltering. In late 2023, the annual UN conference on climate change delivered an equivocating final text asking countries to “transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems”—a result that fell far short of the clarion call for which many observers had hoped. To achieve net-zero global emissions in 25 years—which scientists say is necessary to avoid warming above 2 degrees Celsius by the middle of the century—countries must embrace rapid, substantial, and sustained reductions in emissions. The global temperature increase will likely exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius in the coming decade, but if global emissions peak within the next few years and then decline sharply in the following two decades, it is possible that global warming could be held to less than 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Last

year's UN climate conference, COP28, concluded by reiterating targets that had already been accepted by G-20 countries: to double energy efficiency and triple renewable energy capacity globally by 2030. It also established a new fund to help countries cope with the damage already caused by a warming climate. Those measures, while laudable, will not produce the change that many analysts think is necessary.

For instance, the mobilization of financing to support developing countries in both transitioning away from fossil fuels and adapting to the consequences of a warming planet remains insufficient. In 2022, governments and the private sector belatedly reached the goal established in 2009 of raising \$100 billion a year in climate financing by 2020. Yet that sum, according to the Independent Expert Group established by the G-20 and chaired by the economists Larry Summers and Nand Kishore Singh, is not nearly enough: by 2030, they say, developing countries (not including China) will need around \$1.8 trillion annually. A new global fund established at COP28 to help vulnerable countries cope with the losses associated with climate change has generated only \$800 million so far, a pittance compared with what is needed.

That the 2023 UN climate conference was hosted in Dubai by the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a major exporter of petroleum, stirred further cynicism. The fate of the world seems to have been put into the hands of oil and gas interests. The next iteration of the conference will be hosted by Azerbaijan, where oil and gas production accounted for nearly half the country's GDP and more than 90 percent of its export revenue in 2022. In 2025, the conference will be held in Brazil, which just joined the alliance OPEC+ as South America's largest oil-producing nation. And the United States, which plays a leading role in setting the agenda for international cooperation on climate change, has become the world's largest oil producer—producing even more than Saudi Arabia or Russia. This increase in oil production has been a boon for U.S. energy security, reducing gas prices at the pump and undermining the geopolitical power of authoritarian petrostates, but it certainly hasn't been good for the climate.

And yet as dire and dispiriting as this all may seem, there are still reasons to be optimistic. The climate crisis can seem daunting

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The strategy to tackle climate change that governments have developed is working.

and immune to small human actions, but the world has made and continues to make remarkable progress. That is because the strategy to tackle climate change that governments have developed in the last 30 years is working. It should be strengthened, not disparaged. Most industrialized countries and even some developing ones are well on their way to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in pursuit of net-zero goals. Technological advances are making renewable sources of energy cheaper and more efficient. Both governments and civil society groups are now more adept at crafting the policies and legislation needed to address climate change.

What is needed now, however, is not just hope but also further concerted action. Rather than succumbing to the pessimism that assumes humans cannot arrest rampant climate change, countries should reaffirm their commitments to helping one another meet emissions reduction targets and work harder to generate the necessary financing. The longer the world delays in acting, the harder it becomes to prevent catastrophic change. And the more countries reduce their emissions—starting today—the more they can limit the climatic change that future generations will have to contend with. Every ton of emissions that is avoided counts in constraining rising temperatures. If global emissions peak around 2025 and then rapidly and steadily decline thereafter for the next 25 years, reaching net zero by 2050, it will still be possible to limit warming to between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius and thus avoid aggravating the already evident effects of climate change.

#### THE WORLD'S FIGHT

Governments first came together to address climate change in 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Officials set initial goals for reducing emissions, along with targets and timetables. They agreed, in principle, that because the problem had overwhelmingly been caused by the emissions of wealthier industrialized countries, those states should take the lead in reducing emissions and provide the technology and money to help developing countries make the transition to cleaner energy. Though trailing industrialized countries by a decade or more in the effort, developing countries would adopt stricter limits on emissions. Such an approach was reasonably successful in rebuilding the earth's ozone layer through the 1987 Montreal Protocol: emissions of key ozone-depleting chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons peaked

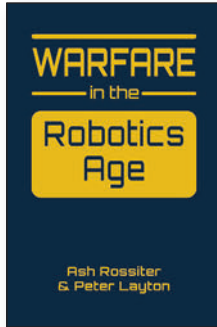


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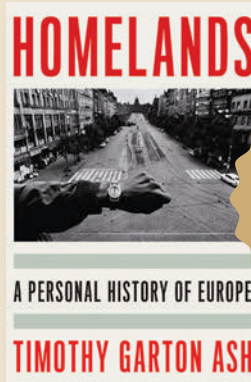
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before 2000 and are still declining, and the ozone hole is expected to fully recover between 2050 and 2060.

Negotiators initially took the same approach in tackling climate change when they founded the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992. They set gentle targets for industrialized countries with the aim of reducing emissions to 1990 levels but envisioned gradually setting more stringent ones, as they did with the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Under these two global agreements, developing countries had no obligation to reduce emissions, as the plan for action embodied the principle of “common but differentiated capabilities.” As a result, some countries’ emissions, especially China’s, began to grow very rapidly and at mammoth scale, offsetting the emission reductions of the industrialized countries. China would overtake the United States in 2006 and become the world’s biggest emitter. For its part, the United States refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and continued to let its emissions rise until 2007. Countries made several attempts to set up dedicated climate finance funds, but the financing mobilized never matched the scale of the need.

From the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 until the signing of the Paris agreement in 2015, industrialized countries took a zero-sum horse-trading approach to negotiating emission reduction commitments. Each country pressured others to deliver stronger commitments while resisting outside pressure to act itself. Developing countries, defined at the time as the members of the G-77 and China, were treated as a monolithic category and asked to make only voluntary contributions. Indeed, most developing countries had produced a tiny fraction of the world’s cumulative emissions, so it was only fair for the industrialized countries to take the lead.

When negotiations collapsed at the 2009 UN climate summit in Copenhagen, partly because of disagreement between industrialized and major emerging economies about who should be responsible for what, governments realized the limits of their approach. What had worked to fix the ozone hole would not work when it came to the bigger problem of climate change. In 2010, states under the aegis of the UN climate change framework established a new multilateral fund called the Green Climate Fund. Subsequently, governments took a bottom-up approach that emphasized “nationally determined” contributions. In this formulation, every country was asked what it could do to contribute to the global effort. No external pressure was brought to





bear on any state. The United States and China surprised the world in 2014 by announcing their own commitments at a presidential summit, and a year later, almost every country in the world submitted such a commitment at the 2015 UN climate conference in Paris. Many of these pledges have been updated, and they are scheduled to be revised again at the 2025 climate meeting in Brazil.

This combination of approaches—focusing first on lowering the emissions of industrialized countries, then encouraging developing countries to follow suit—has produced tangible results, albeit too slowly. Emissions from most industrialized countries are now below 1990 levels, and some are far below. Germany’s emissions are around 40 percent below 1990 levels, and the United Kingdom’s, nearly 50 percent lower, although the British economy has tripled in size over that period. U.S. emissions are three percent below 1990 levels after peaking in 2007. Among industrialized countries, the emissions from Australia, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States, along with the European Union, are on a downward trajectory.

The emissions of some middle- and lower-income countries have also peaked and begun to trend downward, including those of Albania, Cuba, Jamaica, North Macedonia, and South Africa. Although it is too early to say for sure, China’s carbon emissions may have peaked in 2023 and

may start to fall in 2024 as a result of the country's weakening economic growth and a steady push to use low-carbon energy sources. And eight developing countries have already achieved net-zero emissions: Bhutan, Comoros, Gabon, Guyana, Madagascar, Niue, Panama, and Suriname. Almost all these net-zero pioneers do not consume vast quantities of fossil fuels and are rich in carbon-dioxide-absorbing forests.

Meanwhile, 150 countries have announced or are considering targets to achieve net-zero emissions by the middle of the century, includ-

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Eight developing countries have already achieved net-zero emissions.

ing, as of early 2024, the top emitters: China, the United States, India, the EU, and Russia. Judging from this progress, and assuming full adherence to the commitments that governments made in Paris in 2015, countries should manage to limit the rise in global temperatures to 2.8 to 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. That is far lower than the worst-case

scenario of nearly 5 degrees Celsius imagined in the 2023 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN body assigned to track the science of the warming planet. But it is still not low enough.

According to the climate change panel, the world has not experienced a temperature rise of 2.5 degrees Celsius for more than three million years. And with an increase of 3 degrees Celsius, climate-induced losses and damages would be significantly worse than at 1.5 or 2 degrees. The soil in most of South America, the western United States, southern Europe, and southern Africa would become much drier. If the planet becomes 1.5 degrees Celsius warmer, it would lose one to ten percent of its species; with a rise of 3 degrees Celsius, the projection is ten to 80 percent of all species. If the rise were between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius, coral reefs would diminish by 70 to 90 percent; with a rise of 3 degrees Celsius, they would virtually disappear. And the more emissions grow, the greater the likelihood of reaching crucial tipping points, as witnessed with the formation of the ozone hole in the 1980s after years of gradual ozone depletion. Some climatic changes will be irreversible, including species extinction and the loss of biodiversity and ice sheets.

At the 2025 UN climate conference in Brazil, countries must submit new and improved targets and goals. If they manage to raise their overall ambitions and adhere to these commitments, the rise in global temperatures could be kept below 2 degrees Celsius over this century.

If countries significantly increase their goals, there is a small but real chance that they could limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, which would result in a vastly more livable world.

#### A PATH OUT OF RUIN

Countries will seek to meet these targets in large part by taking advantage of technological advances and turning to renewable sources of energy, which are becoming ever cheaper and more efficient. In the early 1990s, when governments first started taking climate change seriously, wind and solar energy were prohibitively expensive, and no electric vehicles were on the market. But much has changed in three decades. Solar energy cost nearly \$10 per watt to generate in 1992, but just 26 cents per watt in 2022. Today, in many places, electricity produced by wind and solar energy is as cheap as that made by coal or natural gas. Similarly, the cost of electric vehicle batteries has declined far more quickly than experts predicted. Battery pack prices fell 90 percent between 2008 and 2022, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

China provides one of the best illustrations of how lower-cost technology can enable the rapid deployment of clean energy. According to the nonprofit Global Energy Monitor, China is on track to almost double its current wind and solar capacity by 2025 and thus meet its target of generating 1,200 gigawatts from clean energy five years ahead of schedule. Conversely, although the United States has had great success in directing new investment to domestic clean energy manufacturing since the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, it has been slower to deploy renewable energy and encourage the production and purchase of electric vehicles, thanks to bureaucratic delays and weak supply chains as well as local opposition to new clean energy infrastructure.

Such is the pace of technological advances that decarbonizing the economy may become even easier in the future. Continued investment in green innovation will help improve technological performance, further reducing costs and providing new options for carbon-intensive sectors such as steel, petrochemicals, airplanes, shipping, and cement. Fusion energy, long a figment of science fiction, may become a viable source of power in the coming decades. Interest in hydrogen as a fuel that produces only water as a waste product when consumed in a fuel cell appears to be booming around the world. The challenge remains to figure out

how to make hydrogen cleanly and inexpensively. Governments must also determine what technologies they will need to achieve net-zero emissions and begin researching, demonstrating, and deploying these technologies at scale. For instance, technologies that extract greenhouse gases from the atmosphere could help countries attempting the difficult transition from fossil fuels reach their net-zero targets more swiftly.

Technological progress has accompanied another striking advance: an undeniable improvement in policymaking and legislation on climate change at the national level. Both industrialized and developing countries have experimented extensively with climate policies over the last 20 years and learned much about what works, what does not, and why. Altogether, 56 countries accounting for 53 percent of global emissions have passed laws intended to limit greenhouse gases. Even countries without framework climate laws have enacted legislation that has resulted in emission reductions, such as the U.S. Energy Policy Act of 2005, which mandated many energy efficiency measures, and the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act.

Governments have also learned how to enact climate policies in more effective ways. Leaders contemplating reforms to existing policies or drafting new ones can do so more confidently than before. Countries that have successfully reduced emissions started early and then phased in their policies over time to build political support and momentum, steadily ratcheting up the scale of these measures. On the road to achieving its deep emissions cuts, Germany passed legislation in 2000 that created a renewable energy industry and associated jobs, and in 2005 it helped establish the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme. China's Renewable Energy Law of 2005 and its 13th Five-Year Plan, adopted in 2015, set targets, established tariffs, and required grid operators to use renewable electricity. China has repeatedly strengthened its "nonfossil" targets to be ever more ambitious in each five-year plan and consequently now has three times more installed renewable capacity than the United States. These countries took an incremental approach to passing laws and designing, implementing, and enforcing technical regulations. Over time, they can surgically address industrial sectors or specific greenhouse gas emissions that the law does not yet cover.

#### THE RISK OF FALLING SHORT

Those despairing about the state of the world's response to climate change should take heart in this evidence of success. But nobody

should feel complacent. In the near term, achieving net-zero goals by 2050 will require more concerted action. For starters, countries must ensure that they actually meet their targets. The UN Environment Program's 2023 Emissions Gap Report, which assesses the difference between where global emissions are heading given the commitments of each country and where they need to be to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, estimated that the gaps range between a relatively small two percent in China's case to 27 percent in the case of Canada. The U.S. gap is 19 percent, and the British gap is 11 percent. Governments must translate prior commitments into concrete laws and policies. In the United States, for example, new siting policies are needed to make it easier to build transmission lines that enable the distribution and use of new renewable electricity capacity. Experts in every country can estimate the gaps between policy and implementation, and nongovernmental organizations can press for concrete action to remedy them.

For their part, developing countries need much more support in drafting, introducing, and enforcing the required policy frameworks. Many countries remain at an aspirational stage, with high-level targets, plans, and strategies in mind but few concrete and specific policies on the books. And governments with specific policies often lack the capacity or will to enforce them—for example, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, and Vietnam. It also remains challenging for developing countries, apart from China, to secure financial resources for building clean energy generation capacity and for adaptation—measures to prepare societies to endure the effects of climate change. To date, countries have not devoted as many resources to or developed the same policy competence in adaptation as they have to what is known in climate parlance as mitigation, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. But governments have to pay attention to both adaptation and mitigation.

The good news is that the work of mitigation, adaptation, and fostering socioeconomic development often overlaps. In the United States, for instance, the Inflation Reduction Act has already generated \$239 billion in new investment in the manufacture and deployment of cleaner and more efficient energy technologies, which in turn has created 80,000 jobs and reduced emissions. Distributed systems for renewable energy generation and storage are often more resilient in extreme weather and can help limit blackouts or prevent them altogether.

FROM EACH ACCORDING TO THEIR ABILITY

Crucially, governments must do more to raise climate financing for developing countries that have done little to create the crisis but already suffer some of its worst effects. The main objective at this year's UN climate change conference in Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, will be setting a new goal for climate financing now that the \$100 billion yearly target dating from 2015 has been achieved. Given that 18 times that figure will be required by 2030, governments will need to muster the creativity and determination to figure out how to unlock public and private sources of financing in practical ways.

One possible solution is to ask countries to make their own commitments to raising the money, much as they have with respect to reducing emissions. But such a broadly collective effort is not in place. Currently, a set of richer countries, among them Canada, Japan, the United States, and those of the European Union, are obligated to provide climate financing to the developing world. But many other countries that are perfectly capable of furnishing climate financing, such as China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have no obligation to do so. Some do nonetheless: China, for example, provides overseas development finance through its Belt and Road Initiative and its South-South Cooperation Fund on climate but does not disclose how much it provides to whom and for what purpose. Every country in the world should assess how much financing it can raise for climate projects at home and abroad.

In determining how much will be forthcoming, each government should ask its private sector and philanthropists what they can do, as well. Private companies should make clearer commitments within a national context, and they must stop financing high-carbon infrastructure at home and abroad. If firms cannot make and deliver on these commitments, they will need to be regulated—first, by requiring them to disclose their investments in high- and low-carbon infrastructure and later, if necessary, by simply prohibiting investments in certain types of high-carbon projects.

Of course, many countries will struggle to raise meaningful contributions, but this broader approach to mustering climate finance would almost certainly yield more funds from a wider set of countries. The likes of China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—all significant emitters with financial capacity—might contribute their fair share. If more countries contribute, obstacles might give way elsewhere.

In the United States, where Congress has persistently resisted making commitments to international climate financing, legislators may finally agree to act if China and the Persian Gulf countries are also known to be contributing.

With nationally determined financial commitments in place, countries would need to report on their progress toward reaching these targets as part of their obligations under the Paris agreement. To do so, they would need to create institutional mechanisms for collecting the financial data, just as they have for emissions. Every five years, analysts could measure the absolute sums raised against the overall global need, perhaps the bar of \$1.8 trillion per year by 2030 identified by the G-20's International Expert Group. Governments could jointly decide to establish a national approach to climate financing at the UN climate conference in Azerbaijan this year and pledge to report their commitments at the 2025 summit in Brazil.

Countries should also find a better way to mobilize and deliver their financial contributions. Wealthy countries largely channel public financing through multilateral or bilateral finance institutions such as the World Bank or the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation. Currently, most multilateral institutions and funds move too slowly and are highly risk-averse. Some continue to support fossil fuel projects because they don't know how to develop alternative solutions. Countries have to apply to individual bilateral and multilateral funds or development banks for climate financing project by project, which is a sluggish and administratively burdensome process. Public and private financiers do not always blend their resources in ways that maximize climate and development outcomes. A more efficient and effective approach would first require countries to adopt compelling policy frameworks with aligned incentives that are durable enough to allow investors to calculate returns. Once these policies are in place, each country could set up conferences for potentially interested financiers. Not all projects will produce a high return on investment, particularly those on the adaptation side, so funding for such ventures should be treated as development or climate aid. Success will be contagious; once one or two countries manage to procure funds this way, other developing countries will

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Most multilateral institutions and funds move too slowly and are highly risk-averse.

be highly motivated to set up stronger climate policy frameworks to secure similar levels of funding.

#### GROUNDS FOR HOPE

From wildfires in Canada, Hawaii, and southern Europe to extreme flooding in Brazil, Greece, Hong Kong, Libya, and Taiwan, the climatic damage was intolerable in 2023 and is only likely to get more severe. The world needs greater ambition from nearly every country to meet the challenge ahead. Yet that difficult task need not drive people to despair. Countries have the tools to address the threat of climate change; what is needed now is action.

In the run-up to the 2025 UN climate summit, each country must determine what it can do to scale up its commitments to reduce emissions and raise climate financing. On the emissions side, each country's commitment for 2030 to 2035 must clearly put it on a path to net zero by 2050 to limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius. The need for greater ambition is also an opportunity for leadership from powers that have not traditionally guided global diplomacy on the environment. China, the United States, and European countries have historically led various stages of global climate negotiations, but others should step up now, including Azerbaijan, Brazil, India, and the UAE.

The G-20 and UN climate summits are the two most important multilateral forums for climate action. When India hosted the G-20 climate conference last year, it proposed multilateral development bank reform to mobilize more financing. Brazil wears the mantle of the G-20 presidency this year and can follow India's example by encouraging a nationally determined approach to climate finance. While neither Azerbaijan nor Brazil has traditionally been a major actor on the world climate stage, each has the opportunity to spur solutions in assuming the presidency of the UN climate summit in 2024 and 2025. And nobody should forget the power of individual example: each country that proves that resilient low-carbon development is possible will inspire others. This is why every country, no matter how small, matters.

As governments grow more committed and ambitious in reducing their emissions, and the public and private sectors more concertedly raise financing, the climate crisis need not inspire resignation or dread. Hope is not a strategy, but a strategy does exist to restrain climate change, and it is one that should give even pessimists grounds for optimism. 🌍



REVIEW ESSAY

# All Powers Great and Small

## Why Bigger Isn't Always Better in Geopolitics

SHIVSHANKAR MENON

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*Superstates: Empires of the Twenty-First Century*

BY ALASDAIR ROBERTS. Polity, 2023, 244 pp.

*The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World*

BY ARMEN SARKISSIAN. Hurst, 2023, 272 pp.

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The borders that carve the world into today's states may seem indelible, but expand the time frame, and the lines become much more fluid. It is hard to find an international boundary today that has not shifted in the last two centuries. States are born and disappear; great powers swell, shrink, and vanish. In 1910, roughly 80 percent of the planet belonged to just a handful of European empires—and much of the rest lay in the possession of the Ottoman and Qing dynasties. But world wars and decolonization saw the rise of many new and often quite small nation-states. The United Nations had 51 members when it was formed in 1945; it has 193 now. Most of these additions are old nations but new states that emerged from empires, including former European colonies in Asia and

erstwhile Soviet republics. In character and scale, these states and the international system they compose bear little resemblance to the vast empires that preceded them for most of recorded history. The median population of the world's countries today is 8.5 million—about the size of Switzerland's.

And yet it is premature to imagine that the habits and thinking characteristic of that era of empires have also disappeared. Numerous states came into being after World War II, but their creation happened in parallel with another trend: the growth of what the political scientist Alasdair Roberts calls "superstates." In *Superstates: Empires of the Twenty-First Century*, Roberts charts the rise of what he considers the biggest polities in the world today—China, India, the United States, and

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the European Union. By 2050, 40 percent of all people will live in those four entities. They may not be the empires of yore; for one thing, these superstates have a far greater responsibility for the welfare of their citizens than empires ever had. But they share many imperial challenges—namely, how to manage vast, diverse, and often multinational populations within the rubric of a single political entity. Each of these superstates addresses the task in different ways. But their size, economic heft, and internal complexity separate them from what Roberts terms “lesser states,” and these factors fundamentally shape geopolitics today. “The international order that is emerging in the twenty-first century,” Roberts writes, “is distinguished by dramatic differences in the scale of states.” In his view, it’s a superstate world, and everybody else just lives in it.

This perspective may be familiar to many in Western capitals, where analysts and policymakers often fixate on the U.S. rivalry with China and the specter of great-power competition. But most people do not live in superstates, and they have their own worldviews and ambitions. “The world has never been structured to facilitate the survival of small states,” Armen Sarkissian notes in *The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World*, “and treating them as disposable has been the norm through most of recent history.” And yet that has not stopped many smaller countries from thriving. In addition to being a professor of theoretical physics and a tech entrepreneur, Sarkissian served as prime minister (1996–97) and president (2018–22) of Armenia. He tours a succession of such countries, including Armenia, to determine how

small states can succeed in a world that so often rewards size. With an emphasis on both technological and technocratic savvy, he is keen to show that smallness can be a boon and not a weakness on the international stage.

Sarkissian’s book offers a corrective to the pervasive bias in favor of big states. For his part, Roberts reminds readers of the intrinsic fragility of superstates and the tremendous governance challenges they face. Taken together, these books reveal the complexity of an international system in great flux. Small states have agency in their dealings with the large ones, and the supposed greatness of major powers obscures the strains and pressures roiling within. Of course, superstates shape international affairs more fundamentally than smaller ones. But the growing great-power rivalry that threatens global peace and prosperity also creates the space for small and middle powers to build influence and thrive.

#### TOO BIG NOT TO FAIL?

For much of recorded human history, empires were the dominant form of political organization. These states often exercised loose forms of control over their inhabitants and rarely mapped onto any particular nation—indeed, most empires ruled over diverse populations that could not be described by a single ethnic or linguistic identity. They were top-down affairs, the enterprise of an individual leader, dynastic clan, or ruling class, not the expression of the will of a people. As nation-states began to emerge in the nineteenth century, thinkers debated the merits of size. The German economist Friedrich List argued that small states would struggle to prosper and compete with



Small world: at a UN climate change conference in Bonn, Germany, November 2017

imperial powers and other larger states. The British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, meanwhile, argued that size and diversity were the enemies of democracy: “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made of different nationalities.”

Such propositions would be continually tested in the twentieth century. After World War I, and more definitively after World War II, a new international architecture emerged that oversaw the dismantling of old empires and the rise of a world of nation-states. Both Roberts and Sarkissian explain the emergence and survival of so many smaller countries in this period by pointing to the establishment of international institutions, such as the United Nations, along with the consolidation of norms that upheld national sovereignty and discouraged territorial invasion. Globalization, technological advances, and the lowering of

commercial barriers also allowed otherwise peripheral countries to stake a greater position in the global economy.

At the same time, some big countries got bigger. The Soviet Union might have collapsed in 1991 (Roberts does not consider its shriveled successor, Russia, to be a superstate), but in quasi-imperial fashion, China, India, the United States, and the European Union have grown to rule over enormous, complex societies and territories. Roberts acknowledges that these modern states are different from prior empires in that they are beholden to their citizens. Superstates, he writes, are “hybrid polities, governing vast territories and diverse populations, and having important features of both empires and states.” They are similar to empires in having to hold diverse communities together over a vast span of territory. But they have technologies of control, such as the Internet and advanced surveillance tools, that empires

lacked. Superstates must also meet welfare and human rights demands from subjects who are now concentrated in cities, where they can better organize to exert pressure on governments than could the largely dispersed, rural populations of previous centuries.

Roberts's principal concern is the durability of these superstates. The implicit assumption is that the failure or disintegration of any of these superstates would generate enormous instability and conflict. The United States is the oldest of the four, having lasted so far around 250 years. But there is no compelling reason to think that it will survive another 250 years or that superstates will be more robust in general than the empires that preceded them. Superstates are vulnerable to a host of threats: external attack, rebellion, climate change, disease, growing internal disparities, shifts in economic competitiveness, and uneven technological development. Each of these issues is accentuated in superstates by their internal diversity and divisions over policy, since they lack the single-minded focus and clear policy goals of small states. "Never in history," Roberts writes, "have we constructed polities that carry such heavy burdens." He offers an insightful account of superstates' internal governance and a thoughtful exploration of their similarities in diversity, fragility, leadership structures, and ideology.

In his detailed examination of the governance of each of the four superstates, Roberts comes to some counterintuitive conclusions. For one, he sees the temptation to centralize as having the unintended consequence of weakening empires and superstates. The Soviet Union is a prime example

of brittleness caused by overcentralization. By contrast, he sees the EU's model of cohesion without coercion, where the union functions by consensus and lacks the power to enforce its decisions on its members, as a strength and a consistently underestimated source of its resilience. Roberts thus sees the EU as more durable than the other superstates.

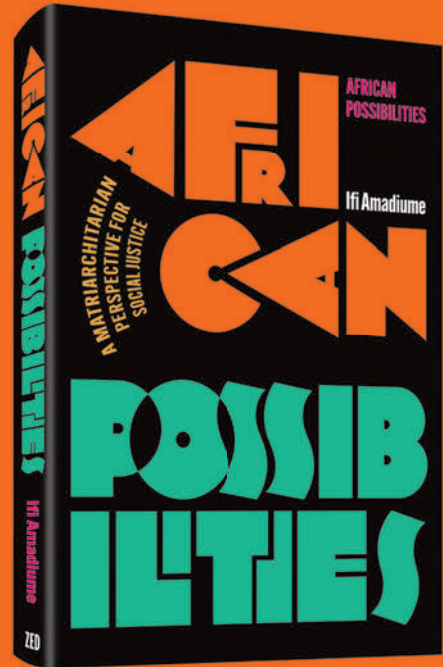
It's not entirely clear, however, that these states are all that different from recent empires. The British Empire, for instance, was probably much more like a modern superstate than ancient Mesopotamian empires such as Akkad and Sumer. The United States today has a population not dissimilar to that of the British Empire at its height. The American ideal of being "a city on a hill," Chinese leader Xi Jinping's "China dream" of a world centered on Beijing, or Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's claim to have become a Vishwa Guru ("world teacher") are modern iterations of the self-important "civilizing missions" of earlier empires. And thanks to technology and globalization, borders remain porous as they did in the era of empires, especially for small states and even for superstates. Those forces continue to test the assumptions attached to the idea of the Westphalian state—that countries have absolute sovereignty, enforce hard borders, have citizens who are loyal only to them, and maintain a monopoly of violence. Today, the difference between empire and superstate is more a matter of degree than of kind. As the historian Charles Maier and others have argued, empires never quite vanished; they just shifted shape.

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MINNOWS IN A  
SHARK'S WORLD

Sarkissian, in stark contrast to Roberts, is interested in the travails of smallness, not those of bigness. His persuasive and fluent book is part reminiscence, part case for the significance of small states, and part advocacy for Armenia. It is steeped in the experiences of a man whose life was shaped by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. "I write this book from a unique vantage point," he notes, "that of someone who was born and raised in a seemingly indestructible superpower and went on to steer the course of an apparently untenable small state."

His reasonable definition of a small state is one that is "small in size and population (say up to or under 15 million)." In 2024, 164 of the world's 237 states met those criteria, a cohort, incidentally, that excludes most East, South, and Southeast Asian states. Half the world's states have less territory than Portugal, and there are now 41 UN member states that are microstates with a population of less than a million. (At the end of World War II, there were only two such states, Iceland and Luxembourg.)

Sarkissian argues that small states' "survival can scarcely be taken for granted in an increasingly multipolar world whose order, institutions, and norms are being torpedoed by the velocity of political, geopolitical, social, and technological transformations." The pace of change creates new challenges, particularly for small states. With the sharks of large states lunging at one another across the world, can the minnows do more than hide in the reefs? Sarkissian thinks so, and he examines the experience of ten successful small states.

He explores the records of Botswana, Estonia, Ireland, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates, ending with his own Armenia. Many of these countries have indeed outperformed the seeming impediment of their size, leveraging their locations, local talent, ingenuity, natural resources, and other advantages to build dynamic economies and often play influential roles in regional geopolitics. As he points out, it was the Armenian quest for self-determination that helped initiate the unraveling of the Soviet Union.

Sarkissian admires Botswana for its economic prudence and efficient governance, Singapore for aggressively becoming an economic force and diplomatic troubleshooter, and Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the founder of the UAE, for wrangling the different emirates into a single entity. In each case, these small states set the stage for success that was hardly preordained or even predicted. Sarkissian finds that successful policy is grounded in a realistic and practical understanding of the international and regional situation and a visionary leader's single-minded pursuit of policy goals.

But the sample dictates the results; by choosing these states, he has selected cases of success, which, in truth, represent the exception rather than the norm among small states. These examples are surely instructive on their own, but the exclusion of so many other countries that have fared more poorly prevents the reader from learning from failure as well as triumph. It is unclear whether the experience of these exceptional states is replicable, transferable, or scalable.

Sarkissian has nary a harsh word to say about all but one of these small states. The exception is Armenia, which he criticizes sharply for having squandered the opportunity of the 1994 cease-fire with Azerbaijan by failing to convert victory into lasting peace. That failure has produced disastrous results in recent years as a stronger Azerbaijan has seized the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and effectively expelled its Armenian residents. Indeed, there surely is a warning here of the risks of geopolitical irrelevance; Armenia's smallness left it isolated and unable to fend off local adversaries and threats.

For Sarkissian, all happy small states are alike. Their policies boast a clear national vision that steers the state. He does not mention that all his examples of smart small states are firmly tied to the West or that their closeness to the West brought economic advantages and access that they were clever enough to use. He lists four ingredients as crucial to their success and as determining their fate: a strong foundation of national identity, robust and savvy leadership, an articulated vision for their country, and methodical strategic planning. In addition, a coherent state structure and an internal balance of power with strong institutions and democracy, as in the case of Israel, can also help small states succeed.

Sarkissian is a techno-optimist, seeing the march of science and technology as enabling small states to overcome the limitations imposed by geography, power politics, and traditional geopolitics, thus disrupting the dominance of large states. As globalization has moved from the physical to the virtual realm,

small states have found it even easier to reconfigure or bypass the rules. Power no longer resides solely in the large players; it resides in small states, too. For instance, Sarkissian ascribes Singapore's success to its shift to research and development after 1986, culminating in the 1991 strategic plan that moved Singapore out of labor-intensive manufacturing to an economy focused on knowledge. Israel's investment in education and technology has helped keep it safe from multiple enemies. The dominance of large states depended on their military, economic, and technological power. Now, small states are gaining leverage in the economic and technological realms using easily available communications technology and surveillance systems and drones in both civilian and military contexts. Seven of the top ten countries in the Bloomberg Innovator Index, which measures the quality of innovation in a particular economy, are small states. An eighth, the Netherlands, only just exceeds the population cutoff. Sarkissian sees artificial intelligence as leveling the playing field—creating a sort of parity between big and small states and making private companies such as Google and individual tycoons such as Elon Musk into meaningful actors.

A practical politician, Sarkissian sees that the power of small states lies in using regional balances to ensure their survival, in building up their economies and militaries to deter adversaries, and in enhancing their attractiveness to make others work with them. Small states, he insists, can prosper and offer their citizens peace and stability even in an era of great-power competition and widening geopolitical fault lines.

THE PROBLEMS OF SIZE

But small states, in Sarkissian's view, aren't just fertile ground for technocratic achievement. They can play an almost moral role in the international system. "Large states desire dominance," he writes. "Small states seek stability." He advocates a "small states club," a body that would convene these countries, seek to advance their interests, and, invariably, be an evangelist for amity among all countries since peace is the condition of their survival. Such a body could help rescue the world from its most extreme instincts. But this assumption that small states always act rationally and pursue the greater good is belied by the fact that more small states have failed than succeeded in building themselves economically and militarily. Sarkissian is guilty of a touch of romanticism in his thinking about small states; these countries are hardly immune to internal strife or averse to making war, and they often draw great powers into their quarrels.

Yet both Sarkissian and Roberts seem to understand the emergence and survival of small states as evidence of a less bloody and more ordered world. After 1950, attitudes toward the legitimacy of war changed radically and found expression in international law and norms. This belief may have been popular in the West, and it is an offshoot of the common Western conceit that the Cold War was largely peaceful. But it ignores the truth that in its killing fields, which were largely in maritime Asia, 1,200 people were killed every day of the Cold War. Whether or not one agrees with the historian Charles Tilly that "war made the state, and the state made war," it could be argued that the creation of small states served the

Cold War needs of great powers and superpowers. The United States and the Soviet Union assisted decolonization and the breakup of the older European empires in the 1950s and 1960s at least in part because it enabled them to find clients and to continue controlling international affairs while waging war where it suited them, away from their homelands.

Today, great-power rivalry in a world between orders has altered the context in which big and small states operate. Great-power competition offers smaller states the chance to hedge and play bigger states off against one another. But the turn away from globalization, on which so many small states depend, could have damaging consequences. All states are affected by the lack of a settled international order, the resulting ineffectiveness of the multilateral system, and the weakening of post-World War II norms, but these trends hit small states hardest. Indeed, the current inchoate order has seen—contrary to the authors' view—an increasing reliance on force and the militarization of the foreign policy of larger states in the international system.

If big states suffer problems of cohesion, small states suffer the consequences of weakness. The recent record shows that large states can often be frustrated in imposing their will on smaller ones—see Russian experiences in Ukraine and the U.S. record in Afghanistan. Equally, small states, such as Armenia, can struggle because of their smallness, losing territory to more powerful adversaries. But irrespective of size, today's global disorder affects all states, as both big and small find it harder to create the outcomes they desire. 🌐



REVIEW ESSAY

# Tyrants of Industry

## Can the Right Tame Capitalism?

SHERI BERMAN

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*Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It*

BY SOHRAB AHMARI. Forum Books, 2023, 288 pp.

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To win a second term, former U.S. President Donald Trump will need to continue to attract the working-class voters who helped give him his first victory in 2016 and almost handed him a second in 2020. People from this category constitute a majority of eligible voters across the nation and make up an even higher percentage of the electorate in the crucial swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

The drift of less educated and less affluent Americans away from the Democratic Party did not begin with Trump. Indeed, Trump's success with these groups is best understood as the culmination of a long process that commentators have described as the "class inversion of American politics," with most professionals now support-

ing Democrats and more working-class people backing Republicans.

Trump's ability to take advantage of this trend has often been attributed to his exploitation of social and cultural grievances, but voters also viewed him as less economically conservative and more sympathetic to working-class interests than previous Republican leaders. As in other areas, Trump's policies did not exactly bear out the rhetoric. Although he shifted Republican positions on some economic issues—notably trade—he did not pursue economic policies that disproportionately benefited working-class Americans.

Given the political importance of these voters, it is not surprising that some on the right have called for a further shift away from the GOP's traditionally conservative economic

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platform. Perhaps the most interesting and unexpected of these calls comes from the writer and pundit Sohrab Ahmari in *Tyranny, Inc.* His book is neither a policy brief for Trump nor a partisan attack on the Biden administration. Instead, it takes aim at contemporary capitalism and what Ahmari sees as the failures of both parties to rein in a private sector whose power has become a threat not only to the country's economic well-being but to Americans' freedom and liberty, as well. By getting readers to recognize this threat, Ahmari aims to build support for a new relationship between government and capitalism that would enable the former to control the pernicious economic and political consequences of the latter.

#### CORPORATE TAKEOVER

In many ways, Ahmari may seem a surprising figure to be making a case against contemporary U.S. capitalism. He began his career as an editor and commentator for conservative publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary*, and *The New York Post*. In the 2010s, he converted to Catholicism and evolved into a right-wing culture warrior, expressing sympathy for Donald Trump and Hungary's autocratic leader Viktor Orbán and penning jeremiads against identity politics. In 2019, he gained notoriety for his attack on David French, at the time a *National Review* writer and fellow conservative Christian who had argued that the culture wars could be fought civilly. Christians, Ahmari responded, needed to understand that they were involved in a real war and should fight accordingly, leaving unclear what that meant.

Ahmari's evolution took another turn in 2022, when he co-founded the magazine *Compact* with two other heterodox thinkers, one a fellow religious conservative, the other a dissident Marxist. Reflecting the diverse backgrounds of its founders, *Compact* describes its mission as promoting "a strong social-democratic state that defends community—local and national, familial and religious—against a libertine left and a libertarian right." Now, in *Tyranny, Inc.*, Ahmari has moved even further from his earlier work, setting aside cultural concerns and redirecting his anger toward American capitalism and its corrosive effects on democracy.

Although many books have criticized the economic harms of contemporary capitalism—rising inequality, financial insecurity, and so on—*Tyranny, Inc.* also highlights capitalism's destructive political consequences. The current version of American capitalism, he argues, has generated vast inequalities in power that have allowed companies to coerce their workers, undermined choice and freedom, and turned politics into a game in which "one side lacks the power to play while the other side is structurally set up to win."

Take employment and workplace law. Rather than merely providing clear expectations about the terms and conditions of employment, many employment contracts now give employers sweeping control over workers, even beyond the workplace. Corporations may surveil employees' web browsing and email and punish them for taking bathroom breaks deemed too long. They can even compel workers to listen to political speech. Ahmari cites news reports showing that, in 2019,

workers at a Royal Dutch Shell plant in Pennsylvania were told that they would not receive overtime pay if they refused to attend a speech by Trump. Employers can also prevent employees from speaking out about abusive workplace conditions, even enforcing gag orders on former employees who file wrongful termination lawsuits.

Alternatively, companies may require employees to use special arbitration courts to resolve disputes. This is an onerous process that can be prohibitively expensive for the employee, and its rules and procedures have been designed by the company for its own benefit, in contrast to the legal system in a democracy, in which all citizens are theoretically equal before the law. In one U.S. worker's contract, Ahmari writes, Uber Eats required that "any dispute be resolved using individual, private mediation" and that arbitration proceedings would be held at the International Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam. "In practice," Ahmari writes, it meant that a worker "would have had to pay an up-front fee of \$14,500 just to begin the process"—obviously daunting costs for an Uber driver earning approximately \$2,000 a month.

Perhaps corporations' greatest damage to democracy has been their long campaign to undermine labor unions. By enabling workers to confront employers collectively rather than individually, unions help workers bargain more effectively over wages, benefits, and workplace conditions, as well as pursue labor's shared interests in the political arena. As Ahmari notes, one of the major achievements of the New Deal in the 1930s was the National Labor Relations Act, which gave work-

ers the right to organize and soon led to a federal minimum wage, guaranteed overtime pay, and other regulations and policies that contributed to diminishing inequality and rising living standards after the Great Depression. By the 1950s, more than 30 percent of the U.S. labor force was unionized. But union membership had shrunk to just 10 percent by 2022, largely thanks to a concerted anti-union strategy by much of the corporate sector, aided and abetted by a conservative, pro-business legal movement and the Republican Party.

*Tyranny, Inc.* describes the myriad tools U.S. companies use to discredit unions and prevent workers from building or joining them, including by firing employees they consider troublesome, threatening to shut down workplaces if workers vote for unions, and spying on employees' efforts to organize. These labor-busting tactics may be deployed despite the progressive political leanings of the owners. Ahmari tells the story of a podcast that REI, the outdoor-gear chain, prepared for its workers. The podcast began with the company's chief diversity officer declaring, "I use she/her pronouns and am speaking to you today from the traditional lands of the Ohlone people," before moving on to her main purpose of warning workers not to join a union.

Contemporary American capitalism has not only diminished the power of some groups while enhancing that of others, making a mockery of the political equality that is the foundation of any real democracy. It has also led to a rollback of a broad array of government regulations and services, which has reduced the quality of life of many citizens and contributed to a fraying of

the country's social fabric. For example, emergency services such as firefighting and ambulances have long been considered public goods. Now, as Ahmari observes, they are being outsourced, especially in underserved rural areas, to profit-seeking private companies, with the result that residents often pay exorbitant prices for deficient services. Since citizens often cannot choose between public and private emergency services, they risk incurring thousands of dollars of debt with a call to 911—presenting a wrenching dilemma, particularly for the poor. How are Americans, Ahmari wonders, supposed to see themselves as part of a common national community if membership in that community means less and less?

Ahmari argues that such abuses persist and have even increased partly because of another consequence of unrestrained capitalism—the emergence of “news deserts” in many parts of the country, principally in regions with poorer, less educated people where public accountability is especially needed. This phenomenon is not simply the outcome of vanishing advertising revenue and the rise of the Internet. As Ahmari observes, it has also been caused by cost-cutting Wall Street investors, who have gobbled up local newspapers and television stations with little interest in the long-term survival of local news. Nor do these investors seem to care that without these outlets, local abuses of power are much more likely to go unreported on and therefore unpunished.

Ahmari repeatedly stresses that these effects are not inevitable. Rather, they are the product of political choices made over many decades. For example,

both parties have embraced neoliberal economic ideas and policies that have undercut the power of working Americans, enhanced the power of wealthy corporate elites, and weakened the ability of government to counter this tilt. Different political choices, accordingly, could reverse these problems. As Ahmari sees it, the goal must be to move away from a vision of capitalism in which markets have continually expanded at the expense of government oversight. Instead, he argues, the United States should aim to create a new economic order, in which a strong “social democratic” state keeps “markets in their proper place.” But what would that look like in practice?

#### CHRISTIANS INTO DEMOCRATS

Although less familiar in the United States, the term “social democracy” has long been a part of the political lexicon elsewhere, especially in Europe, where parties bearing this name have been important political actors. More generally, social democracy refers to a distinct understanding of the relationship between capitalism and government, one that is based on the “primacy of politics”—that is, the idea that political power could and should be used to control the downsides of capitalism.

In contrast to their communist and Marxist counterparts, social democrats have historically accepted that capitalism was the best engine of economic growth and innovation. But unlike classical liberals, social democrats also feared the downsides of an unfettered market economy. In Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, this led them to build strong social safety nets, empower



Fare fight: Uber drivers striking in New York City, January 2023

unions, and regulate the operation of markets in other ways. But social democrats also differed from the type of reformists and progressive liberals that have typically dominated the Democratic Party in the United States, except during the New Deal era, in which a more social democratic understanding of the economy emerged. Progressive U.S. liberals acknowledge that capitalism can produce such negative effects as economic inequality and insecurity, and that government needs policies to ameliorate them. But in general, these reformers have not been much concerned with addressing capitalism's destructive political consequences, as well. Social democrats, on the other hand, explicitly assert that all economics is political—that the rules governing the economy shape political as well as economic outcomes, most notably the relative power of various socioeconomic groups.

In recent decades in the United States, however, it is not the left but neoliberal conservatives who have grasped that reshaping the economic rules inevitably means reshaping power relationships in society. They have, as Ahmari puts it, engaged in “a generational effort” to weaken the political power of workers and obscure the reality that “private actors can imperil freedom just as much as overweening governments.” Yet social democracy involves more than a state capable of constraining capitalism's negative economic and political consequences. In addition to the primacy of politics, social democrats have traditionally shown a strong commitment to liberal democracy.

Social democrats viewed the democratic state both as the best tool for constraining capitalism and as the only political system consistent with the liberal values they held. The most important of those values is the ability

of individuals to make their own life choices, free from political, social, or economic coercion. Such a commitment to individual freedom, liberty, and the pluralism that follows from it conflicts, however, with Ahmari's previous positions. In the past, he has railed against those who prize "autonomy above all" and aim "to secure for the individual will the widest possible berth to define what is true and good and beautiful, against the authority of tradition." It is the task of government, Ahmari has argued, to protect and promote the "common good" rather than maximizing private autonomy or liberty. If one assumes that Ahmari remains committed to some version of his earlier positions, then social democracy is the wrong solution for him. What other political traditions, then, might be compatible with his calls for a new economic order?

Perhaps the most obvious is right-wing populism. In populist efforts to remake the economy, Europe may be ahead of the United States. Many European right-wing populist parties abandoned neoliberal and conservative economic policies a couple of decades ago, instead attacking globalization and free trade, advocating for a strong national state, promising to protect social welfare policies, and more generally claiming to champion the "left-behinds." This reorientation has helped France's National Rally, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Sweden Democrats, and other European right-wing populist parties become the largest or close to the largest working-class parties in their countries. These parties have not, however, paired their leftward economic shift with a commitment to political liberalism. And how committed they are to democracy remains unclear.

This is certainly true of the Trumpist version of the Republican Party, which has made clear its disdain not merely for pluralism and individual rights but also for democracy itself. In his culture-warrior days, Ahmari certainly expressed something resembling right-wing populist views. But if his rejection of tyranny is principled, then embracing the Trumpist GOP, even if it shifts away from an embrace of neoliberal, free-market capitalism, is not an option since it would simply create a different form of tyranny.

There is, however, another political tradition consistent with the kind of constraints on capitalism Ahmari advocates: post-1945 Christian democracy. Unlike right-wing populism, Christian democracy coheres with at least some of the traditional or religious values Ahmari championed earlier in his career while also maintaining a strong commitment to democratic institutions. Like social democracy, Christian democracy has not played an important role in the United States, but it has deep roots in Europe.

Christian democracy began in the late nineteenth century, when Catholic parties sprang up to protect the role of the church and religion in modernizing societies. They tended to be wary of capitalism, which they saw as threatening traditional values. Until World War II, many of these parties were also skeptical about liberal democracy since elections and majority rule might produce policies that would weaken the role of the church and religion in society.

After World War II, however, the attitude of European Catholic parties changed. Having experienced the horrors produced by actual tyrannies, Catholic parties such as Germany's Christian

Democratic Union and Italy's Christian Democrats committed themselves to democracy, even though this would entail making compromises and accepting the legitimacy of political actors with opposing views on the role of church and religion in society. Postwar Christian democratic parties also embraced welfare states and other restrictions on markets: in addition to being concerned about capitalism's corrosive effect on traditional values, they now recognized the democratic benefits of market restraints. By providing many European countries with something they lacked before the war—namely, mass parties on the right that fully accepted multiparty democracy—the modern Christian democratic movement contributed immensely to Europe's postwar stability.

In the contemporary United States, Christian movements on the right have until now been closer to the pre-World War II European Catholic parties than their postwar offshoots. Thus, echoes of the earlier position can be found in the Christian Nationalism and Catholic integralism movements, which are profoundly illiberal and prioritize the protection and promotion of Christian values above all else. To establish the more salutary approach of Europe's Christian democrats, Ahmari would need to persuade religious conservatives that a better way to protect their interests is to work through, rather than against, the country's democratic institutions.

#### AMERICA'S PARTY PROBLEM

*Tyranny, Inc.* is a powerful and convincing account of the dangers that capitalism poses to the country's political foundations. But saving American

democracy requires more than taking on the private sector; it also requires addressing the threat posed by political parties not fully committed to democratic principles.

Ahmari is correct to point out that the left's turning away from earlier efforts to rein in corporate America and protect workers has contributed to the rise of neoliberal capitalism and hence to the dismal state of American democracy today. Nonetheless, the primary responsibility for the unhealthy state of the U.S. economy and democracy lies with the Republican Party. Not only have successive Republican administrations fought more consistently to deregulate markets, undermine the power of workers, and eviscerate a protective, regulatory state; they have also, especially since Trump, supported unprecedented attacks on democratic norms and institutions.

Ahmari is unlikely to persuade many voters on the right to become social democrats, but he may be able to convince at least some of them that their economic and political future does not lie in a right-populist or Christian nationalist or integralist direction—with all the illiberalism and further evisceration of democracy those tendencies entail. And if he can direct them instead toward the profile that made Christian democratic parties so successful in Europe during the postwar decades—a defense of Christian values, a recognition that unconstrained capitalism is dangerous, and a principled commitment to democracy—he will be doing the American people a great service. Without such a reorientation of Trump's GOP, however, Ahmari's call for more government may simply exchange one form of tyranny for another. 🌐

REVIEW ESSAY

# The Leaning Tower of Babel

## What We Lose When Languages Die

ROSS PERLIN

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*A Myriad of Tongues: How Languages Reveal Differences in How We Think*

BY CALEB EVERETT. Harvard University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

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**T**he world's 190-odd nation-states are home to 7,168 "living languages," according to the latest figure from Ethnologue, a widely used language database. The implications of this enormous disproportion are obvious, given that few governments support more than one or a handful of official languages. The vast majority of languages represent communities that are much older and more localized than nation-states, and the mismatch between states and languages is at least one driver of a planet-wide shift in human consciousness: the staggering loss of linguistic diversity.

Linguists consider at least half of all human languages to be endangered. Already most of these tongues have under 10,000 speakers, whereas hundreds have fewer than ten, and many

are thought to have just one. (The situation is particularly dire for the world's 157 sign languages, as tallied by Ethnologue.) Speakers of Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish are legion, while lesser-known tongues dwindle away. According to one estimate, 96 percent of the world's population speaks just four percent of all languages, which means that the striking obverse is also true: just four percent of the world's population speaks 96 percent of all languages. Like biodiversity, linguistic diversity is not evenly distributed, remaining strongest in "hotspots" such as Papua New Guinea, equatorial Africa, the Amazon, and the Himalayas, all places where, at least until recently, topography, subsistence economies, and distance from centralized states have helped smaller language groups survive.

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The new language hotspots today are in cities that are migrant hubs such as Jakarta, Lagos, London, New York, and Paris, where peoples from all over increasingly cluster for work, education, access to services, a chance for survival, and a taste of modern life. Today's New York is the most linguistically diverse city not only in the world but in the history of the world, but the survival of linguistic diversity in such crucibles of contact is far from assured.

Languages have always come and gone—and sometimes even languages with very small numbers of speakers have survived for generations—but the current rate of loss is unprecedented. In many ways, it is parallel to the planet's accelerating loss of animal and plant species. Arguably, it started with the millennia-long, ongoing spread of agriculture, which enabled certain language groups to increase in number, take new territories, and dominate smaller-scale and more linguistically diverse hunter-gatherer and nomadic groups. In recent centuries, the conquests of colonial empires, hyper-urbanization, the ever-expanding networks of capitalism, and the monolingual imperatives of nation-states have all driven the vanishing of languages. The spread of formal education systems and new forms of media and communications also make it harder for smaller languages to hang on in a changing world.

Speakers of dominant languages often shrug at the disappearance of these smaller languages. After all, they wonder, wouldn't the world be a better place if everybody understood one another? That kind of thinking not only forgets that speakers of the same language are perfectly capable of fighting and killing

one another but also completely overlooks the scientific, artistic, and deeply human benefits of linguistic diversity. In *A Myriad of Tongues: How Languages Reveal Differences in How We Think*, the anthropological linguist Caleb Everett dwells on the richness of the world's disappearing tongues. Far from being primitive dialects, endangered languages teem with oral literature, historical and scientific knowledge, unique linguistic features, and other wonders that can rarely be fully translated into other languages. A growing body of research also shows that it is best for children to be educated in their mother tongue and that maintaining one's mother tongue can even be good for one's mental and physical health. Preserving languages can also be a matter of justice, given the history of displacement, persecution, and marginalization of most speakers of endangered languages.

The demise of any language is not inevitable. With the political support of local or national governments and the devotion of sufficient economic resources, every language can handle all the threats, temptations, and communicative demands that come with both the homogenizing of national identities and the pressures of globalization. But most languages do not enjoy that kind of backing. Extraordinary economic, political, and social strains produce ruptures in intergenerational language transmission as young people cease to speak the way their elders do. Speakers of a language begin to feel out of place in the world; it is not just that access to jobs, schools, and other opportunities are tied to dominant languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish but also that speakers of tongues such as

Cree, Nahuatl, and Zhuang have continually been made to feel ashamed of what and how they speak and, by extension, of who they are.

Such languages face an uphill battle to survive, never mind to flourish. It is precisely the endangered half of the world's languages about which the least is known, with few if any books or recordings to document most of them—sometimes little beyond a bare list of words. Only in the past few decades has there been a serious organized effort even among linguists (often a step behind missionaries) to document endangered languages and develop a set of practices, protocols, and tools for the purpose. At the same time, speakers of small and endangered languages are not sitting idly by. Hundreds of communities around the world have started trying to reclaim or revitalize their languages—a new global movement with major political implications of its own.

#### TIME CODES

In *A Myriad of Tongues*, Everett sketches the tremendous diversity of the world's languages. Most belong to one of hundreds of overarching language families, including Austronesian, Indo-European (which includes English), and Niger-Congo. But there are also well over a hundred language “isolates” with no proven connection to any other known language. Although language families trace common descent from a putative protolanguage typically thousands of years in the past, languages also develop features and structures independently or change through contact with other languages.

Everett offers a sophisticated account of how researchers, by finally beginning

to draw on a more representative sample of the world's languages, are making connections between language, thought, and “other aspects of the human experience.” Among the more ineffable things that the world stands to lose with diminishing linguistic diversity are the subtly but significantly different ways that human groups have of inhabiting and understanding their natural and social worlds. Languages do not simply offer different labels for the same universal set of items and concepts, with translation always bridging the gap. There may be cross-linguistic tendencies and commonalities, but there is no single language we can call Earthling, no linguistic “view from nowhere.” Every language carries within it the grain of a particular place and history.

Different languages, suggests Everett, encode and affect “the human cognitive experience” in different ways. With careful phrasing and an emphasis on empirical evidence, he sidesteps addressing in a definitive way one of the classic controversies of linguistics, about what is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that “languages have strong effects on their speakers’ nonlinguistic thoughts,” as Everett puts it. In other words, people do not just think in a given language; that language shapes the way they think. The debate over whether this is indeed true has raged for nearly a century, with many nonlinguists discerning a kernel of common sense in the proposition even as most linguists have resisted what they see as a largely untestable and oversimplifying claim.

Until recently, that is. Everett draws on dozens of recent studies that point to languages’ deeply divergent ways of handling time, space, and relationships,

among other central human preoccupations, and to how these may linger in minds and cultures beyond the moment of speech. More speculatively, he also sees intriguing connections between linguistic features and certain natural environments and associated manners of living, or lifeways. In other words, the old saw that the Inuit people have 50 words for snow may be wildly exaggerated (the original observation by the anthropologist Franz Boas isolated only four ways of describing snow), but there is something to it.

Take time, for instance. The linguist Benjamin Whorf (of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) claimed that the Hopi language in what is now Arizona has no words referring to time, suggesting that Hopi speakers as a result might not experience time in the same way as, for example, English speakers. Whatever the (hotly debated) facts may be in Hopi, it is manifestly true that many languages large and small either dispense with tense altogether or encode something other than a division into past, present, and future. Karitiana, an Amazonian language that Everett researches, distinguishes only two tenses: future and nonfuture, the latter mingling both past and present. Yagua, also spoken in the Amazon, has eight tenses, five of which are for different periods in the past. To speak Yagua well, one needs to make fine distinctions about timing—for example, attaching the suffix *-siymaa* to verbs to mean “between approximately one week and one month ago.”

More intricate still are the many metaphors for time in different languages. Where English speakers see the future as being spatially ahead or in front of them, speakers of Aymara in Bolivia

and Peru see the future as being behind them and the past in front, as in the expression *nayra mara*, which is literally “the year I can see” but figuratively “last year.” Associated gestures are an indication that such expressions may seep into thought. Whereas English speakers often point backward in discussing the past, Aymara speakers do the opposite.

Such cases multiply when it comes to space, color, and noun categorization, including by kinship, gender, and shape. For instance, speakers of the Berinmo language of Papua New Guinea have the word *nol* for what English speakers call green and blue. (Indeed, many languages have such a “grue” color.) Berinmo speakers also have the word *wor*, which covers English speakers’ yellows and bright greens. An experiment testing the ability of Berinmo and English speakers to recall different color chips found that each group did better with chips that aligned clearly in terms of their respective linguistic categories for understanding colors, compared with chips whose color was more ambiguous. This is language-based categorical perception, in which “people discriminate stimuli more neatly because the stimuli fall into distinct conceptual categories,” according to Everett.

How much these fascinatingly different conceptions matter in everyday life is a “thornier issue,” Everett admits. Some would argue that the effects of linguistic differences are relatively slight, appearing mainly under carefully calibrated experimental conditions. No one would dispute that different lexicons on some level reflect the different priorities, lifeways, and environments of speakers; indeed, there are more words for snow in languages spoken where snow

exists. But relatively few of the presumably “deeper” grammatical differences are readily explained by social, cultural, or environmental variables. Certain ones clearly are—including levels of politeness in more stratified societies and directional markers based on local topography—but the fact that English speakers pluralize nouns and Mandarin speakers do not has to be seen as an arbitrary detail of linguistic history without any nonlinguistic consequences. Sometimes, the differences between languages are merely that, with many linguistic features essentially random parameters that have no deeper cultural or cognitive meaning. Not only is there currently no basis for seeing it otherwise, but the resulting pseudoscientific generalizations could be downright dangerous. Imagine if people started believing that Hopi speakers had no sense of time, whereas Yagua speakers had the most sophisticated understanding of it, and English speakers were somewhere in the middle. Actual linguistic practices are simply too dynamic, situational, and mixed to generalize about in this way.

Nonetheless, *A Myriad of Tongues* gently suggests that certain connections between language, culture, and thought can be found. Farmers with softer diets—and thus a tendency for their top teeth to protrude in overbites and overjets—may be more likely to use labiodental sounds, such as *f* and *v*, that combine the top front teeth and the bottom lip, whereas hunter-gatherers, with their edge-to-edge bites, in which the top and bottom front teeth are flush, use these sounds less. Although the use of commercial dyes in WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies has recently enriched



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the color terms in those languages, hunter-gatherer subsistence strategies may have led to richer “olfactory lexicons” in others—such as the 15 abstract terms for different smells documented for the Chapalaa language of Ecuador.

#### DIALECTS WITH NO ARMIES

Fascinating as they may be for linguists and cognitive scientists, languages such as Aymara, Berinmo, and Chapalaa are not just bundles of exotic features waiting to be displayed in some future museum of the world’s languages, or at least in one of the new digital archives where linguists are depositing recordings of them. Like all languages, they are to varying degrees emblems and embodiments of group belonging, in which every feature, however arbitrary, may be laden with political meaning. Yet in their particular circumstances, these languages face different challenges: the pressures on Berinmo, which has a few hundred speakers in two villages, will not be the same as those on Chapalaa, which has several thousand speakers in a rainforest territory, or Aymara, which has around three million speakers spread across multiple countries.

*A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot*—“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy”—in the famous Yiddish phrase uttered in the 1940s by an unknown Bronx high school teacher to the linguist Max Weinreich. More than the linguistic criterion of mutual intelligibility, this sly witticism puts its finger on how some “language varieties” (to use a more neutral term preferred by linguists over “language” or “dialect”) are elevated and developed above others. According to Weinreich, the teacher had never heard that his

own mother tongue had a history and “could be used for higher matters” beyond just the basics of everyday life and oral communication.

Now more than ever, global inequalities are producing linguistic ones. Speakers of endangered languages are ever more marginalized as their lands are taken or made uninhabitable by climate change; they enter both cities and the cash economy at the bottom of the hierarchy. The few hundred languages that enjoy official status and some form of governmental support are pulling away from all the others with the spread of mass literacy, standardization, formal education, mass media, and new technologies. One study found that less than five percent of all languages are “ascending” into the digital realm, flourishing online and in a range of new technologies. As for the other 95 percent of human languages, although every bit as sophisticated on a grammatical and cognitive level, they may have to be supported if they are going to survive. To assert that a language has not just a history but also a future requires, in most cases, the mobilizing of people, resources, and social pressure: a language movement.

The groundbreaking language movements of the twentieth century have shown that any language can be made modern, even as dominant languages extend their sway over the world—and even in the absence of an army and a navy. A few generations ago, it seemed that the Welsh language was locked in inevitable decline with fewer and fewer young people able to speak it. But thanks to the work of activists—and the eventual support of local, national, and even continental governments

such as the European Union—the language has been revived to the point that even in the heartland of English, it has a stable population of speakers and is thriving. The twentieth-century language movements of the Basques and Catalans benefited from the economic wealth and autonomy of those regions of Spain. Advocates of Maori in New Zealand and of Hawaiian have emphasized the importance of inculcating these languages in early childhood development and education as part of their successful revival. The extraordinary efforts of many Native American revitalization programs are demonstrating that even smaller groups may be able to carve out a place for languages that have been “asleep,” as linguists describe languages with no fluent speakers, for a century or more.

The political theorist Will Kymlicka has written that “national minorities should have the same tools of nation-building available to them as the majority nation,” and perhaps many countries will see fit to offer linguistic and cultural autonomy to minorities as long as ultimate authority remains in the capital. But how far can that process go? The linguist Gerald Roche points out that language movements “often take nationalist form, reproducing the logic of one people, one language, one territory, endeavoring to capture or create state power for their nation, and oppressing the languages of second-order minorities in the process.” An example Roche points to is the Tibetan independence struggle, which has given rise to a “pure father-tongue movement” that tends to focus on Standard Tibetan and ignore Tibet’s many other languages and dialects.

Language movements are nothing new, but they have formed an integral part of most of the political movements that lie behind nearly every contemporary nation-state. What is distinctive today is a world order in which few new nation-states can emerge but in which language movements are rising everywhere in response to the pressures of endangerment, through the force of imitation and often under the banner of indigenous rights. Many governments are responding to these demands at least with symbolic gestures—enshrining languages in constitutions including those of Alaska and Algeria, for example, while spending little on resources for them—but the demands are likely to keep growing.

Not every group will resist the passing of its language. Nor will every language movement inevitably turn political and spur secession, ethnic conflict, and civil war. But from Cameroon to Catalonia, as from Hong Kong to Ukraine, language politics are gaining currency more than ever before. With decolonization, creole languages from Port Moresby to Port-au-Prince are climbing out of the shadows. In Jamaica, the political push to exit the British Commonwealth has accompanied a linguistic push to elevate Patwa, long stigmatized as a “broken” form of English. Nor are new language movements only about these fairly large, quasi-national languages often with hundreds of thousands of speakers. Hundreds of much smaller groups are collaborating with linguists, harnessing new technologies, and drawing inspiration from the pioneering twentieth-century movements. It is the dialects with neither armies nor navies that need support most of all. 🌐

## Recent Books

### Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

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*Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash From 1600 to the Present*

BY FAREED ZAKARIA. Norton, 2024, 400 pp.

**Z**akaria tells the epic story of the upheavals, breakthroughs, backlashes, and transformations that marked the rise of Western liberalism and industrial modernity, looking for insights to explain today's fraught global moment. Starting with the "liberal revolutions" of the sixteenth-century Dutch Republic and England's Glorious Revolution of 1688, the book traces the tumultuous path of economic, technological, and political modernization through the eras of British and American industrial supremacy and post-Cold War globalization. Zakaria focuses on what he sees as the key dynamic at the heart of each of these revolutions of modernity: a struggle between forces seeking to harness economic and technological change for profit and progress, on the one hand, and groups seeking to hold on to their old identities and ways of life, on

the other. In Zakaria's account, societies that embrace liberal commitments to trade, openness, and free thinking, such as the United States in the postwar era, tend to be more innovative and powerful, but illiberal forces are never fully vanquished either at home or abroad. By grandly illuminating the great revolutions of the past, Zakaria holds a mirror to our own times.

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*Liberalism as a Way of Life*

BY ALEXANDRE LEFEBVRE. Princeton University Press, 2024, 304 pp.

In this spirited defense of liberalism, Lefebvre celebrates the ordinary, everyday virtues of life in a free and open society. Most people define liberalism by its core institutions, such as individual rights, the rule of law, separation of powers, free elections, and open markets. Lefebvre argues that a more important (and often ignored) feature of liberalism is its worldview and value system: the diffuse societal underpinnings that enshrine diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism. Notions of fairness, equality, respect, and openness to new ways of thinking are anchored in liberalism's political culture. The book elaborates its argument with engaging



anecdotes and vignettes that show the range of ways liberal principles manifest in daily life, including comedians who mock identity politics, novels that dissect the power dynamics of gender and class, and codes of conduct for respectful workplace relations. The book evocatively captures the philosopher John Rawls's idea of society as a "fair system of cooperation," a sensibility that should be celebrated, cultivated, and embraced as an ethical vision for daily life.

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*Grand Strategies of the Left:  
The Foreign Policy of Progressive  
Worldmaking*

BY VAN JACKSON. Cambridge  
University Press, 2023, 234 pp.

Jackson helpfully maps the ideas of left-wing thinkers in debates over U.S. foreign policy. What unites these progressive critiques is the belief that the United States, guided by an old-style liberal internationalist vision, has failed to use its power to build a more peaceful, democratic, and egalitarian world. According to left-leaning thinkers, the regressive features of U.S. foreign policy that block global peace and progress include its imperial tendencies, its drive for primacy and hegemony, its militarism and construction of a national security state, and its support for neoliberal economic policies. Jackson identifies three schools of left-wing strategic thinking. "Progressive pragmatists" want the United States to promote economic equality at home and abroad; "anti-hegemonic" thinkers want restraint and retrenchment; and "peacemakers" want democratic solidarity and deeper cosmopolitan ties

across borders. Each has its own theory about how to expand peace and security worldwide, variously through the spreading of economic opportunity, the reduction of the United States' global military footprint, and the building of regimes for nonviolent peacemaking. Jackson argues that together these ideas constitute a vision of "progressive worldmaking," in which U.S. power would be redirected in service of a better world. The book identifies tensions and inconsistencies within the progressive tradition but emphasizes its unity as a pragmatic agenda for statecraft.

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*Techlash: Who Makes the Rules  
in the Digital Gilded Age?*

BY TOM WHEELER. Brookings  
Institution Press, 2023, 264 pp.

Likening today's digital revolution to the late-nineteenth-century Gilded Age of unregulated capitalism, Wheeler makes a powerful case for U.S. government action to set rules that protect the public interest. In both eras, American society has grappled with technology-enabled corporate giants that acquired huge windfalls of wealth and private power. The rampant capitalism practiced by robber barons such as Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John Rockefeller over a century ago was ultimately checked by government measures to protect consumers, workers, and market competition. Wheeler argues that the innovations of the digital age have brought modern capitalism to a similar crossroads. Revolutions in computing and connectivity have created new "platform companies" that harvest and monetize

vast amounts of private information and operate without meaningful government oversight. The consequences are profound—including the routine invasion of privacy, corporate control of information to thwart competition, and the erosion of common notions of truth and reality—and will only become more so with new tools such as artificial intelligence. Wheeler calls for government intervention that tames the unprecedented power of these digital platforms to make them accountable to the public.

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*Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*  
EDITED BY DANIEL DEUDNEY,  
G. JOHN IKENBERRY, AND  
KAROLINE POSTEL-VINAY. Oxford  
University Press, 2023, 312 pp.

The editors of this informative collection open with a familiar story. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, “liberal democratic capitalism” stood triumphant, its universalistic pretensions apparently vindicated. Now the tide has turned: “the Rest have surged in power, bringing with them new stories of the global past and present.” The collection argues that such narratives matter: their interaction will “shape . . . world order in the decades ahead.” Its contributors examine how the world has been imagined in the past and present by pan-Islamic thinkers, Japanese and Indian nationalists, and figures on the transnational radical right, among others. These critiques of liberal modernity are inextricable from it since they reflect two centuries of wrestling with Western material and political dominance. But

as the political scientist Duncan Bell’s chapter shows, Western anxiety about the rise of “the rest” long predates the current crisis, and the racial prejudices underlying that anxiety produced the direct ancestors of many contemporary global-governance projects. The book, like many other edited volumes, often reads more like a grab bag of related topics than a unified, cohesive project. Yet the chapters are always informative and generally good reads, precisely because they are free to reflect the cacophony of the narratives that challenge liberal order.

DANIEL NEXON

## Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

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*Default: The Landmark Court Battle Over Argentina’s \$100 Billion Debt Restructuring*

BY GREGORY MAKOFF. Georgetown  
University Press, 2024, 424 pp.

**M**akoff tells the painful but illuminating story of Argentina’s 2001 sovereign debt default and the decades of negotiation needed to repair the country’s broken relations with its creditors. Alternating between spellbinding narrative and dry legal analysis, he describes the thrust and parry between Argentine governments and litigious investors and argues that the hands-off approach of the U.S. government helped lengthen the deadlock. In the absence of Washington’s constructive influence, Argentina’s

relations with the International Monetary Fund broke down, and without the fund's imprimatur, a significant minority of investors refused to participate in the debt exchange tabled by the Argentine authorities. Over time, the international policy community responded by encouraging underwriters and issuers to add "collective action clauses" to bond contracts, thereby allowing a majority of investors to impose terms on the recalcitrant minority. Makoff concludes that debt restructurings will remain messy and unpredictable but that these new collective action clauses, together with the systematic involvement of the U.S. government, can make a positive difference.

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*The Trade Weapon: How Weaponizing Trade Threatens Growth, Public Health, and the Climate Transition*

BY KEN HEYDON. Polity, 2023, 224 pp.

This timely book describes how governments use trade policy to achieve noneconomic ends. Western governments have used trade restrictions to punish cross-border aggression, such as Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and human rights violations, such as China's abuse of its Uyghur minority. They also apply trade restrictions in the name of reducing domestic dependence on fragile global supply chains, improving self-sufficiency in the production of items deemed critical to national security, and encouraging advances in science that serve the environment and public health. But Heydon argues that trade weapons hurt those who wield them and threaten the vitality of the global trading system. What's more, the

objectives that countries aim to achieve with trade weapons can be reached in better ways: investing in the resilience of global supply chains, refuting spurious national security arguments for self-sufficiency, and taking direct action to achieve public health and environmental goals. The author is perhaps least convincing when he suggests that a more effective way of getting North Korea and Russia to change their ways is to rely less on trade sanctions and more on positive diplomatic overtures.

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*FinTech: Finance, Technology, and Regulation*

BY ROSS P. BUCKLEY, DOUGLAS W. ARNER, AND DIRK A. ZETZSCHE. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 287 pp.

Digital technology is transforming financial services worldwide. The authors argue that this transformation has accelerated since the global financial crisis of 2008–9 because of four factors: artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, and distributed ledger technology (of which blockchain is the best-known example). These developments have facilitated the emergence of new digital financial platforms and intermediaries, undermining the position of incumbent financial institutions. They have improved access to payments and other financial services in middle-income countries, such as China and India, that do not have deeply entrenched financial systems. Above all, they pose a challenge to supervisors and regulators insofar as nontraditional providers of financial services are often outside the bounds of existing regulations. The regulatory

bloodhounds will have to run very fast to keep up with the entrepreneurial greyhounds. Regulators will have to be adept in order to balance the needs of financial stability and consumer protection with the imperatives of economic growth, innovation, and sustainability.

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*Made in China: When U.S.–China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade*

BY ELIZABETH O'BRIEN INGLESON.  
Harvard University Press, 2024, 352 pp.

It is tempting to take for granted a state of affairs wherein China exports manufactured goods to the world, and the United States buys much of what China sells. Ingleson, a historian, argues that doing so would be a mistake. It needed an unusual alignment of interests between the two countries' respective political systems for this commercial relationship to emerge in the 1980s. Chinese policymakers, U.S. diplomats, and, notably, executive officers of major U.S. banks and corporations helped bring this dynamic into being. Through their efforts, China was transformed from a market of 400 million customers into a land of 800 million low-cost workers. This transformation required Chinese leaders to open their economy and compelled U.S. corporate leaders to commit to multinational production. It was facilitated by the weakening of organized labor in the United States, as blue-collar workers could not prevent the offshoring of their jobs. It remains unclear whether this interdependence, developed over 40 years, will survive resurgent nationalism, a revival of labor activism, and geopolitical tensions between the two countries.

## Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

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*Nuclear War: A Scenario*

BY ANNIE JACOBSEN. Dutton, 2024, 400 pp.

In this work of creative nonfiction, Jacobsen urges readers to fear a nuclear war even more than they already do, imagining a terrifying scenario that ends in Armageddon. She describes in graphic detail not only the consequences of nuclear detonations but also all the systems that would be employed to track incoming missiles, try to intercept them, help get the U.S. president and other senior officials to safety as they work out how to respond, and authorize a nuclear retaliation. In the scenario she describes, nothing goes right. Two North Korean missiles take out a nuclear power station in California and central Washington, D.C. The Kremlin perceives the massive U.S. nuclear response as an attack on Russia, and one thing follows another to catastrophe. The original North Korean attack comes out of the blue—the author does not describe a prior crisis or why North Korea has launched the strike when the inevitable response is its own obliteration. The dire conclusion of the book supposes that Washington will be unable to communicate with Moscow and head off the calamity. It is good to remind readers of the insanity of a nuclear war, but a less overheated plot might have done the job better.



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*Countdown: The Blinding Future of Nuclear Weapons*

BY SARAH SCOLES. Bold Type Books, 2024, 272 pp.

The west of the United States is home to many of the research and production facilities connected to the U.S. nuclear arsenal, including the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore labs, and also to Scoles, a science journalist living in Colorado who took advantage of her proximity to visit the facilities and talk to the staff. Her investigations are particularly salient today, thanks to the heightened awareness of nuclear risks resulting from Russia's war against Ukraine and the U.S. government's decision to manufacture new plutonium pits for its nuclear warheads. She offers a valuable and measured exploration of the motivations of the people she meets, mainly scientists but also antinuclear activists. In the process, she paints a vivid picture of the complex world of nuclear weapons, describing computer simulations that assess whether weapons that can't be tested will work, systems that can detect detonations anywhere in the world, and the agencies that prepare to deal with nuclear accidents. She shows how nuclear scientists balance less satisfying, mission-directed work with research into fundamental scientific problems, and she sees these figures as "peaceful people who nevertheless hold nuclear deterrence in their hearts."

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*Death Dust: The Rise, Decline, and Future of Radiological Weapons Programs*

BY WILLIAM C. POTTER, SARAH BIDGOOD, SAMUEL MEYER, AND HANNA NOTTE. Stanford University Press, 2023, 230 pp.

Given all the attention devoted to nuclear and chemical weapons programs, it is remarkable how little has been accorded to radiological weapons, bombs that "disperse radioactive material in the absence of a nuclear detonation." In recent years, governments have fretted about terrorists acquiring so-called dirty bombs that would cause panic without massive destruction. This welcome book fills a gap in the scholarship by looking at how states—notably the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as Egypt and Iraq—researched and developed these weapons in the twentieth century. These Cold War-era programs did not get far because radiological weapons seemed to have less potential than chemical or nuclear weapons. The Egyptians were keen on non-conventional weapons, but they were dependent on German scientists, and their program was short-lived. The Iraqis made more progress, but their program still faced technical difficulties, and Baghdad left it marginalized and underfunded.

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*In True Face: A Woman's Life  
in the CIA, Unmasked*

BY JONNA MENDEZ, WITH  
WYNDHAM WOOD. PublicAffairs,  
2024, 320 pp.

Mendez's engaging memoir of her life in the CIA, in which she served from 1966 to 1993, has two main themes. One is familiar: the challenges talented women of her generation faced as they tried to make careers in areas that had traditionally been reserved for men. She joined the CIA as a "contract wife," given a job so she could travel with her first husband, John, who was already in the agency. In this supporting role, she was given gainful but undemanding work. But Mendez was both ambitious and clever, and she sought out and eventually got more interesting assignments, but only after confronting continual, and in some instances extreme, misogyny. Her career provides the second theme: the importance of the technical services that support the agency's clandestine work. This emerges as she progresses from working with film to developing disguises for agents in the field, which on occasion required her to go into the field herself. These sections are full of fascinating details about the techniques agents use, from the highly sophisticated to the hastily improvised. She is particularly proud of a mask that she pulled off her own face in front of President George H. W. Bush to reveal her true identity.

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*Cracking the Nazi Code: The Untold  
Story of Agent A12 and the Solving of  
the Holocaust Code*

BY JASON BELL. Pegasus Books,  
2024, 352 pp.

Until recently, the Canadian academic Winthrop Bell was known largely as a talented philosopher, a student of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century. The Canadian journalist Jason Bell (no relation) was curious to learn more and, in the course of his research, chanced on an extraordinary trove of Winthrop's personal papers. This enabled him to put together a hitherto unknown story about how Bell, who had been interned in Germany during World War I, used his excellent German and many connections to describe the country's turmoil after the war for the benefit of the British secret services and government. He used the cover of being a Reuters correspondent to supply information to the British. Bell warned of the danger of causing German economic degradation and saw the rise of anti-Semitism on the German right, preceding the formation of the Nazi Party. The diaries demonstrate his perspicacity and influence, but his efforts were not quite enough to persuade the French to soften their stance at the Versailles peace conference in 1919, where the victors of the war chose to levy a heavy economic penalty on Germany. The core story is remarkable in itself, but the wealth of detail about Germany in the years after World War I and the inner workings of British espionage makes it doubly so.

## The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

*A World Safe for Commerce: American Foreign Policy From the Revolution to the Rise of China*

BY DALE C. COPELAND. Princeton University Press, 2024, 504 pp.

Copeland's valuable book is both a history of the key moments in American foreign trade policy and a theoretical study of what he terms "dynamic realism," the middle ground between so-called offensive realism (aggressive policies in the interest of protecting the security of the United States) and defensive realism (the recognition that overly aggressive policies can be counterproductive). In his view, the generally understood drivers of U.S. history greatly undervalue the role that assuring access to global markets has played in U.S. foreign policy since before the American Revolution. In his telling, ideological and national security motivations and domestic political pressures (which he repeatedly diminishes) did not compel key decisions from the outbreak of the Revolution to the U.S. entry into World War I, as much as did the natural drive of any major power to maintain and expand its access to markets, resources, and investment abroad. The principal impediment for the United States in that quest now is China. He argues that U.S. policymakers should recognize that Chinese policies that might appear to be motivated by a desire for dominance may in fact be driven by insecurity and the fear of U.S. intentions.

*In the Nation's Service: The Life and Times of George P. Shultz*

BY PHILIP TAUBMAN. Stanford University Press, 2023, 504 pp.

George Shultz combined years as an academic and as a successful business leader with service in four cabinet-level positions—as secretary of state, labor, and the treasury and as director of the Office of Management and Budget. Taubman covered Shultz as a reporter and had full access to the man, his family, and his papers and is the first to have seen a detailed journal kept by Shultz's executive assistant at the State Department. The journal documents incredible infighting and sometimes humiliating end runs in the Reagan administration, producing nearly constant "chaotic conflict." Shultz persevered, calling on a seemingly inexhaustible fund of personal loyalty to the president until he was able, in the end, to facilitate diplomacy with the Soviet Union and thereby make critical contributions toward ending the Cold War peacefully. Ultimately, he became one of the most admired public servants of the century. Taubman never lets his closeness to his subject cloud incisive judgments of an admirable career that was not without failings, including a reprehensible episode near its end involving the fraudulent biomedical company Theranos and its disgraced founder, Elizabeth Holmes.



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*A Real Right to Vote: How a Constitutional Amendment Can Safeguard American Democracy*

BY RICHARD L. HASEN. Princeton University Press, 2024, 240 pp.

*How to Steal a Presidential Election*

BY LAWRENCE LESSIG AND MATTHEW SELIGMAN. Yale University Press, 2024, 176 pp.

Two books explore the weaknesses in the U.S. electoral system that could be used to undermine American democracy. Shockingly, the Constitution does not establish the right to vote. The Supreme Court declared unanimously in 1875 that the Constitution “does not confer the right of suffrage upon anyone” and that, in the case then before it, state laws that restrict the privilege “to men alone are not necessarily void.” Hasen, an election law expert, shows that states have also variously disenfranchised African Americans, former felons, Native Americans, students, and military voters. He makes a convincing case that this hole in the fabric of rights that makes up a democracy creates many of the pathologies that threaten the U.S. election system today. These include endless disputes over registration requirements, voter identification residency requirements, and other efforts to shape electorates that have made attempted election subversion a near constant in recent years. He does not understate the challenge of getting legislative approval for a new constitutional amendment but notes that both parties would stand to gain from guards against election subversion and that just as during the 40 years it

took to ratify women’s right to vote, the long fight for passage would build support for other measures along the way.

In the fall of 2020, months before the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, Lessig and Seligman, both leading scholars of constitutional law, attempted to uncover every possible means bad actors could use to overthrow the voters’ choice in a presidential election. They found seven, four they believe could not ultimately succeed and three they think could. The plan the Trump campaign adopted—to use slates of “fake electors”—they view as “the dumbest” of the possible subversive strategies. The most dangerous strategy—state legislatures could pass a law directing electors to vote for the candidate the legislature picks—was inadvertently suggested by the Supreme Court itself in a 2020 decision. The authors believe that since others will figure out one or more of these strategies, their book does not amount to publishing the “plans to build democracy’s nuclear bomb.” Rather, they see it as an effort to rally urgent public support to repair glaring vulnerabilities.

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*Illiberal America: A History*

BY STEVEN HAHN. Norton, 2024, 464 pp.

The dominant narrative of U.S. history is that over centuries, the country has seen the steady expansion of liberal political values and the strengthening of established rights, inclusive civic and governmental institutions, and the rule of law applied equally through democratic means. By the twentieth century,

the United States was open to immigration and sought to promote social and economic liberalization around the world. Hahn looks through a different lens at a parallel illiberal tradition that runs through this same history. Whether espoused by the left or the right, this tradition is usually marked by a belief in fixed hierarchies defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Its proponents have recognized violence as a legitimate means for acquiring and exercising power. These illiberal values do not merely erupt periodically at the margins of American society but have been “central fields of political and cultural force” since the very beginning of the country. Appreciating this history puts recent divisiveness and the upending of long-standing norms since the political rise of Donald Trump in valuable perspective; the current upheaval has deep and broad roots.

familiar story. Born into a small-town working-class family, he studied at Oxford and became a human rights lawyer, eventually serving as the United Kingdom’s top criminal prosecutor. After entering Parliament in 2015, he climbed swiftly, rising to the shadow cabinet within a year and becoming party leader just four years later. Since then, he has taken ruthless and controversial steps to push the party to the center, including purging far-left candidates and adopting many fiscally conservative positions. Like many modern politicians, he is sports-obsessed and “hates losing,” yet he dismisses the performative side of politics, such as the antics of the prime minister’s question time in Parliament, as “shallow” tribalism. The next British government is likely to test whether an intelligent and committed but uncharismatic politician who just wants to get on with practical problem-solving can succeed in the modern world.

## Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

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*Keir Starmer: The Biography*

BY TOM BALDWIN. William Collins, 2024, 448 pp.

With a general election looming in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party enjoys a steady 20-point lead in polls. Yet the presumptive prime minister, Keir Starmer, has impressed few people, coming off instead as awkward and rather dull. This engaging biography, written with Starmer’s cooperation, adds some personal details to a mostly

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*Centrist Antiestablishment Parties and Their Struggle for Survival*

BY SARAH ENGLER. Oxford University Press, 2024, 224 pp.

In Europe today, new political parties rise to prominence by portraying themselves as outsiders and mobilizing citizens to cast protest votes against corrupt political elites. Many of these parties, such as Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia in Italy and Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement Nationale in France, can be found on the populist fringes of the extreme right and left. Yet some of these upstart parties initially emerge from the political center. This study argues that when such centrist antiestablishment parties

emerge, they confront a dilemma: How can they maintain their antiestablishment credentials from the middle of the political spectrum? Most fail the test and collapse, as did the Free Party in Estonia, while the few that survive do so by moving to the extremes and, ironically, by adopting the corrupt clientelism of the predecessors they once criticized, as the Law and Justice Party did in Poland a decade ago. Europe's traditional Christian democratic, liberal, and social democratic parties may thus face less centrist competition than they have in recent years. At the same time, the conditions that enabled innovative new parties that bolstered centrist politics, such as Renaissance in France and ANO in the Czech Republic, may no longer obtain.

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*Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*  
BY PATRICK JOYCE. Scribner,  
2024, 400 pp.

For 8,000 years, the great majority of Europeans were peasants. Yet over the past two centuries, these people have either moved away or died out, leaving the countryside increasingly depopulated and silent. The social historian Patrick Joyce describes this vanished world and the worldview, lifestyle, and rites of its inhabitants. He focuses on Poland, Italy, and the country where his father was born a peasant, Ireland. Since peasants produced few written records, the book describes their world using eyewitness accounts, legal records, and the peasants' unremittingly bitter and melancholy songs. The author treats his subjects with respect and affection,

but he does not romanticize their lot. Most peasants worked, it was often said, "like beasts," going out before dawn and returning after dark, doing repetitive hard labor without mechanical assistance. Life was a precarious struggle to produce above bare subsistence levels and to avoid taxes, conscription, epidemics, famine, and oppressive landlords. Peasants were keen judges of weather, farming, and markets, but they nonetheless approached life with a dogged and stoic attitude bordering on fatalism.

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*Big Caesars and Little Caesars: How They Rise and Fall—From Julius Caesar to Boris Johnson*  
BY FERDINAND MOUNT.  
Bloomsbury, 2023, 304 pp.

Mount insists that this is an era of charismatic "little" Caesars, such as former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and former U.S. President Donald Trump. In some ways, these figures resemble historical "big" Caesars, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and Julius himself. All abuse power—telling propagandistic lies, breaking the law, rigging political institutions, empowering cronies, and unleashing violence—to achieve political dominance. The difference is a matter of degree: historical figures sought power on "a limitless scale," while their diminutive modern-day imitators simply do what is needed to prevail in the next election. No matter how spicy the writing, such sweeping comparisons between modern demagogues and world-historical figures can come across as clever rather than deep. Mount's faith that courts, constitutions,

and common sense will ultimately defeat the authoritarian turn may not convince everyone. The book nonetheless provides a useful reminder of the tools populist leaders have always employed and the remarkable willingness of people to defer to them.

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*The Invention of Terrorism  
in France, 1904–1939*

BY CHRIS MILLINGTON. Stanford University Press, 2023, 304 pp.

Terrorism is notoriously difficult to define: one person's terrorist, the cliché goes, is another's freedom fighter. For this reason and others, government responses to terrorist violence are often disproportionate to the threat. Terrorism has declined since the remarkably bloody 1970s and 1980s, when the German Baader-Meinhof Gang and the Italian Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari were active, but policymakers have become even more forceful in trying to stamp it out. Millington's history goes further back to France in the first four decades of the twentieth century—a period in which attempts by both anarchist leftists and extreme rightists to assassinate top political figures were numerous and often successful. The author argues that both the public and the elites at the time harbored a fundamentally nineteenth-century view that terrorists were all radical leftists from foreign countries. This assumption overlooked how French the terrorist threat actually was. Moreover, it often explained the threat in a way that played to commonplace xenophobic, antiparliamentarian, sexist, and imperialist stereotypes.

## Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

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*Colonial Reckoning: Race and  
Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*

BY LOUIS A. PÉREZ, JR. Duke University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

*Covert City: The Cold War and the  
Making of Miami*

BY VINCE HOUGHTON AND ERIC DRIGGS. PublicAffairs, 2024, 256 pp.

**T**wo books chart the tumult in Cuba and the Caribbean in the last two centuries, highlighting how race shapes the region's politics. An accomplished historian, Pérez shows that Cuba's heroic mythology of national liberation often omits the messy fact that many Cubans—white and Black—aligned with the colonialists, first from Spain and later from the United States. In the bloody and destructive nineteenth-century wars of independence, wealthy Cubans often fought alongside Spain, which they saw as the best guarantor of social order and their slave-dependent sugar plantations. The Haitian Revolution in the early nineteenth century and its slaughter of whites shaped the Cuban political landscape; many whites saw the drive for sovereignty as synonymous with Black ascendancy. Impoverished mercenary collaborators, including many free Blacks, also fought with Spain, devising cunning guerrilla tactics to entrap pro-independence insurgents. Eventually, many upper-class Cubans welcomed the 1898 U.S. intervention; they saw the United States as the best

guarantor of existing social hierarchies and property relations. Pérez concludes, however, that these complexities do not diminish the achievements of the liberation struggles in freeing Cuba from imperial rule.

In *Covert City*, Houghton and Driggs recount the arrival in Miami of Cuban immigrants, predominantly upper- and middle-class whites who fled the long-feared social insurrection led by Fidel Castro. Miami became a hotbed of U.S. intelligence operations focused on Castro's Cuba, replete with fleets of small ships and airplanes. But after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the chilling Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Kennedy administration pledged not to invade the island, crushing the exiles' dreams of return. Eventually, a more sophisticated Cuban American community learned to work within the U.S. political system, aligning primarily with the Republican Party, whose leaders, from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, appealed directly to the exiles. Repeated waves of migrants, some cynically engineered by Castro, caused severe headaches for several U.S. presidents, including Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Houghton and Driggs (who hails from a family of Cuban exiles) write with an informal, sometimes snarky style readily accessible to the general reader. But *Covert City* relies on standard sources and adds little new to the understanding of the shifting politics of the Cuban diaspora.

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*Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis*  
BY JONATHAN BLITZER. Penguin Press, 2024, 544 pp.

Drawing on his extensive contributions to *The New Yorker*, Blitzer explores the traumas of displaced Central American migrants as they bravely confront the opaque and rapidly evolving U.S. immigration system. Having gained access to many key Washington policymakers, he is especially convincing when describing the zigs and zags of U.S. immigration policies as the bureaucracy struggles to manage a growing influx of asylum seekers while weighing solutions to the crisis that are both realistic and humane. The task of assessing a migrant's "credible fear of persecution" if repatriated is especially fraught. Blitzer's finely crafted, multifaceted book illustrates well the dilemmas of underfunded and understaffed U.S. government agencies. He also deplores the brutalities and the hypocrisies of the local elites and their backers in Washington. His sympathies lie with immigrant advocates and the progressive left; as a professional journalist rather than a policy analyst, however, he does not offer definitive answers or recommendations.

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*Until I Find You: Disappeared Children and Coercive Adoptions in Guatemala*

BY RACHEL NOLAN. Harvard University Press, 2024, 320 pp.

Nolan traces the pull and push factors that drove the adoption of children from Guatemala between the 1970s and the first decade of this century, when the government of Guatemala banned it, including the impetus provided by a major earthquake in 1977 and the horrific civil wars of the 1980s. Over those three decades, about 40,000 Guatemalan children were placed in families in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Meticulously reviewing archives of adoption files and court cases, Nolan finds that many adoptions involved fraudulent testimonies, suggesting that children were kidnapped or that their families were coerced into giving them up. The mothers of these children were often illiterate and came from poor, indigenous backgrounds. Nolan asks whether such desperate mothers were capable of “meaningful consent” to the adoption of their children. In the process, however, she minimizes their agency. The author also wonders whether it was in the children’s best interests to transfer them from their Maya communities, however indigent, to inhabit white middle-class homes. A sharp critic of Guatemala’s social structures, Nolan attributes the mothers’ immiseration to their country’s profound inequalities, overlooking the country’s demographic explosion—the population soaring from three million in 1950 to 18 million today.

## Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

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*The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War*

BY RICHARD SAKWA. Yale University Press, 2023, 448 pp.

Sakwa, a political scientist, offers an eloquent and persuasive argument about how the world squandered the promise of the end of the Cold War and plunged into what he calls “Cold War II,” epitomized by the ongoing proxy war between Russia and the West over Ukraine. Although he condemns Russia’s brutal 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a villainous act, Sakwa insists that the United States bears some responsibility for the erosion of the international order. The U.S.-led NATO enlargement was guided by the lofty principle of “freedom of choice” when it comes to alliances, but it led to the alienation of Russia and the subsequent breakdown of security in Europe, undermining another principle, that of the “indivisibility of security” in Europe. The rules-based order that after 1991 gradually supplanted the internationalism of the UN Charter was the United States’ thinly disguised claim to hegemony, unacceptable to Russia as well as to China, now Washington’s chief rival. Sakwa concludes his bitter analysis by comparing the current moment to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The latter was peacefully resolved, but he notes that humanity “may not be so lucky” this time.

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*Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States*

BY MARIA POPOVA AND OXANA SHEVEL. Polity, 2024, 288 pp.

As they meticulously trace developments in Russia and Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Popova and Shevel point out that the current war was not preordained. In the early 1990s, both countries followed parallel tracks as they struggled to overcome dysfunctional economies and social and political chaos. Their decisive disentanglement followed later as Ukraine got firmly on the path to democracy and the West while Russia moved toward autocracy and “re-imperialization.” Still, there were important forks in the road, such as when Ukraine’s democratic development faltered during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich in the early 2010s. If Ukraine had taken an autocratic path, it could have become a willing Russian vassal, and the war would have been avoided. The book minimizes the role of the West in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and it pays little attention to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s growing distrust of the West, which long predated the war and made Ukraine’s pivot westward unacceptable to him. The authors dismiss Russia’s security concerns as “paranoia” and criticize the West for being too soft on Russia instead of opting in the first decade of the twenty-first century for a policy of containment and punishment.

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*The Kremlin’s Noose: Putin’s Bitter Feud With the Oligarch Who Made Him Ruler of Russia*

BY AMY KNIGHT. Northern Illinois University Press, 2024, 296 pp.

Knight tells the riveting story of the Russian tycoon and political operator Boris Berezovsky and his role in the rise of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2000. Drawing on many books and articles, as well as interviews with Berezovsky’s family and associates, she chronicles how Berezovsky made his incredible fortune through get-rich-quick schemes; his close ties with the family of Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin; his contributions to the neutralizing of Putin’s rivals; his falling out with Putin almost as soon as the latter became acting president and his forced exile in 2000; and his mysterious death in his London home in 2013. Berezovsky, as portrayed by Knight, marks a striking contrast to Putin: the former boisterous and mercurial, a charmer and a womanizer, a super-ambitious man with an “insatiable need for publicity”; the latter secretive, cold, and calculating. Those familiar with Russia’s post-Soviet history will not find many new facts in Knight’s book, but others are sure to enjoy her narrative, which covers the tumultuous political developments in Russia in the 1990s and the first decade of the next century, replete with terrorist attacks, hostage takings, wars, and vicious political intrigue, including an especially murky period preceding Putin’s anointment as Yeltsin’s successor.

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*The Gulag: A Very Short Introduction*

BY ALAN BARENBERG. Oxford University Press, 2024, 168 pp.

*After the Gulag: A History of Memory in Russia's Far North*

BY TYLER C. KIRK. Indiana University Press, 2023, 308 pp.

Two books delve into the ordeal of the prison camps known as the gulag in the Soviet Union. Barenberg offers an overview of the Soviet penal system, masterminded by Stalin, between 1930 and 1960, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev officially abolished it. Millions of prisoners were held in a sprawling network of “correctional labor camps,” while entire ethnic and social groups were uprooted from their homelands and exiled to places with harsh conditions. Beyond isolating and punishing its inmates, the gulag abetted Stalin’s ambitious modernization goals. Prisoners harvested timber, mined mineral resources, and were used to build new cities, railroads, dams, canals, and hydroelectric stations. Roughly one in five inmates died from hard labor, cruel treatment, and the severe deprivations of the camps. The “enemies of the people” convicted of made-up political crimes accounted for a quarter to a third of the overall gulag population. Barenberg points out the difference between the gulag and Nazi extermination camps: unlike Nazi prisoners, most labor camp inmates (although not the deportees) had finite sentences and could expect to be released—if they were lucky enough to survive.

Kirk’s unique contribution to the history of Stalin’s labor camps is based

on his research in the archives of the Komi Republic in the Russian Far North. These archives contain the testimonies of returnees from the gulag, a collecting project initiated in the late 1980s by local branches of Memorial, a human rights organization founded at the height of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika and banned by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2021. The initiative generated a flood of prisoner’s memoirs that sparked privately funded attempts to find mass graves associated with the camps; 83 such gravesites were discovered in three decades. In their memoirs, the returnees emphasized the importance of the brotherhood of *zeks* (prisoners), a solidarity that helped them survive the camps and adjust to life after their release. For many former prisoners, their former fellow inmates were the only family they had. Some former *zeks* were also proud of their contributions to Soviet achievements (six out of seven cities in the Komi Republic were built by prisoners). A striking chapter is devoted to one former prisoner, an artist who sent over 150 letters about his imprisonment and his life after release to a local museum, along with poignant drawings of his camp experience, some of which are reproduced in the book.



## Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

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*The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel: Promise Unfulfilled*

BY DAHLIA SCHEINDLIN.

De Gruyter, 2023, 277 pp.

Candid, forthright, and often courageous, this book cuts through decades of bromides, wishful thinking, and unconstructive ambiguity to assess the long and painful struggle to establish democracy in Israel. Scheindlin, a political consultant and polling expert, was an astute guide to the upheavals occasioned by the Israeli government's proposed judicial reforms in the spring of 2023. In this book, she begins the story of Israeli democracy in the early years of Zionism. She provides a brisk, fresh history, avoiding many of the now hackneyed assessments of the myriad virtues and vices of Israel's leaders, instead crafting a lucid assessment of the conflicting ideological and political commitments that have weakened democracy in Israel—not least, the decades-long failure to acknowledge, much less resolve, the question of Israel's relationship with the land and people of historic Palestine. The book concludes before the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, which paused but did not end the debate about democracy in Israel. It is an enormously valuable resource for understanding the Israeli reactions to the attack, as well as the challenges the country will still face when the guns fall silent.

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*How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare*

BY NARGES BAJOGHLI, VALI NASR,

DJAVAD SALEHI-ISFAHANI AND

ALI VAEZ. Stanford University Press, 2024, 212 pp.

Economic sanctions are often viewed as preferable to war as a way to alter the strategic decisions of actors who violate international norms. Yet as the authors of this provocative critique suggest, sanctions can often be equally devastating. Whereas “just war” theory forbids inflicting harm on noncombatants, economic sanctions are subject to no such rules or norms. Sanctions can be highly destructive by weakening national economies, undermining health systems, and limiting access to foodstuffs and essential technologies—often strengthening the hand of the very governments the sanctions seek to undermine. Iran has been under increasingly draconian U.S. sanctions for more than 40 years to little apparent effect beyond hobbling the country's economic development and deepening popular suspicion about American values and intentions. Nonetheless, these sanctions on Iran have mushroomed to include a dizzying array of prohibitions mandated by both the U.S. Congress and the White House and to target a multitude of actors. Compounded by bureaucratic inertia, the complexity of these sanctions makes it easier to keep Iran on the enemies list than to craft policy that would actually invite or reward good behavior.

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*My Friends: A Novel*

BY HISHAM MATAR. Random House, 2024, 416 pp.

This lyrical novel chronicles the friendship of three Libyans who find themselves in unexpected exile in London for what proves to be 27 years. Matar's gentle storytelling captures the fear, loneliness, anger, and forbearance of very different young men thrown together by longing for their families, for familiar landscapes, and for the lives they had expected to lead. In a remarkable evocation of the daily experience of alienation and adaptation, Matar conveys how they come to terms with their lives in exile while remaining quietly unreconciled to their fates—still “strapped to the old country.” When the 2011 uprising against the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi erupts, the now middle-aged men confront the decades they have whiled away, stranded far from home, and two join the rebellion. This story is a haunting commentary on the long reach of tyranny.

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*We Are Your Soldiers: How Gamal Abdel Nasser Remade the Arab World*

BY ALEX ROWELL. Norton, 2023, 416 pp.

An eccentric but provocative retelling of the modern history of the Arab world, this book mixes insider accounts with sometimes far-fetched speculation to weave an entertaining story. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled from 1952 to 1970, helped reshape the political landscape of the Middle East. Rowell finds his fingerprints on virtually all the consequential events of

his era. Some tales are useful reminders of an unhappy history—see, for example, what Nasser himself called his “Vietnam,” the civil war in Yemen, in which tens of thousands of Egyptian troops fought during the 1960s—whereas others seem less reflections of Nasser's policy influence than the long reach of his charisma, such as his apparent endorsement of Libya's new ruler, the star-struck Muammar al-Qaddafi, shortly before Nasser died in 1970. Rowell has a predilection for stomach-turning descriptions of torture and cruelty in prisons across the region, not all of which can be attributed to Nasser, and for what Rowell admits are “educated guesses” about the Egyptian president's role in the many coups of the day in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, this is an engaging account of an important era in modern Middle Eastern history.

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*Building a New Yemen: Recovery, Transition, and the International Community*

EDITED BY AMAT AL ALIM  
ALSOSWA AND NOEL BREHONY.  
I.B. Tauris, 2023, 248 pp.

This collection of essays is a useful primer on the politics and economics of Yemen, now mired in war and dysfunction. Although the authors do address the “fragmented interventions” of various international players, from the United States to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Iran does not figure prominently), most of the contributions are devoted to detailed and instructive discussions of tangled local political alliances and the severe economic challenges with which any postwar settlement will

have to contend. One essay offers a useful description of the history of the Houthi political movement and its tortured relationship with various local governments. Another assesses the scandalous decline in living standards across the country, no matter who is in control. Damning descriptions of international aid programs whose donors seem not to have known or cared whom they were supporting intersect with equally negative assessments of local political venality and economic greed. It is hard to conjure a happy end to this story, but this book provides a clear-eyed appraisal of where a conclusion to Yemen's long era of war will have to start.

## Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

*Qaum, Mulk, Sultanat: Citizenship and National Belonging in Pakistan*

BY ALI USMAN QASMI. Stanford University Press, 2023, 444 pp.

*Subcontinent Adrift: Strategic Futures of South Asia*

BY FERAZ HASSAN KHAN. Cambria Press, 2022, 280 pp.

*Pakistan and American Diplomacy: Insights From 9/11 to the Afghanistan Endgame*

BY TED CRAIG. Potomac Books, 2024, 296 pp.

Three books parse the travails of Pakistan in history and geopolitics. The country was founded as a state for Muslims, but

its national identity remains a subject of contestation and debate. Leaders have wrestled with whether many more Muslims—from India, from breakaway Bangladesh after 1971, or even from Afghanistan—should be allowed to claim Pakistani citizenship; whether non-Muslims in Pakistan should have equal rights with Muslims; whether the state should interpret the vast reservoir of Islamic texts in light of modern democratic and egalitarian values or adhere to more originalist interpretations; and whether the common bond of Islam overcame the separatist claims of large ethnolinguistic minorities such as the Baluchis and the Pashtuns. In a detailed study pitched to specialists, Qasmi excavates previously overlooked legal and religious archives to illustrate how these fundamental issues surfaced in debates over Pakistan's constitutions, the role of the government versus religious authorities in setting the dates of religious holidays, and the country's symbols—the precise shade of green on the nation's flag, the official dress code, the national anthem, and the choice of iconography on official stationery. These debates refracted the larger issues of national identity that continue to undermine the coherence of the Pakistani state.

Khan, a former Pakistani brigadier general, astutely analyzes Indian and Pakistani security strategies and shows how the Pakistani security establishment has made the country's inherently vulnerable situation even worse. The country is squeezed into a band, only 500 miles wide in the middle, between Afghanistan and India. By joining with the United States in the 1980s to support Afghan resistance to

Soviet occupation, Islamabad created a “Frankenstein’s monster” of jihadist forces, which it has had to battle on its own territory for the last 20 or more years. On the Indian front, the two sides are locked in a vicious cycle of threat and counterthreat. Pakistan sends proxy forces into Kashmir and elsewhere to weaken India, and India responds by upgrading its larger and better-equipped army to be ready to attack Pakistan. Islamabad’s obsession with security stifles the possibility that the country could gain economically from its location on the crossroads between Asia and the Middle East and from its large workforce, and gives the military unaccountable power to undermine democracy.

Craig, a U.S. diplomat in Islamabad in the 2010s, shows why Pakistan is unhappy with its outside patrons and why they are unhappy with it. The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan generated a flood of terrorists and refugees who threatened Pakistan’s security, but the Americans bristled at Pakistan’s effort to protect itself by maintaining cooperative relations with the Afghan Taliban. The United States supported the Pakistani military’s brutal domestic antiterrorism operations but then lectured the country on human rights and democracy. Chinese loans and investments entrenched the country in debt without appreciably spurring its development. The expensive and slow-moving Chinese expansion of Pakistan’s Gwadar port lacks an economic rationale and has antagonized the local Baluchi population. These outside powers neither approve of Pakistan’s support for militant groups that conduct terrorist attacks in Indian-administered

Kashmir nor consistently take Pakistan’s side on diplomatic issues against the more influential country of India. Dissatisfied with both China and the United States, Pakistan cannot let either patron go, lest the other gain too much influence.

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*Japan’s Ocean Borderlands:*

*Nature and Sovereignty*

BY PAUL KREITMAN. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 300 pp.

The remains of Japan’s once extensive Asian-Pacific empire include over 14,000 mostly uninhabited islands that range as far as 1,100 miles from the country’s five main islands and collectively define a maritime exclusive economic zone nearly 12 times as large as the country’s land territory. Kreitman describes the history of six island groups that were once alive with sea birds but became barren after hunters killed them off for their plumage and guano miners dug up the landscape. Before and during World War II, Japan feuded with the United States and other powers over control of these islands. Today, they have achieved new importance, both as sites of nature conservation and as the source of exclusive economic rights under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Working in the eye-opening field of “political ecology,” Kreitman shows how exploiting nature and conserving it both serve to “perform” sovereignty.

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*Letters From Prison*, vol. 1

BY ARNON NAMPA. Translated by The Article 112 Project. Justice in Translation, 2023, 74 pp.

*Letters From Prison*, vol. 2

BY ARNON NAMPA. Translated by The Article 112 Project. Justice in Translation, 2024, 77 pp.

The Thai *lèse majesté* law known as Article 112 has been applied with escalating severity in response to the growing resistance to the country's ten-year-old military regime. The lawyer and human rights activist Arnon Nampa is serving two consecutive four-year terms for speech acts that ostensibly fall afoul of the law. With more cases against him still pending, he writes to his children, "Daddy's . . . punishment might be imprisonment of more than 80 years." Nonetheless, he tells them, "What Daddy is going through now is the process of being punished and accepting the punishment, but not accepting guilt." On the contrary, "Going to prison this time is full of honor because it is part of the struggle for rights, freedom,

and democracy." He is terrified to think that his young son might not remember him. But at least, he hopes, his letters will help his two children learn about their father and understand why they cannot all be together. Meanwhile, his happiest moments are when he is asleep, dreaming of driving his daughter to school or bathing his son. The missives join a venerable tradition of prison letters that seek to influence events beyond the confining walls through their eloquence and humanity.

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**FOR THE RECORD**

The article "The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution" (March/April 2024) misstated the year the PLO accepted UN Security Council Resolution 242. It was 1988, not 1998.

The article "Kissinger and the Meaning of Détente" (March/April 2024) misstated a Soviet concept of power. It was the "correlation of forces," not the "constellation of forces." A caption in that article gave the wrong title for Leonid Brezhnev. He was general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, not the Soviet premier. 🌐

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THE ARCHIVE

October 1967

## “Asia After Viet Nam”

RICHARD M. NIXON

*Months before announcing his presidential campaign and with U.S. troops bogged down in Vietnam, Richard Nixon took to Foreign Affairs to lay out his vision for U.S. policy in Asia after the war ended. Most important, Washington would have to find a new approach to China that would pull it “back into the world community.” Less than five years later, Nixon had launched his opening to China and was visiting Beijing as president.*

Any American policy toward Asia must come urgently to grips with the reality of China. This does not mean, as many would simplistically have it, rushing to grant recognition to Peking, to admit it to the United Nations and to ply it with offers of trade—all of which would serve to confirm its rulers in their present course. It does mean recognizing the present and potential danger from Communist China, and taking measures designed to meet that danger. It also means distinguishing carefully between long-range and short-range policies, and fashioning short-range programs so as to advance our long-range goals.

Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever

outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation. But we could go disastrously wrong if, in pursuing this long-range goal, we failed in the short range to read the lessons of history.

The world cannot be safe until China changes. Thus our aim, to the extent that we can influence events, should be to induce change. The way to do this is to persuade China that it must change: that it cannot satisfy its imperial ambitions, and that its own national interest requires a turning away from foreign adventuring and a turning inward toward the solution of its own domestic problems. 🌐



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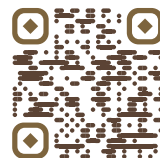
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