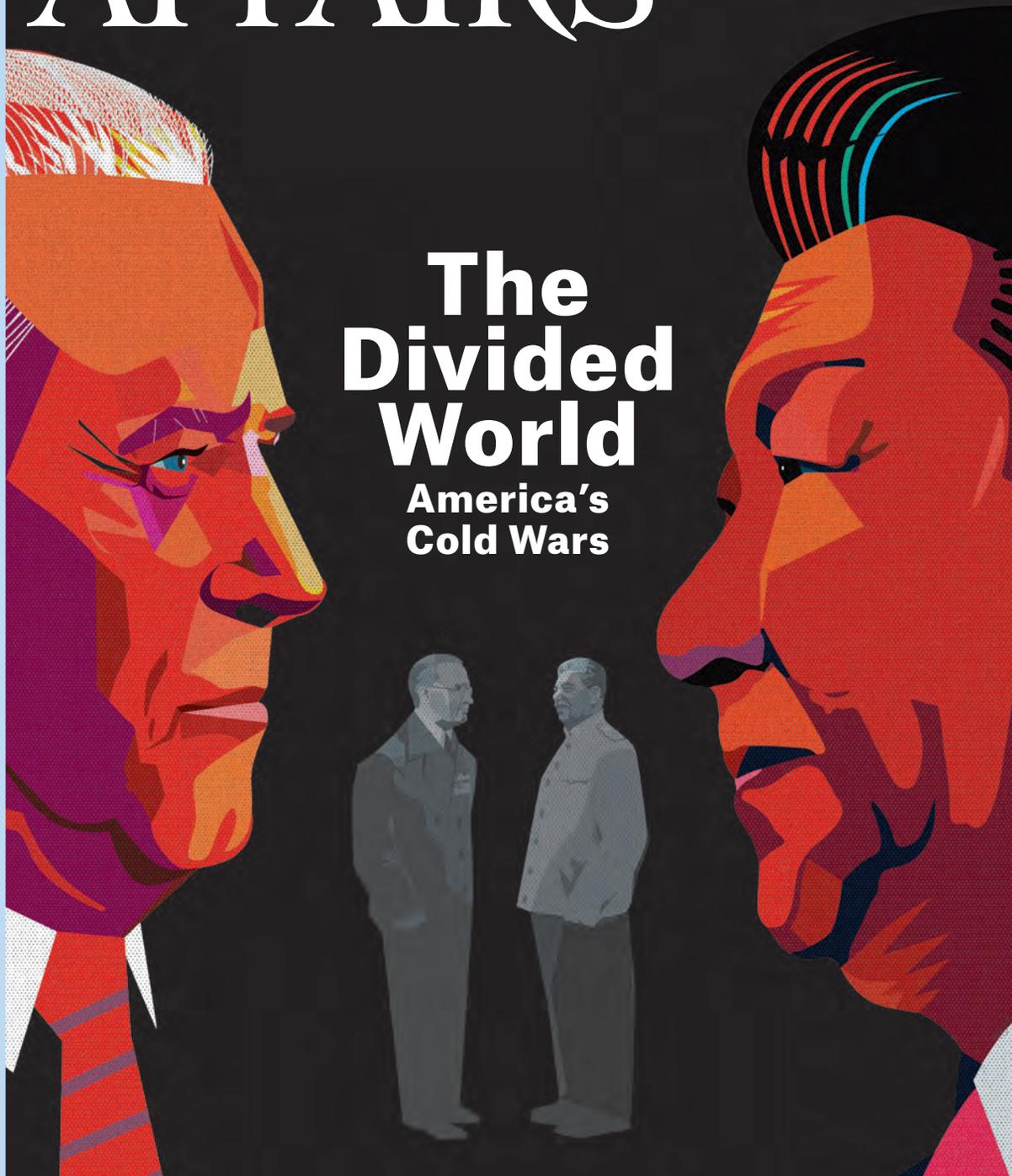


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The son of a British intelligence officer, **RORY STEWART** studied at Eton and Oxford before serving as an infantryman in the British army and later as a diplomat. While on leave from the British foreign service, he walked for 21 months across Nepal, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—a story he partly told in his best-selling book *The Places in Between*. Stewart went on to serve in Parliament and in various ministerial positions and now teaches at Yale. In “The Last Days of Intervention” (page 60), he blames the tragic outcome in Afghanistan on the international community’s inability to chart a path between overreach and neglect.



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From 1997 to 2001, **MADELEINE ALBRIGHT** served as the first female U.S. secretary of state; she had earlier served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Born in Prague, she, with her family, was forced to escape her Czech homeland twice—first from the Nazis and later from the communists—and they eventually settled in Denver when Albright was 11 years old. She is the author of multiple best-selling books and now teaches at Georgetown University. In “The Coming Democratic Revival” (page 99), she argues that democracy is poised for a global comeback.



THE DIVIDED WORLD

In September, in his first address to the UN General Assembly as president, Joe Biden pledged that the United States was not “seeking a new cold war or a world divided into rigid blocs.” That pledge was echoed, in different words, by Biden’s Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, and reinforced by warnings from a slew of other leaders about the grim consequences of a world split into warring camps. Yet rather than offering reassurance, this chorus served mostly to highlight just how dismal the geopolitical reality has become, with suspicion and acrimony threatening to sink trust and cooperation even in the face of shared existential challenges.

Is it too late? Has a new cold war already begun? Despite some clear differences between the U.S.-Soviet contest then and the U.S.-Chinese contest now, Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis argue that the time has come to carefully study the lessons of the former in order to prevent catastrophe in the latter. “The greatest unfought war of our time,” they write, can “enhance resilience in a Sino-American rivalry whose future, hot or cold, remains unclear.”

In their respective essays, M. E. Sarotte and Fiona Hill explore the lost opportunities and dashed hopes of the Cold War’s aftermath: how a moment of both American triumph and new global possibility gave way to competition and disarray. Sarotte digs deep into the

archives to reveal how and why Washington’s relationship with Moscow so rapidly regressed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Hill, reflecting on her experience as both a longtime Russia watcher and the senior Russia official on Donald Trump’s National Security Council, shows how effectively and advantageously the Kremlin has exploited American dysfunction—above all during the administration in which she served.

Finally, John Mearsheimer contends that sharpening U.S.-Chinese competition is just the latest act in what he has called “the tragedy of great-power politics.” The mystery, he argues, is not why the relationship between Washington and Beijing has so dramatically deteriorated but why Americans ever thought a different outcome was possible; now, in his view, a darker, less delusional worldview offers the best chance of averting disaster.

In the decades since the onset of what we may someday come to call the First Cold War, historians and policymakers have endlessly studied its opening moves and argued over what, if anything, could have been done differently. To invoke the Cold War parallel is not to endorse it as either desirable or inevitable. Instead, it should serve as a reminder: that now is the time to bring scrutiny, care, and wisdom to the opening moves of this new competition, before it truly is too late.

—*Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, Editor*



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The New Cold War

America, China, and the Echoes of History

Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis

Is the world entering a new cold war? Our answer is yes and no. Yes if we mean a protracted international rivalry, for cold wars in this sense are as old as history itself. Some became hot, some didn't: no law guarantees either outcome. No if we mean *the* Cold War, which we capitalize because it originated and popularized the term. That struggle took place at a particular time (from 1945–47 to 1989–91), among particular adversaries (the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies), and over particular issues (post–World War II power balances, ideological clashes, arms races). None of those issues looms as large now, and where parallels do exist—growing bipolarity, intensifying polemics, sharpening distinctions between autocracies and democracies—the context is quite different.

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JOHN LEWIS GADDIS is Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University and the author of *On Grand Strategy*.

It's no longer debatable that the United States and China, tacit allies during the last half of the last Cold War, are entering their own new cold war: Chinese President Xi Jinping has declared it, and a rare bipartisan consensus in the United States has accepted the challenge. What, then, might previous contests—the one and only Cold War and the many earlier cold wars—suggest about this one?

The future is, of course, less knowable than the past, but it's not in all respects unknowable. Time will continue to pass, the law of gravity will still apply, and none of us will outlive our physiological term limits. Are similarly reliable knowns shaping the emerging cold war? If so, what unknowns lurk within them? Thucydides had such predictabilities and surprises in mind when he cautioned, 24 centuries ago, that the future would resemble the past but not in all respects reflect it—even as he also argued that the greatest single war of his time revealed timeless truths about all wars to come.

Our purpose here, then, is to show how the greatest unfought war of our time—the Soviet-American Cold War—as well as other prior struggles, might expand experience and enhance resilience in a Sino-American rivalry whose future, hot or cold, remains unclear. That history provides a framework within which to survive uncertainty, and possibly even thrive within it, whatever the rest of the twenty-first century throws our way.

THE BENEFITS OF BOUNDARIES

Our first known is geography, which continental drift will in time alter, but not in our time. China will remain



chiefly a land power, beset by an ancient dilemma. If, in search of strategic depth, it tries to expand its perimeters, it is likely to overstretch its capabilities and provoke resistance from anxious neighbors. If, to regain solvency, it contracts its perimeters, it risks inviting in enemies. Even behind great walls, uneasy lie the heads of those whose boundaries remain unfixed.

The United States, in contrast, benefits from boundaries that geography has determined. That's why the United Kingdom, after 1815, chose not to contest its offspring's primacy in North America: sustaining armies across 3,000 miles of ocean would have been too costly even for the world's greatest naval power. Geography gave the Americans hybrid hegemony: control of a continent and unimpeded access to two vast oceans, which they quickly connected with a transcontinental railroad. That allowed them to develop the military-industrial means with which to rescue Europeans in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War from the attempted continental consolidations they confronted.

Why, though, from so safe a perch, did the Americans undertake such daunting commitments? Perhaps they looked in the mirror and feared what they saw: their own example of a country dominating a continent and its oceanic approaches. The trigger warning was Russia's completion of its trans-Siberian railroad in 1904, a slapdash project soon overtaken by war and revolution—but not before eliciting the British geopolitician Halford Mackinder's portentous warning that “heartland” control of Eurasian “rimlands” could empower new and globally ambitious

forms of hybrid hegemony. President Woodrow Wilson had that prospect in mind when he declared war on imperial Germany in 1917, and President Franklin Roosevelt took the argument one step further in 1940–41, insisting—correctly, historians have now confirmed—that Adolf Hitler's ultimate target was the United States itself. So when the American diplomat George Kennan, in 1947, called for “containing” an emboldened World War II ally, the Soviet Union, he had long legacies on which to draw.

Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) evokes similar concerns. The “belt” is to be a network of rail and road corridors across Eurasia. The “road” will be sea routes in the Indo-Pacific and, if global warming permits, also in the Arctic, sustained by bases and ports in states made friendly by the BRI's “benefits.” Nothing Germans or Russians ever attempted combined such ambition with such specificity: China seeks hybrid hegemony on an unprecedented scale. Which brings us to our first unknown: What might that imply for Eurasia and the world beyond?

XI'S WORLD ORDER

There's a remarkable record, over the past three centuries, of offshore balancers thwarting aspirants to onshore domination: first Great Britain against France in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then an Anglo-American coalition against Germany twice during the first half of the twentieth century, followed by a U.S.-led coalition against the Soviet Union in the second half. It's too easy to claim that maritime states project power without generating resistance, for if that were the case, colonialism would

still thrive. But the relationship between geography and governance is clear enough to be our second known.

Continents—North America excepted—tend to nurture authoritarians: where geography fails to fix boundaries, harsh hands claim the right and duty to do so, whether as protection from external dangers or to preserve internal order. Liberty, in these situations, is decreed from the top down, not evolved from the bottom up. But that holds such regimes responsible for what happens. They can't, as democracies regularly do, spread the blame. Autocracies that fall short—such as the Soviet Union—risk hollowing themselves out from within.

China's post-Cold War leaders, having compulsively studied the Soviet example, sought to avoid repeating it by transforming Marxism into consumer capitalism without at the same time allowing democracy. They thereby flipped what they saw as Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's greatest error: permitting democracy without ensuring prosperity. This latest "rectification of names"—the ancient Chinese procedure of conforming names to shifting realities—seemed until recently to have succeeded. The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's post-Mao pro-market reforms solidified support for the regime and made China a model for much of the rest of the world. Xi, on taking power, was widely expected to continue along that path.

But he hasn't. Instead, Xi is cutting off access to the outside world, defying international legal norms, and encouraging "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, none of which seems calculated to win or retain allies. At home, he is enforcing orthodoxy, whitewashing history, and op-

pressing minorities in ways defunct Russian and Chinese emperors might have applauded. Most significant, he has sought to secure these reversals by abolishing his own term limits.

Hence our second unknown: Why is Xi undoing the reforms, while abandoning the diplomatic subtlety, that allowed China's rise in the first place? Perhaps he fears the risks of his own retirement, even though these mount with each rival he imprisons or purges. Perhaps he has realized that innovation requires but may also inspire spontaneity within his country. Perhaps he worries that increasingly hostile international rivals won't allow him unlimited time to achieve his aims. Perhaps he sees the prevailing concept of world order itself as at odds with a mandate from Heaven, Marx, or Mao.

Or it could be that Xi envisions a world order with authoritarianism at its core and with China at its center. Technology, he may expect, will make human consciousness as transparent as satellites made the earth's surface during the Cold War. China, he may assume, will never alienate its foreign friends. Expectations within China, he may suppose, will never find reasons not to rise. And Xi, as he ages, will gain in the wisdom, energy, and attentiveness to detail that only he, as supreme leader, can trust himself to provide.

But if Xi really believes all of this, then he's already losing sight of the gaps between promises and performance that have long been Catch-22s for authoritarian regimes. For if, like Gorbachev's predecessors did, you ignore such fissures, they'll only worsen. But if, like Gorbachev himself, you acknowledge them, you'll undermine the claim to

infallibility on which legitimacy in an autocracy must rest. That is why graceful exits by authoritarians have been so rare.

THE ROOTS OF RESILIENCE

Democracy in America has its own gaps between promises and performance, so much so that it seems at times to suffer from Brezhnev-like paralysis. The United States differs from China, though, in that distrust of authority is constitutionally mandated. The separation of powers secures a center of gravity to which the nation can return after whatever bursts of activity crises may have demanded. The result is what evolutionary biologists call “punctuated equilibrium”: a resilience rooted in rapid recovery from unforeseen circumstances. China has it the other way around. Respect for authority permeates its culture, but stability is punctuated by protracted upheavals when authority fails. Recovery, in the absence of gravity, can require decades. Autocracies often win sprints, but smart investors put their marathon money on democracies. Our third known, then, is sharply different roots of resilience.

The pattern emerges clearly from the two costliest civil wars of the nineteenth century. The Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64 took some 20 million Chinese lives, about five percent of the population. The American Civil War of 1861–65 killed 750,000 combatants, 2.5 percent of a much less crowded country. And yet by the testimony of its current leaders, China after the Taiping Rebellion underwent decades of turmoil from which it emerged only with Mao’s proclamation of the People’s Republic in 1949. The United States, by that same account,

recovered quickly enough to join the European predators victimizing China at the end of the nineteenth century and has continued doing so ever since. Leave aside issues of accuracy in this view of history. Our point is that Xi’s growing reliance on this narrative and the nationalism it stokes implies an inflammability in Chinese culture that is currently useful to the regime—but that might not be easily extinguished.

Hence our third unknown: Can Xi turn internal outrage on and off, as Mao did repeatedly during his years in power? Or is Xi locking himself into the same dependence on external hostility without which Joseph Stalin, as Kennan put it in 1946, did not know how to rule? Because nothing could reassure such a regime, Kennan insisted, only cumulative frustrations would convince Stalin or, more likely, his successors that it was in their best interests to alter their system’s worst aspects. That strategy depended, however, on neither side setting deadlines: Kennan carefully pointed out that it would never have worked with Hitler, who had a fixed timetable, dictated by his own mortality, for achieving his aims.

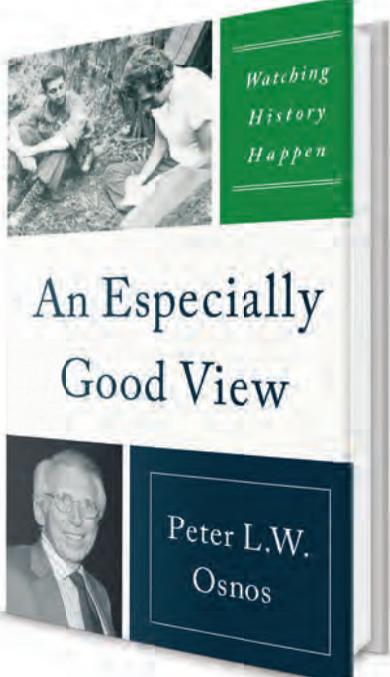
Mao, craftily, gave his regime 100 years to recover Taiwan. Xi has ruled out passing that problem from generation to generation, although he has not yet set a date for resolving it. Nonetheless, his increasingly aggressive rhetoric adds to the risk that the Taiwan issue could cause a Sino-American cold war to become hot, for the United States has deliberately left its own Taiwan policy unclear. All of which eerily evokes how Europe went to war in 1914: an ambiguity of great-power commitments combined with the absence of an escalation off switch.

ANOTHER LONG PEACE?

Except that we have, in the Cold War, an intervening known to draw on: how that conflict transformed itself into a “long peace.” The first half of the twentieth century offered no support for the idea that great-power rivalries could be resolved peacefully. “A future war with Soviet Russia,” the American diplomat Joseph Grew predicted in 1945, “is as certain as anything in the world can be certain.” What allowed the Cold War superpowers to escape that prospect, and how relevant are those circumstances today?

One answer is that history itself during those years became prophecy. Given what most leaders had experienced in a second world war, few anywhere were eager to risk a third. It helped also that those in Washington and Moscow, if for different reasons, saw time as an ally: the Americans because the strategy of containment relied on time to thwart Soviet ambitions, Stalin because he expected time to produce fratricidal capitalist wars that would ensure proletarian revolutionary triumphs. Once Stalin’s successors realized the extent of his miscalculations, it was too late to reverse their effects. The Soviet Union spent the rest of the Cold War failing to catch up.

But what if determinations to avoid the next war fade with the memories of the last one? That’s how some historians have explained World War I: a century had passed without a European great war. Does it matter that three-quarters of a century now separate American and Chinese leaders from the great wars of their predecessors? Americans have had some combat experience in the “limited” and “low-intensity” conflicts in



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which they have been involved—with decidedly mixed results—but the Chinese, except for their brief invasion of Vietnam in 1979, haven't fought any significant wars for more than half a century. That may be why Xi, with his “heads bashed bloody” rhetoric, seems to celebrate bellicosity: he may not know what its costs can be.

A second way in which historians have explained the “long peace” is that nuclear weapons suppressed optimism about how wars might end. There's no way to know for sure what deterrence in the Cold War deterred: that's a history that didn't happen. But this in itself suggests a balanced lack of resolve, for whatever Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy may have said publicly, neither wanted to die for Berlin. Instead, they accepted a walled city inside a partitioned country in the middle of a divided continent. No grand design could have produced such an oddity, and yet it held up until the Cold War evolved its own peaceful, if equally unexpected, end. None of this could have happened without nuclear capabilities, for only they could put lives on the line simultaneously in Washington and Moscow.

So what about Washington and Beijing? Even with recent enhancements, the Chinese deploy less than ten percent of the number of nuclear weapons the United States and Russia retain, and that number is only 15 percent of what the two superpowers had at the height of the Cold War. Does this matter? We doubt it, given what Khrushchev achieved in 1962: despite a nine-to-one disadvantage in nuclear weapons, he deterred the post-Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba that

Kennedy had been planning. The United States has lived ever since with its own adjacent anomaly: a communist island in the middle of its self-proclaimed Caribbean sea of influence.

It's even less plausible today that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan, for that island is more important to Beijing than Cuba or Berlin ever was to Moscow. Yet that implausibility could lead Xi to believe that he can invade Taiwan without risking a U.S. nuclear response. China's growing cyber- and antisatellite capabilities may also encourage him, for they bring back possibilities of surprise attacks that the Cold War's reconnaissance revolution seemed, for decades, to have diminished.

But then what? What would Xi do with Taiwan if he captured it? The island is not Hong Kong, an easily controlled city. Nor is it Crimea, with a largely acquiescent population. Nor are other big islands in the region—Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand—teetering dominoes. Nor would the United States, with its unmatched power-projection capabilities, be likely to “sit idly by,” as the Chinese might put it: “ambiguity” means keeping options open, not ruling out any response at all.

One such response might be to exploit the overstretch that comes from China's forcefully expanding its perimeters, the self-created problem that once plagued Moscow. Suppressing the “Prague Spring” was simple enough for the Soviet Union in 1968, until military morale plummeted when the Czechs made it clear to their occupiers that they didn't feel “liberated.” The Brezhnev Doctrine—the commitment

to act similarly wherever else “socialism” might be at risk—alarmed more than it reassured the leaders of other such states, notably Mao, who secretly began planning his 1971 “opening” to Washington. By the time the Soviet Union invoked the doctrine again, in Afghanistan in 1979, it had few allies left anywhere and none on whose reliability it could count.

Xi’s threats to Taiwan could have a similar effect in states surrounding China, which may in turn look for their own “openings” to Washington. Extravagant Chinese claims in the South China Sea have already increased anxieties in that region: witness Australia’s unexpected alignment with the Americans and the British on nuclear submarines, as well as India’s expanded cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies. Central Asians may not indefinitely ignore repressions of Tibetans and Uyghurs. Debt traps, environmental degradation, and onerous repayment terms are souring recipients on the BRI’s benefits. And Russia, the original source of early-twentieth-century concerns about the “heartland,” could now find itself surrounded by Chinese “rimlands” in Asia, eastern and southeastern Europe, and even the Arctic.

All of which raises the possibility that American unipolarity may end not with a precarious Sino-American bipolarity but with a multipolarity that restrains Beijing by making assertiveness self-defeating. Metternich and Bismarck would have approved. So would a crafty American Cold Warrior who, following their example, hoped to deploy a similar strategy. “I think it will be a safer world and a better world,” President Richard Nixon told *Time* magazine in 1972, “if

we have a strong, healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan, each balancing the other.”

VARIETIES OF SURPRISE

Our final known is the inescapability of surprises. International systems are anarchic, theorists tell us, in that no component within them is fully in control. Strategy may reduce uncertainty but will never eliminate it: humans are fallible, and artificial intelligences will surely be also. There are, though, patterns of competition across time and space. It may be possible to derive from these—especially from the Soviet-American Cold War—categories of surprises likely to occur in the Sino-American cold war.

Existential surprises are shifts in the arenas within which great powers compete, for which neither is responsible but that endanger them both. U.S. President Ronald Reagan had this in mind when he surprised Gorbachev at their first meeting, in 1985, with the claim that a Martian invasion would force the United States and the Soviet Union to settle their differences overnight: Weren’t nuclear weapons at least as dangerous? Martians haven’t yet arrived, but we do face two new existential threats: the accelerating rate of climate change and the almost overnight outbreak, in 2020, of a global pandemic.

Neither is unprecedented. Climates have always fluctuated, which is why it used to be possible to walk from Siberia to Alaska. Thucydides described the plague that struck Athens in 430 BC. What is new is the extent to which globalization has accelerated these phenomena, raising the question of whether geopolitical rivals can collab-

oratively address the deep histories that are increasingly altering their own.

The Soviet-American Cold War showed that cooperation to avoid catastrophe need not be explicit: no treaty specified that nuclear weapons, after 1945, would not again be used in war. Instead, existential dangers produced tacit cooperation where negotiated formalities almost surely would have failed. Climate change may present similar opportunities in the Sino-American cold war, even if COVID-19 has so far spurred only Chinese abrasiveness. The point should be to keep landing sites for Martian equivalents open—not to welcome existential problems but to explore whether collaborative outcomes can result from them.

Intentional surprises originate in efforts by single competitors to startle, confuse, or dismay their adversaries. Surprise attacks, as on Pearl Harbor, fit this category, and intelligence failures can never be ruled out. The Cold War's greatest surprises, however, arose from reversals of polarity, of which Mao was a master. When he leaned east, in 1949–50, he blindsided the Truman administration and opened the way for the Korean War and a communist offensive in Asia. When he leaned west, in 1970–71, he made the United States an ally while rendering the Soviet Union vulnerable on two fronts, a disadvantage from which it never recovered.

That's why an American "opening" to Moscow might someday turn it against Beijing. The original Sino-Soviet split took two decades to develop, with the Eisenhower administration seeking to speed the process by driving Mao into a mutually repulsive relationship with Khrushchev. Xi's BRI may be accom-

plishing this on its own with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has long complained about U.S. "containment" of Russia. Chinese "containment," from the Kremlin's perspective, may ultimately become the greater danger.

One other form of intentional surprise comes from supposed subordinates who turn out not to be. Neither Washington nor Moscow wanted the offshore island crises of 1954–55 and 1958: Chiang Kai-shek, in Taipei, and Mao, in Beijing, made them happen. The communist leader Walter Ulbricht's warnings of an imminent East German collapse forced Khrushchev to provoke the Berlin crises of 1958–59 and 1961. Smaller powers pursuing their own agendas derailed Soviet-American détente in the 1970s: Egypt by attacking Israel in 1973; Cuba by intervening in Africa in 1975–77; and Hafizullah Amin in Afghanistan, whose reported contacts with U.S. officials triggered a self-defeating Soviet invasion in 1979. None of this, though, was unprecedented: Thucydides showed Corinth and Corcyra doing something similar to the Spartans and the Athenians 24 centuries earlier.

The potential for tails wagging dogs in the Sino-American cold war is already evident: rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait have resulted as much from changes in Taiwanese politics in recent years as from deliberate decisions in Washington or Beijing. And while China is trying, through the BRI, to create a system that maximizes its power, it may end up building, through its relationships with insecure and unstable regimes, just the sort of inverse dependency that vexed the Cold War superpowers. That can be a formula for volatil-

ity: history is full of instances in which local actors embroiled larger powers.

Finally, there are systemic surprises. The Cold War ended in a way no one at the time had expected: with the sudden collapse of a superpower and its accompanying ideology. Two visionaries who had foreseen such a possibility, however, were that doctrine's mid-nineteenth-century founders, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Capitalism, they were sure, would eventually destroy itself by creating too great a gap between the means of production and the benefits it distributed. Kennan, a century later, turned Marx and Engels upside down. The gap between productive means and distributed benefits would instead, he insisted in 1946–47, bring about the collapse of communism within the Soviet Union and its post–World War II satellite states. Kennan didn't welcome what finally happened in 1990–91: the implosion of the Soviet Union itself was too great a disruption in the balance of power even for him. But he did understand how stresses within societies can themselves greatly surprise.

No one can predict when some new geopolitical earthquake might occur: geological earthquakes are difficult enough to anticipate. Geologists do know, however, where to expect them: that is why California gets earthquake warnings but Connecticut does not. Does the very brittleness of authoritarian regimes—their strange belief in the immortality of top-down command structures—leave them similarly vulnerable? Or does the entrenched recalcitrance of democracies—their resistance to being commanded—pose even greater dangers to them? Only time will tell, probably sooner than we expect.

STRATEGY AND UNCERTAINTY

This aggregation of knowns, unknowns, and surprises leaves us with the historical equivalent of a three-body problem: given the coexistence of predictability and its opposite, we'll know the outcome only when we've seen it. Strategy, however, doesn't have that luxury. Its success requires living with uncertainties, of which the future will not be in short supply. The strategy of containment, although imperfect in its accomplishments and at times tragic in its failures, did successfully manage its own contradictions while buying the time necessary for those within the Soviet system to become obvious, even, in the end, to its own leaders.

It did this chiefly by combining simplicity of conception with flexibility in application, for even the clearest of destinations may not always, or even often, reveal the paths by which to reach them. It may be necessary, for example, to cooperate with Stalin to defeat Hitler, or with Tito to resist Stalin, or with Mao to confound Brezhnev: not all evils are equally so at all times. Nor are arms buildups always bad or negotiations always good: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan employed both to begin transformations of the adversaries confronting them. Kennan distrusted such elasticities in the pursuit of containment, but it was precisely this maneuverability that ensured the strategy's safe arrival at its intended destination.

A second way in which containment succeeded was by treating spontaneity as a strength. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was as much a European as an American creation, in striking contrast to its Moscow-dominated rival, the Warsaw Pact. Nor, outside of Eu-

rope, did the United States insist on ideological uniformity among its friends. The objective instead was to make diversity a weapon against a rival bent on suppressing it: to use the resistance to uniformity embedded within distinctive histories, cultures, and faiths as a barrier against the homogenizing ambitions of would-be hegemons.

A third asset, although it didn't always seem so at the time, was the American election cycle. Quadrennial stress tests for containment unnerved its architects, upset sympathetic pundits, and alarmed overseas allies, but they were at least safeguards against ossification. No long-term strategy can succeed if it allows aspirations to outrun its capabilities or capabilities to corrupt its aspirations. How, though, do strategists develop the self-awareness—and the self-confidence—to acknowledge that their strategies are not working? Elections are, for sure, blunt instruments. They are better, though, than having no means of reconsideration apart from the demise of aged autocrats, the timing of whose departure from this world is not given to their followers to know.

There are thus, in the United States, no exclusively foreign affairs. Because Americans proclaim their ideals so explicitly, they illustrate departures from them all the more vividly. Domestic failures such as economic inequality, racial segregation, sexual discrimination, environmental degradation, and top-level extraconstitutional excesses all go on display for the world to see. As Kennan pointed out in the most quoted article ever published in these pages, “Exhibitions of indecision, disunity and internal disintegration within this country” can “have an exhilarating

effect” on external enemies. To defend its external interests, then, “the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”

Easily said, not easily done, and therein lies the ultimate test for the United States in its contest with China: the patient management of internal threats to our democracy, as well as tolerance of the moral and geopolitical contradictions through which global diversity can most feasibly be defended. The study of history is the best compass we have in navigating this future—even if it turns out to be not what we'd expected and not in most respects what we've experienced before. 🌐



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Containment Beyond the Cold War

How Washington Lost the Post-Soviet Peace

M. E. Sarotte

On December 15, 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker arrived in Moscow amid political chaos to meet with Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, who was at the time busy wresting power from his nemesis, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Yeltsin had recently made a shocking announcement that he and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine were dismantling the Soviet Union. Their motive was to render Gorbachev impotent by transforming him from the head of a massive country into the president of nothing.

In the short run, it was a brilliant move, and within ten days, it had succeeded completely. Gorbachev resigned, and the Soviet Union collapsed. The long-term consequences, however, were harder to grasp.

Even before Yeltsin's gambit, Baker had begun worrying about whether the desire of some Soviet republics to become independent might yield bloodshed. On

November 19, 1991, he had asked one of Gorbachev's advisers, Alexander Yakovlev, if Ukraine's breaking away would prompt violent Russian resistance. Yakovlev was skeptical and responded that there were 12 million Russians in Ukraine, with "many in mixed marriages," so "what sort of war could it be?" Baker answered simply: "A normal war."

Now, with Yeltsin upping the ante by calling for the Soviet Union's complete destruction, Baker had a new fear. What would happen to the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal after the collapse of centralized command and control? As he counseled his boss, President George H. W. Bush, a disintegrating empire with "30,000 nuclear weapons presents an incredible danger to the American people—and they know it and will hold us accountable if we don't respond."

Baker's goal for his December 1991 journey was thus to ascertain who, after the Soviet Union's dissolution, would retain the power to authorize a nuclear launch and how that fateful order might be delivered. Soon after arriving, he cut to the chase: Would Yeltsin tell him?

Remarkably, the Russian president did. Yeltsin's openness to Baker was partly a gambit to win U.S. help in his struggle with Gorbachev and partly an attempt to secure financial aid. But it was also a sign that he wanted a fresh start in Moscow's relations with the West, one characterized by openness and trust. Yeltsin and Baker soon began working in tandem to ensure that only one nuclear successor state—Russia—would ultimately emerge from the Soviet collapse.

This collaboration survived Bush's 1992 election loss. Yeltsin continued the effort with President Bill Clinton, U.S. Secretaries of Defense Les Aspin and

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William Perry, and Strobe Talbott, Clinton's top Russia adviser, among others, to ensure that former Soviet atomic weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and above all Ukraine were either destroyed or relocated to Russian soil. During a 1997 summit, Yeltsin even asked Clinton whether they could cease having nuclear triggers continually at hand: "What if we were to give up having to have our finger next to the button all the time?" Clinton responded, "Well, if we do the right thing in the next four years, maybe we won't have to think as much about this problem."

By the end of the 1990s, however, that trust had largely vanished. Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's handpicked successor, divulged little in grudging 1999 conversations with Clinton and Talbott. Instead of sharing Russia's launch protocols, Putin skillfully played up his perceived need for a harder Kremlin line by describing the grim consequences of reduced Russian power: in former Soviet regions, he said, terrorists now played soccer with decapitated heads of hostages.

As Putin later remarked, "By launching the sovereignty parade"—his term for the independence movements of Soviet republics in 1990–91—"Russia itself aided in the collapse of the Soviet Union," the outcome that had opened the door to such gruesome lawlessness. In his view, Moscow should have dug in, both within the union and abroad, instead of standing aside while former Soviet bloc states jumped ship to join the West. "We would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from Eastern Europe," he said.

Once firmly in power, Putin began backtracking on the democratization of

the Yeltsin era and on cooperative ventures with Washington. Although there were notable episodes reprising the spirit of the early 1990s—expressions of sympathy after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and a nuclear accord in 2010—the basic trend line was negative. The relationship reached frightening new lows during Russia's 2008 conflict with Georgia and its 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and it has sunk even further since 2016, owing to the revelation of Russia's cyberattacks on U.S. businesses, institutions, and elections.

Why did relations between Washington and Moscow deteriorate so badly? History is rarely monocausal, and the decay was the cumulative product of U.S. and Russian policies and politics over time. But it is hard to escape the fact that one particular U.S. policy added to the burdens on Russia's fragile young democracy when it was most in need of friends: the way that Washington expanded NATO.

Expansion itself was a justifiable response to the geopolitics of the 1990s. NATO had already been enlarged a number of times. Given that former Soviet bloc states were now clamoring to join the alliance, it was neither unprecedented nor unreasonable to let them in.

What was unwise was expanding the alliance in a way that took little account of the geopolitical reality. The closer NATO moved its infrastructure—foreign bases, troops, and, above all, nuclear weapons—to Moscow, the higher the political cost to the newly cooperative relationship with Russia. Some U.S. policymakers understood this problem at the time and proposed expanding in contingent phases to minimize the damage. That promising alternative

mode of enlargement would have avoided drawing a new line across Europe, but it faced strong opposition within Washington.

Instead, advocates of a one-size-fits-all manner of expansion triumphed. Washington's error was not to enlarge the alliance but to do so in a way that maximized Moscow's aggravation and gave fuel to Russian reactionaries. In 2014, Putin justified his takeover of Crimea as a necessary response to NATO's "deployment of military infrastructure at our borders."

Cold wars are not short-lived affairs, so thaws are precious. Neither country made the best possible use of the thaw in the 1990s. Today, as the United States and Russia spar over sanctions, cyberwarfare, and much else, the choices made three decades ago carry enduring significance. The two countries still possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads and thus the ability to kill nearly every living creature on earth. Yet between them, both states have shredded nearly every remaining arms control accord, and they have shown little willingness to replace them with new agreements.

Understanding the decay in U.S.-Russian relations—and how the manner of NATO expansion contributed to it—can help the United States better manage long-term strategic competition in the future. As the 1990s showed, the way that Washington competes can, over time, have just as profound an impact as the competition itself.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

To grasp what went wrong in U.S.-Russian relations, it is necessary to look beyond the familiar binary that catego-

rizes NATO enlargement as either good or bad and instead focus on the manner in which the alliance grew. After the collapse of Soviet power in Europe—and in response to urgent requests from states emerging from Moscow's domination, now justifiably eager to choose a security alliance for themselves—NATO swelled in multiple rounds of enlargement to 30 states, which together were home to nearly one billion people.

New historical evidence shows that U.S. leaders were so focused on enlarging NATO in their preferred manner that they did not sufficiently consider the perils of the path they were taking or how their choices would magnify Russia's own self-harming choices. Put simply, expansion was a reasonable policy; the problem was how it happened.

Although NATO is an alliance of many countries, it is ultimately the United States' views that matter most when the Article 5 guarantee—the pledge to treat an attack on one as "an attack against them all"—is at stake. Hence, a U.S.-centric, one-size-fits-all approach prevailed, despite the concerns of other members about a crucial geographic problem: the closer the alliance's borders moved to Russia, the greater the risk that NATO expansion would derail the newfound cooperation with Moscow and endanger the dramatic progress being made on arms control.

Scandinavian alliance members, such as Norway, savvy about living in a neighborhood that was Soviet-adjacent but not Soviet-controlled, had in earlier decades wisely customized their NATO memberships. As the only original NATO member sharing a border with the Soviet Union, Norway had decided against either the stationing of foreign

bases or the deployment of foreign forces on its territory in peacetime and had ruled out nuclear weapons either on its land or in its ports. All of this was done to keep long-term frictions with Moscow manageable. That approach could have been a model for central and eastern European states and the Baltics, since they, too, occupy a region close to but not controlled by Russia. Some policymakers understood this dynamic at the time and supported the creation of a framework under which new allies might gain contingent memberships in phases through the so-called Partnership for Peace (PfP), an organization launched in 1994 to allow non-NATO European and post-Soviet states to affiliate themselves with the alliance.

But American hubris, combined with tragic decisions by Yeltsin—most notably, to shed the blood of his opponents in Moscow in 1993 and in Chechnya in 1994—provided ammunition to those arguing that Washington did not need phased enlargement to manage Russia. Instead, they maintained, the United States needed to pursue the policy of containment beyond the Cold War.

By the mid-1990s, “not one inch”—a phrase originally intended to signal that NATO’s jurisdiction would not move one inch eastward—had gained the opposite meaning: that no territory should be off-limits to full-membership enlargement and that there should be no binding limitations on infrastructure of any sort. And this happened just as Yeltsin was succumbing to illness and Putin was rising through the ranks in Russia. But U.S. leaders persisted, despite knowing, as Talbott put it in an internal U.S. memo on the alliance’s role in quelling violence in

Bosnia, that “the big babies in Moscow,” although “a real head case,” had immense “capacity for doing harm.”

CROSSING THE LINE

Understanding the collapse in U.S.-Russian relations requires returning to a time when things were going right: the 1990s. The devil, in this case, really is in the details—specifically, in three choices that Washington made about NATO expansion, one under Bush and two under Clinton, each of which cumulatively foreclosed other options for European security.

The first choice came early. By November 24, 1989, just two weeks after the Berlin Wall’s unexpected fall, Bush was already sensing the magnitude of more changes yet to come. As protesters toppled one government after another in central and eastern Europe, it seemed clear to him that new leaders in that region would abandon the Warsaw Pact, the involuntary military alliance with the Soviet Union. But what then?

According to U.S. records, Bush put the issue to the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher: “What if [the] East European countries want to leave [the] Warsaw Pact. NATO must stay.” Thatcher replied with her startlingly preferred option: she was in favor of “keeping . . . the Warsaw Pact.” According to British records, she saw the pact as an essential “fig leaf for Gorbachev” amid the humiliation of the Soviet collapse. She also “discouraged [Bush] from coming out publicly at this stage in support of independence for the Baltic Republics,” since now was not the time to question European borders.

Bush, however, was unconvinced. He “expressed concern about seeming to

consign Eastern Europe indefinitely to membership of the Warsaw Pact.” The West “could not assign countries to stay” in that pact “against their will.” Bush preferred to solve this problem by pushing NATO beyond the old Cold War line.

The West German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, subsequently proposed another option: combine NATO and the Warsaw Pact into a “composite of common, collective security,” within which the two alliances “could both finally dissipate.” Former dissidents in central Europe went even further, suggesting the most far-reaching option: their region’s complete demilitarization.

All these options were anathema to Bush, who most certainly did not want NATO to dissipate or the United States’ leading role in European security to disappear with it. In 1990, however, Gorbachev still had leverage. Thanks to the Soviet victory over the Nazis in World War II, Moscow had hundreds of thousands of troops in East Germany and the legal right to keep them there. Germany couldn’t reunify without Gorbachev’s permission. And the Soviet leader had another source of power: public opinion.

As the Cold War’s frontline, a divided Germany had the highest concentration of nuclear arms per square mile anywhere on the planet. The weapons in West Germany had been installed to deter a Soviet invasion, given how difficult it would have been for NATO’s conventional forces alone to stop a massive advance. Had deterrence failed, the missiles’ use would have rendered the heart of Europe uninhabitable—a terrifying prospect to Germans, who, because they were living at ground zero, arguably had more skin in the game than their NATO allies.

Hence, if Gorbachev had asked the Germans to trade those nuclear weapons for Soviet permission to reunify, a sizable number would have gladly agreed. Even better for Moscow, 1990 was an election year in West Germany. The chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had to be particularly attuned to voter sentiment on reunification and the nuclear issue. As Baker’s top aide, Robert Zoellick, put it at the time, if Kohl decided to signal a willingness to pay Moscow’s price, whatever that was, in advance of the election and “the Germans work[ed] out unification with the Soviets,” NATO would get “dumped.” This reality gave Moscow the ability to undermine the established order of transatlantic relations.

There were speculative discussions between the U.S. State Department and the West Germans on February 2, 1990, about how best to proceed in this delicate moment and what NATO might do beyond the Cold War line, such as “extend[ing] its territorial coverage to . . . eastern Europe.” Genscher raised this idea in a negative sense, meaning he was certain that Moscow would not allow reunification unless such coverage was explicitly ruled out. But Bush and his National Security Council sensed that they might be able to finesse the way NATO moved eastward, namely by restricting what could happen on eastern German territory after Germany joined the alliance. Although they did not use the term, they were following the Scandinavian strategy.

But a week later, Baker—out of the loop with evolving White House thinking because of his extended travels—unwittingly overstepped his bounds by offering Gorbachev a now infamous hypothetical bargain that echoed Gen-

scher's thinking, not Bush's: What if Gorbachev allowed reunification to proceed and Washington agreed "that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?"

The secretary soon had to drop this wording, however, after realizing that it was inconsistent with Bush's preferences. Within a couple of weeks, Baker was having to advise allies quietly that his use of "the term NATO 'jurisdiction' was creating some confusion" and "should probably be avoided in the future." It was a sign that NATO would shift eastward after all, with a special status for eastern Germany, which ultimately would become Europe's only guaranteed nuclear-free zone.

Through this move to limit NATO infrastructure in eastern Germany, and by playing on Moscow's economic weakness, Bush shifted Gorbachev's attention away from the removal of nuclear weapons in the western territory and toward economic inducements to allow for German reunification. In exchange for billions of deutsche marks in various forms of support, the Soviet leader ultimately allowed Germany to reunify and its eastern regions to join NATO on October 3, 1990, thus permitting the alliance to expand across the old Cold War frontline.

By October 11, 1991, Bush could even indulge in speculation about a more ambitious goal. He asked Manfred Wörner, then NATO's secretary-general, whether the alliance's efforts to establish a liaison organization for central and eastern European states might also "include the Baltics." Wörner's feelings were clear, and Bush did not contradict him. "Yes," Wörner said, "if the Baltics apply they should be welcomed."

NO SECOND-TIER GUARANTEES

By December 1991, the Soviet Union was gone. Soon, Bush would be gone as well, after he lost to Clinton in the 1992 U.S. presidential election. By the time the new president got his team in place, in mid-1993, hyperinflation and corruption were already weakening the prospects of democracy in Russia. Worse, Yeltsin soon made a series of tragic decisions that cast doubt on the country's ability to develop into a peaceful, democratic neighbor to the new states on its borders.

In October 1993, clashing with anti-reform extremists in the parliament, Yeltsin had tanks fire on the parliamentary building. The fighting killed an estimated 145 people and wounded 800 more. Despite, or perhaps because of, the attack, extremists did well in the subsequent parliamentary elections, on December 12, 1993. The party that won the most votes was the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which was "neither liberal nor democratic, but by all appearances fascist," as the historian Sergey Radchenko has put it.

For a while, a budding friendship between "Bill and Boris" distracted the world from these troubling events. The two leaders developed the closest relationship ever to exist between an American president and a Russian leader, with Clinton visiting Moscow more times than any U.S. president before or since.

But Clinton also wanted to respond to demands from central and eastern European countries seeking to join NATO. In January 1994, he launched a novel plan for European security, one aimed at putting those countries on the path to NATO membership without antagonizing Russia. This was PfP, an



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idea largely conceived of by General John Shalikashvili, the Polish-born chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his advisers. It resembled the Scandinavian strategy—but writ large.

PfP's connection to NATO membership was intentionally left vague, but the idea was roughly that would-be NATO members could, through military-to-military contacts, training, and operations, put themselves on a path to full membership and the Article 5 guarantee. This strategy offered a compromise sufficiently acceptable to key players—even Poland, which wanted full membership and did not like the idea of having to spend time in the waiting room, but understood that it had to follow Washington's lead.

PfP also had the benefit of not immediately redrawing a line across Europe between states with Article 5 protection and those without. Instead, a host of countries in disparate locations could join the partnership and then progress at their own pace. This meant that PfP could incorporate post-Soviet states—including, crucially, Ukraine—even if they were unlikely to become NATO allies. As Clinton put it to the visiting German chancellor, Kohl, on January 31, 1994: "Ukraine is the linchpin of the whole idea." The president added that it would be catastrophic "if Ukraine collapses, because of Russian influence or because of militant nationalists within Ukraine." Clinton continued: "One reason why all the former Warsaw Pact states were willing to support [PfP] was because they understood" that it could provide space for Ukraine in a way that NATO could not.

The genius of PfP was that it balanced these competing interests and

even opened its door to Russia as well, which would eventually join the partnership. Clinton later noted to NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana that PfP "has proven to be a bigger deal than we had expected—with more countries, and more substantive cooperation. It has grown into something significant in its own right."

Opponents of PfP within the Clinton administration complained that by making central and eastern European countries wait to gain the full Article 5 guarantee, the partnership gave Moscow a de facto veto over when, where, and how NATO would expand. They argued instead for extending the alliance as soon as possible to deserving new democracies. And in late 1994, Yeltsin gave PfP critics ammunition by approving what he reportedly thought would be a high-precision police action to counter separatists in the Chechnya region. Instead, he started what became a brutal, protracted, and bloody conflict.

Central and eastern European states seized on the bloodshed to argue that they might be next if Washington and NATO did not protect them with Article 5. A new term arose internally in the Clinton administration: "neo-containment." Such thinking, along with the relationships that Polish President Lech Walesa and Czech President Vaclav Havel established with Clinton, increasingly made an impact on the American president.

So, too, did domestic political pressures. In the November 1994 U.S. midterm elections, the Republican Party took the Senate and the House. Voters had endorsed NATO enlargement as part of the Republicans' winning platform, the "Contract with America." Clinton wanted to win a second term in 1996,

and the midterm results factored into his decision to abandon the option of expanding NATO through an individualized, gradual process involving PfP. He shifted instead to a one-size-fits-all enlargement with full guarantees from the start. Reflecting this strategy, NATO issued a public communiqué in December 1994 stating outright: “We expect and would welcome NATO enlargement that would reach to democratic states to our East.” Yeltsin, conscious of these words’ significance, was enraged.

Privately, the State Department sent the U.S. Mission to NATO a text “which the U.S. believes should emerge from the alliance’s internal deliberations on enlargement.” The text declared that “security must be equal for all allies” and that “there will be no second-tier security guarantees”—shorthand for contingent memberships or infrastructure limits. With that, although it continued to exist, PfP was marginalized.

Clinton’s shift almost caused his secretary of defense to resign. In Perry’s view, the progress on arms control in the early 1990s had been nothing short of astounding. A nuclear superpower had fallen apart, and only one nuclear-armed country had emerged from its ruins. Other post-Soviet successor states were joining the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. No weapons had detonated. There were new agreements on safeguards and transparency about the number and location of warheads. These were matters of existential importance, on which the United States and Russia had made historic progress, and now PfP’s opponents were, in his view, throwing a spanner into the works by pursuing a

form of NATO expansion that Moscow would find far more threatening.

Perry held on but later regretted that he “didn’t fight more effectively for the delay of the NATO decision.” As he wrote in 2015, “The descent down the slippery slope began, I believe, with the premature NATO expansion,” and the “downsides of early NATO membership for Eastern European nations were even worse than I had feared.” As an unfortunate corollary, the Russians immediately concluded that PfP had been a ruse, even though it had not.

COST PER INCH

The significance of Clinton’s shift would become apparent over time. On his first European trip as president, in January 1994, Clinton had asked NATO leaders, “Why should we now draw a new line through Europe just a little further east?” That would leave a “democratic Ukraine” sitting on the wrong side. The partnership was the best answer, because it opened a door but also gave the United States and its NATO allies “the time to reach out to Russia and to these other nations of the former Soviet Union, which have been almost ignored through this entire debate.” Once PfP was abandoned, a new dividing line became inevitable.

Having jettisoned PfP’s method of allowing a wide array of countries to join as loose affiliates, the Clinton administration now needed to decide how many countries to add as full NATO members. The math seemed simple: the more countries, the greater the damage to relations with Russia. But that deceptively simple calculation hid a deeper complication. Given Moscow’s sensitivities, expansion to former Soviet republics

lics, such as the Baltics and Ukraine, or to countries with particular features, such as bases that hosted foreign forces and nuclear weapons, would yield a much higher cost per inch.

This raised two questions: To decrease the cost per inch, should full-membership enlargement avoid moving beyond what Moscow considered to be a sensitive line, namely the former border of the Soviet Union? And should new members have any binding restrictions on what could happen on their territory, echoing the Scandinavian accommodations and the East German nuclear prohibition?

To both questions, the Clinton team's answer was a hard no. As early as June 1995, Talbott had already begun pointedly telling Baltic leaders that the first countries to enter NATO as new members would certainly not be the last. By June 1997, he could be blunter. The Clinton administration "will not regard the process of NATO enlargement as finished or successful unless or until the aspirations of the Baltic states have been fulfilled." He was so consistent in this view that his staff christened it "the Talbott principle." The manner of enlargement was set: it should proceed without regard for the cost per inch—the opposite of the Scandinavian strategy.

In April 1999, at NATO's 50th anniversary summit in Washington, D.C., the alliance publicly welcomed the interest of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (along with six more countries) in full membership. The United States could insist, correctly, that it had never recognized the Soviet Union's 1940 occupation of the Baltics. But that did not change the significance of the move: full-membership expansion would not

stop at the former Soviet border. Washington brushed aside quiet expressions of concern from Scandinavian leaders, who noted the desirability of sticking with more contingent solutions for their neighborhood.

Coming on top of the alliance's March 1999 military intervention in Kosovo—which Russia fiercely opposed—this turned 1999 into an inflection point for U.S.-Russian relations. Moscow's decision to again escalate the brutal combat in Chechnya later that year added to the sense that the post-Cold War moment of cooperation was collapsing. An ailing Yeltsin reacted with bitterness to U.S. criticism of the renewed violence in Chechnya, complaining to journalists that "Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia" because he had forgotten "for a minute, for a second, for half a minute, forgotten that Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." And in Istanbul on November 19, 1999, on the margin of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe summit, Yeltsin's verbal attacks on Clinton were so extreme that Talbott, as he recalled in his memoirs, decided that Yeltsin had become "unhinged." According to the U.S. transcript of a brief private conversation between Clinton and Yeltsin, the Russian leader made sweeping demands. "Just give Europe to Russia," Yeltsin said, because "the U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans."

Clinton tried to deflect the tirade, but Yeltsin kept pressing, adding, "Give Europe to itself. Europe never felt as close to Russia as it does now." Clinton replied, "I don't think the Europeans would like this very much." Abruptly, Yeltsin stood up and announced, "Bill, the

meeting is up. . . . This meeting has gone on too long.” Clinton would not let his Russian counterpart go, however, without asking who would win the upcoming Russian election in 2000. A departing Yeltsin replied curtly, “Putin, of course.”

The two presidents had patched up relations after spats before, but now Clinton was out of time. The meeting in Istanbul would be his last with Yeltsin as president. Returning home to Moscow, Yeltsin decided to exit the political scene. Serious heart disease, alcoholism, and fear of prosecution had worn the Russian president down.

Yeltsin had already decided that Putin was his preferred successor, because he believed that the younger man would, in the words of the Russia expert Stephen Kotkin, protect his interests, “and maybe those of Russia as well.” On December 14, 1999, according to his memoirs, Yeltsin confided to Putin that, on the last day of the year, he would make the younger man acting president.

As promised, on New Year’s Eve, Yeltsin shocked his nation with the broadcast of a brief, prerecorded resignation speech. The president’s stiff, weak delivery of his scripted words intensified the atmosphere of melancholy. Seated against the backdrop of an indifferently decorated Christmas tree, he asked Russians for “forgiveness.” He apologized, saying that “many of our shared dreams didn’t come true” and that “what we thought would be easy turned out to be painfully difficult.” Putin would subsequently uphold his end of the bargain by, in one of his first official acts, granting Yeltsin immunity.

Yeltsin left the Kremlin around 1 PM Moscow time, feeling immensely

relieved to have no obligations for the first time in decades, and told his driver to take him to his family. En route, his limousine’s phone rang. It was the president of the United States. Yeltsin told Clinton to call back at 5 PM, even though the American president was preparing to host hundreds of guests at the White House that day for a lavish millennial celebration.

Meanwhile, the new leader of Russia made Clinton wait a further 26 hours before making contact. On January 1, 2000, Putin finally found nine minutes for a call. Clinton tried to put a good face on the abrupt transition, saying, “I think you are off to a very good start.”

DASHED HOPES

It soon became apparent that Putin’s rise, in terms of Moscow’s relations with Washington, was more an end than a start. The peak of U.S.-Russian cooperation was now in the past, not least as measured in arms control. Letting a decades-long trend lapse, Washington and Moscow failed to conclude any major new accords in the Clinton era.

Instead, nuclear targeting of U.S. and European cities resumed under a Russian leader who, in December 1999, had started a reign that would be measured in decades. For U.S. relations with Russia, these events signaled, if not a return to Cold War conditions precluding all cooperation, then certainly the onset of a killing frost.

Of course, for central and eastern Europeans who had suffered decades of brutality, war, and suppression, entering NATO on the cusp of the twenty-first century was the fulfillment of a dream of partnership with the West. Yet the sense of celebration was muted.

As U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright remarked, “A decade earlier, when the Berlin Wall had come down, there was dancing in the streets. Now the euphoria was gone.”

The world created in the 1990s never fulfilled the hopes that arose after the collapse of both the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Initially, there was a widespread belief that the tenets of liberal international order had succeeded and that residents of all the states between the Atlantic and the Pacific, not just the Western ones, could now cooperate within that order. But both U.S. and Russian leaders repeatedly made choices at odds with their stated intentions to promote that outcome. Bush talked about a Europe whole, free, and at peace; Clinton repeatedly proclaimed his wish to avoid drawing a line. Yet both ultimately helped create a new dividing line across post-Cold War Europe. Gorbachev sought to save the Soviet Union; Yeltsin sought lasting democratization for Russia. Neither one succeeded.

NATO expansion was not the sole source of these problems. But the manner of the alliance’s enlargement—in interaction with tragic Russian choices—contributed to their extent and impact. Put differently, it is not possible to separate a serious assessment of enlargement’s role in eroding U.S.-Russian relations from how it happened. Washington’s error was not to expand the alliance but to do so in a way that maximized friction with Moscow. That error resulted from the United States misjudging both the permanence of cooperative relations with Moscow and the extent of Putin’s willingness to damage those relations.

The all-or-nothing expansion strategy also incurred those costs without locking in democratization. Former Warsaw Pact states succeeded in joining NATO (and eventually the European Union), only to find that membership did not automatically guarantee their democratic transformations. Subsequent research has shown that the prospect of incrementally gaining membership in international organizations—the process offered by PfP—would likely have more effectively solidified political and institutional reforms.

Even as strong a supporter of NATO enlargement as Joe Biden, then a U.S. senator, sensed in the 1990s that the way the alliance was enlarging would cause problems. As he put it in 1997, “Continuing the Partnership for Peace, which turned out to be much more robust and much more successful than I think anyone thought it would be at the outset, may arguably have been a better way to go.”

FOCUS ON THE HOW

What should Washington learn from this history? One of the biggest contemporary challenges for the United States is the way that confrontation between the West and Russia has once again become the order of the day. During Donald Trump’s divisive presidency, Democrats and Republicans agreed on little, but at least some segment of the GOP was never comfortable with Trump’s embrace of Putin. A shared sense of mission in dealing with Moscow offers a path toward a rare U.S. domestic consensus—one that leads back to NATO, still standing despite Trump’s toying with the idea of a U.S. withdrawal.

Even with Trump gone, however, critics continue to question the alliance’s

worth. Some, such as the historian Stephen Wertheim, do so in general terms, arguing that Washington should no longer “continue to fetishize military alliances” as if they were sacred obligations. Other critics have more specific complaints, particularly regarding the recent chaotic withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan. Even Armin Laschet, at the time the candidate for German chancellor from the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union (a party normally strongly supportive of the Atlantic alliance), condemned the withdrawal as “the biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding.” European allies lamented what they saw as an unconscionable lack of advance consultation, which eviscerated early hopes of a new, Biden-inspired golden age for the alliance.

Pundits should think twice about writing off NATO, however, or letting the chaos in Kabul derail post-Trump attempts at repairing transatlantic relations. European concerns are valid, and there is clearly a need for a vigorous debate over what went wrong in Afghanistan. But critics need to think about how a call to downgrade or dismantle the alliance will land in a time of turmoil. The Trump years, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Biden’s Afghan pullout have all damaged the structure of transatlantic relations. When a house is on fire, it is not time to start renovations—no matter how badly they were needed before the fire started.

There is also a larger takeaway from this history of NATO expansion, one relevant not just to U.S. relations with Russia but also to ties with China and other competitors. A flawed execution, both in terms of timing and in terms of

process, can undermine even a reasonable strategy—as the withdrawal from Afghanistan has shown. Even worse, mistakes can yield cumulative damage and scar tissue when a strategy’s implementation is measured in years rather than months. Success in long-term strategic competition requires getting the details right. 🌐

The Kremlin's Strange Victory

How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and Fuels American Decline

Fiona Hill

Donald Trump wanted his July 2018 meeting in Helsinki with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to evoke memories of the momentous encounters that took place in the 1980s between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Those arms control summits had yielded the kind of iconic imagery that Trump loved: strong, serious men meeting in distant places to hash out the great issues of the day. What better way, in Trump's view, to showcase his prowess at the art of the deal?

That was the kind of show Trump wanted to put on in Helsinki. What emerged instead was an altogether different sort of spectacle.

By the time of the meeting, I had spent just over a year serving in the Trump administration as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Coun-

cil. Like everyone else who worked in the White House, I had, by then, learned a great deal about Trump's idiosyncrasies. We all knew, for instance, that Trump rarely read the detailed briefing materials his staff prepared for him and that in meetings or calls with other leaders, he could never stick to an agreed-on script or his cabinet members' recommendations. This had proved to be a major liability during those conversations, since it often seemed to his foreign counterparts as though Trump was hearing about the issues on the agenda for the first time.

When Trump was winging it, he could be persuaded of all kinds of things. If a foreign visitor or caller was one of his favored strongmen, Trump would always give the strongman's views and version of events the benefit of the doubt over those of his own advisers. During a cabinet meeting with a visiting Hungarian delegation in May 2019, for example, Trump cut off acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who was trying to make a point about a critical European security issue. In front of everyone, Trump told Shanahan that the autocratic Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, had already explained it all to him when they had met in the Oval Office moments earlier—and that Orbán knew the issue better than Shanahan did, anyway. In Trump's mind, the Hungarian strongman simply had more authority than the American officials who worked for Trump himself. The other leader was his equal, and his staff members were not. For Trump, all pertinent information trickled down from him, not up to him. This tendency of Trump's was lamentable when it played out behind closed doors, but it

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was inexcusable (and indeed impossible to explain or justify) when it spilled out into public view—which is precisely what happened during the now legendarily disastrous press conference after Trump’s meeting with Putin in Helsinki.

Before the press conference, Trump was pleased with how things had gone in his one-on-one meeting with Putin. The optics in Finland’s presidential palace were to Trump’s liking. The two men had agreed to get U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations going again and to convene meetings between their countries’ respective national security councils. Trump was keen to show that he and Putin could have a productive, normal relationship, partly to dispel the prevailing notion that there was something perverse about his ties to the Russian president. Trump was eager to brush away allegations that he had conspired with the Kremlin in its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or that the Russians had somehow compromised him—matters that at the time of the meeting, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was actively investigating.

Things went wrong as soon as the press conference began. Trump expected public praise for meeting with Putin and tackling the nuclear threat. But the U.S. journalists in attendance were not interested in arms control. They wanted to know about the one-on-one meeting and what Putin might have said or not said regarding 2016 and election interference. Jonathan Lemire of the Associated Press asked Trump whether he believed Putin, who had repeatedly denied that his country had done anything to meddle in the election, or the U.S. intelligence agencies, which had concluded the opposite. Lemire

pressed Trump: “Would you now, with the whole world watching, tell President Putin—would you denounce what happened in 2016 and would you warn him to never do it again?”

Trump balked. He really didn’t want to answer. The only way that Trump could view Russia’s broad-based attack on the U.S. democratic system was through the lens of his own ego and image. In my interactions with Trump and his closest staff in the White House, it had become clear to me that endorsing the conclusions of the U.S. intelligence agencies would be tantamount to admitting that Trump had not won the 2016 election. The questions got right to the heart of his insecurities. If Trump said, “Yes, the Russians interfered on my behalf,” then he might as well have said outright, “I am illegitimate.”

So as he often did in such situations, Trump tried to divert attention elsewhere. He went off on a tangent about a convoluted conspiracy theory involving Ukraine and the emails of his 2016 opponent, Hillary Clinton, and then produced a muddled, rambling answer to Lemire’s question, the crux of which was this:

My people came to me. . . . They said they think it’s Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it’s not Russia. I will say this. I don’t see any reason why it would be. . . . But I have confidence in both parties. . . . I have great confidence in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.

The outcome of the Helsinki press conference was entirely predictable, which was why I and others had counseled against holding it at all. But it was

still agonizing to watch. I was sitting in front of the podium as Trump spoke, immediately behind the U.S. national security adviser and the secretary of state. I saw them stiffen slightly, and I contemplated throwing a fit or faking a seizure and hurling myself backward into the row of journalists behind me. I just wanted to end the whole thing. Perhaps contrary to the expectations of many American observers, even Putin was somewhat dismayed. He reveled in the national and personal humiliation that Trump was courting, but he also knew that Trump's careless remarks would provoke a backlash in the United States and thus further constrain the U.S. president's already limited room to maneuver on Russia policy. The modest agreements for further high-level meetings were already out the window. As he exited the room, Putin told his press secretary, within earshot of our interpreter, that the press conference had been "bullshit."

Trump's critics immediately pounced on his bizarre conduct in Helsinki. It was more evidence that Trump was in league with Putin and that the Kremlin held sway over the American president. The following year, Mueller's final investigative report determined that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Trump campaign had in fact been willing to exploit any derogatory information about Clinton that came its way from whatever source, including Russia. In seeking to thwart Clinton's bid to become the first female American president, the Trump campaign and the Kremlin had been acting in parallel; their goals had aligned. Mueller concluded that although this did not amount to a criminal conspiracy, there was

plenty of evidence of an extensive and sophisticated Russian political influence operation against the United States.

The Mueller report also sketched the contours of a different, arguably more pernicious kind of "Russian connection." In some crucial ways, Russia and the United States were not so different—and Putin, for one, knew it. In the very early years of the post-Cold War era, many analysts and observers had hoped that Russia would slowly but surely converge in some ways with the United States. They predicted that once the Soviet Union and communism had fallen away, Russia would move toward a form of liberal democracy. By the late 1990s, it was clear that such an outcome was not on the horizon. And in more recent years, quite the opposite has happened: the United States has begun to move closer to Russia, as populism, cronyism, and corruption have sapped the strength of American democracy. This is a development that few would have foreseen 20 years ago, but one that American leaders should be doing everything in their power to halt and reverse.

Indeed, over time, the United States and Russia have become subject to the same economic and social forces. Their populations have proved equally susceptible to political manipulation. Prior to the 2016 U.S. election, Putin recognized that the United States was on a path similar to the one that Russia took in the 1990s, when economic dislocation and political upheaval after the collapse of the Soviet Union had left the Russian state weak and insolvent. In the United States, decades of fast-paced social and demographic changes and the Great Recession of 2008–9 had weakened the country and increased its

vulnerability to subversion. Putin realized that despite the lofty rhetoric that flowed from Washington about democratic values and liberal norms, beneath the surface, the United States was beginning to resemble his own country: a place where self-dealing elites had hollowed out vital institutions and where alienated, frustrated people were increasingly open to populist and authoritarian appeals. The fire was already burning; all Putin had to do was pour on some gasoline.

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

When Trump was elected, Putin and the Kremlin made no attempt to conceal their glee. They had thought that Clinton would become president and that she would focus on criticizing Putin's style of governance and constraining Russia. They had steeled themselves and prepared for the worst. Instead, they got the best possible outcome from their perspective—a populist, nativistic president with no prior experience in foreign policy and a huge, fragile ego. Putin recognized Trump as a type and grasped his political predilections immediately: Trump, after all, fit a mold that Putin himself had helped forge as the first populist leader to take power in a major country in the twenty-first century. Putin had blazed the trail that Trump would follow during his four years in office.

The essence of populism is creating a direct link with “the people” or with specific groups within a population, then offering them quick fixes for complex problems and bypassing or eliminating intermediaries such as political parties, parliamentary representatives, and established institutions.

Referendums, plebiscites, and executive orders are the preferred tools of the populist leader, and Putin has used them all over the past 20 years. When he came to power on December 31, 1999, at the end of a decade of crisis and strife in Russia, Putin promised to fix everything. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin did not belong to a formal political party. He was the champion of a looser, personalized movement. After 2000, Putin turned Russian presidential elections into national referendums on himself by making sure his rivals were obscure (or wholly manufactured) opposition candidates. And at every critical juncture during his time in power, Putin has adjusted Russia's political system to entrench himself in the Kremlin. Finally, in 2020, he formally amended the constitution so that in theory (and health permitting), he can run for reelection and stay in power until 2036.

All of Putin's machinations greatly impressed Trump. He wanted to “get along” with Russia and with Putin personally. Practically the only thing Trump ever said to me during my time in his administration was to ask, in reference to Putin, “Am I going to like him?” Before I could answer, the other officials in the room got up to leave, and the president's attention shifted; such was life as a female adviser in the Trump White House.

Trump took at face value rumors that Putin was the richest man in the world and told close associates that he admired Putin for his presumed wealth and for the way he ran Russia as if it were his own private company. As Trump freely admitted, he wanted to do the same thing. He saw the United

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States as an extension of his other private enterprises: the Trump Organization, but with the world's largest military at its disposal. This was a troubling perspective for a U.S. president, and indeed, over the course of his time in office, Trump came to more closely resemble Putin in political practice than he resembled any of his American predecessors.

At times, the similarities between Trump and Putin were glaringly obvious: their shared manipulation and exploitation of the domestic media, their appeals to their own versions of their countries' "golden age," their compilation of personal lists of "national heroes" to appeal to their voters' nostalgia and conservatism—and their attendant compilation of personal lists of enemies to do the same for their voters' darker sides. Putin put statues of Soviet-era figures back on their pedestals and restored Soviet memorials that had been toppled under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Trump tried to prevent the removal of statues of Confederate leaders and the renaming of American military bases honoring Confederate generals. The two men also shared many of the same enemies: cosmopolitan, liberal elites; the American financier, philanthropist, and open society promoter George Soros; and anyone trying to expand voting rights, improve electoral systems, or cast a harsh light on corruption in their countries' respective executive branches.

Trump also aped Putin's willingness to abuse his executive power by going after his political adversaries; Trump's first impeachment was provoked in part by his attempt to coerce the government of Ukraine into smearing one of

his most formidable opponents, Joe Biden, ahead of the 2020 presidential election. And Trump imported Putin's style of personalist rule, bypassing the professional civil servants in the federal government—a nefarious "deep state," in Trump's eyes—to rely instead on the counsel and interventions of cronies. Foreign politicians called in chits with celebrities who had personal connections to the president and his family, avoiding their own embassies in the process. Lobbyists complained to whomever they could reach in the West Wing or the Trump family circle. They were quick to set attack dogs on anyone perceived as an obstacle and to rile up pro-Trump trolls on the Internet, because this always seemed to work. Influence peddlers both domestic and foreign courted the president to pursue their own priorities; the policymaking process became, in essence, privatized.

The event that most clearly revealed the convergence of politics in the United States and Russia during Trump's term was his disorganized but deadly serious attempt to stage a self-coup and halt the peaceful transfer of executive power after he lost the 2020 election to Biden. Russia, after all, has a long history of coups and succession crises, dating back to the tsarist era, including three during the past 30 years. In August 1991, hard-liners opposed to Gorbachev's reforms staged a brief putsch, declaring a state of emergency and placing Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation home. The effort fizzled, and the coup was a debacle, but it helped bring down the Soviet Union. Two years later, violence erupted from a bitter dispute between the Russian parliament and Yeltsin over

the respective powers of the legislature and the president in competing drafts of a new constitution. Yeltsin moved to dissolve parliament after it refused to confirm his choice for prime minister. His vice president and the Speaker of the parliament, in response, sought to impeach him. In the end, Yeltsin invoked “extraordinary powers” and called out the Russian army to shell the parliament building, thus settling the argument with brute force.

The next coup was a legal one and came in 2020, when Putin wanted to amend Yeltsin’s version of the constitution to beef up his presidential powers—and, more important, to remove the existing term limits so that he could potentially stay on as president until 2036. As a proxy to propose the necessary constitutional amendments, Putin tapped Valentina Tereshkova, a loyal supporter in parliament and, as a cosmonaut and the first woman to travel to outer space, an iconic figure in Russian society. Putin’s means were subtler than Yeltsin’s in 1993, but his methods were no less effective.

It would have been impossible for any close observer of recent Russian history to not recall those episodes on January 6, when a mob whipped up by Trump and his allies—who had spent weeks claiming that the 2020 election had been stolen from him—stormed the U.S. Capitol and tried to stop the formal certification of the election results. The attack on the Capitol was the culmination of four years of conspiracies and lies that Trump and his allies had fed to his supporters on social media platforms, in speeches, and on television. The “Big Lie” that Trump had won the election was built on the

backs of the thousands of little lies that Trump uttered nearly every time he spoke and that were then nurtured within the dense ecosystem of Trumpist media outlets. This was yet one more way in which, under Trump, the United States came to resemble Russia, where Putin has long solidified his grip on power by manipulating the Russian media, fueling nationalist grievances, and peddling conspiracy theories.

I ALONE

Trump put the United States on a path to autocracy, all the while promising to “make America great again.” Likewise, Putin took Russia back toward the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union under the guise of strengthening the state and restoring the country’s global position. This striking convergence casts U.S.-Russian relations and the exigencies of Washington’s approach to Moscow in a new light.

Historically, U.S. policies toward Russia have been premised on the idea that the two countries’ paths and expectations diverged at the end of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western analysts had initially thought that Russia might embrace some of the international institutional arrangements that Washington and its allies had long championed. That, of course, did not happen. And under Putin, U.S.-Russian relations have become more frazzled and fraught than at any point in the 1990s.

There is something confounding about the ongoing confrontation between the two countries, which seems like an artifact from another era. During the Cold War, the stakes of the conflict were undeniable. The Soviet

Union posed an existential threat to the United States and its allies, and vice versa. The two superpowers faced off in an ideological clash between capitalism and communism and a geopolitical tussle over spheres of influence in Europe. Today, Russia maintains the capacity to obliterate the United States, but the Soviet Union and the communist system are gone. And even though foreign policy circles in Washington and Moscow still view U.S.-Russian relations through the lens of great-power competition, the struggle for Europe is over. For the United States, China, not Russia, poses the greatest foreign policy challenge of the twenty-first century, along with the urgent existential threats of climate change and global pandemics.

Yet a sense of confrontation and competition persists. Americans point to a pattern of Russian aggression and provocation: Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent assaults on Ukraine's territory and sovereignty, its intervention in Syria in 2015, the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the frequent ransomware attacks and email hacks attributed to Russian actors. Russians, for their part, point to the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the U.S. bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo war in 1999, Washington's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, U.S. support for the "color revolutions" that took place in post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine in the first decade of this century, and the uprisings in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In Moscow, all of these serve as proof that

Washington is hell-bent on invasion and regime change and also has Russia and Putin in its cross hairs.

In truth, most American policymakers simply wish that Russia would just go away so they can refocus their attention on what really matters. For their Russian counterparts, however, the United States still represents the main opponent. That is because, as a populist leader, Putin sees the United States not just as a geopolitical threat to Russia but also as a personal threat to himself. For Putin, foreign policy and domestic policy have fused. His attempt to retain Russia's grip on the independent countries that were once part of the Soviet Union and to reassert Moscow's influence in other global arenas is inseparable from his effort to consolidate and expand his authority at home.

Putin sits at the apex of a personalized and semi-privatized kleptocratic system that straddles the Russian state and its institutions and population. He has embedded loyalists in every important Russian institution, enterprise, and industry. If Putin wants to retain the presidency until 2036—by which time he will be 84 years old and will have become the longest-serving modern Russian ruler—he will have to maintain this level of control or even increase it, since any slippage might be perceived as weakness. To do so, Putin has to deter or defeat any opponents, foreign or domestic, who have the capacity to undermine his regime. His hope is that leaders in the United States will get so bogged down with problems at home that they will cease criticizing his personalization of power and will eschew any efforts to transform Russia similar to those the U.S. government carried out in the 1990s.

Putin also blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy to distract the Russian population from the distortions and deficiencies of his rule. On the one hand, he stresses how decadent and dissolute the United States has become and how ill suited its leaders are to teach anyone a lesson on how to run a country. On the other hand, he stresses that the United States still poses a military threat and that it aims to bring Russia to its knees. Putin's constant refrain is that the contest between Russia and the United States is a perpetual Darwinian struggle and that without his leadership, Russia will not survive. Without Putin, there is no Russia. He does not want things to get completely out of hand and lead to war. But he also does not want the standoff to fade away or get resolved. As the sole true champion of his country and his people, he can never be seen to stand down or compromise when it comes to the Americans.

Similarly, Putin must intimidate, marginalize, defuse, or defeat any opposition to his rule. Anyone who might stand in his way must be crushed. In this sense, the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Clinton fall into the same category. In Putin's view, if Clinton had become U.S. president, she would have continued to hound him and hold him to task, just as she did when she served as secretary of state in the Obama administration, by promoting democracy and civil society to root out corruption in Russia.

Of course, Navalny is far more dangerous to Putin than Clinton would have been. Navalny is a Russian, not a foreigner. He is a next-generation alternative to Putin: young, handsome,

charismatic, patriotic, and defiant. He poses a threat to Putin not only owing to their differences but also because of a few key similarities: like Putin, Navalny is a populist who heads a movement rather than a party, and he has not been averse to playing on nationalist sentiments to appeal to the same Russian voters who form Putin's base. Navalny has survived an audacious assassination attempt and has humiliated Putin on numerous occasions. By skillfully using digital media and slick video skills to highlight the excesses of the Russian leader's kleptocratic system, Navalny has gotten under Putin's skin. He has forced the Kremlin to pay attention to him. This is why Navalny is in jail and why Putin has moved swiftly to roll up his movement, forestalling any chance that Navalny might compete for the presidency in 2024.

THE TASK AT HAND

The current U.S.-Russian relationship no longer mirrors the Cold War challenge, even if some geopolitical contours and antagonisms persist. The old U.S. foreign policy approach of balancing deterrence with limited engagement is ill suited to the present task of dealing with Putin's insecurities. And after Trump's disastrous performance at Helsinki, it is also clear that the arms control summitry that took the edge off the acute phase of the Cold War and nuclear confrontation can provide little guidance for how to anchor the future relationship. The primary problem for the Biden administration in dealing with Russia is rooted in the domestic politics of the United States and Russia rather than their foreign policies. The two countries have been heading in the

same political direction for some of the same reasons over the last several years. They have similar political susceptibilities. The United States will never change Putin and his threat perceptions, because they are deeply personal. Americans will have to change themselves to blunt the effects of Russian political interference campaigns for the foreseeable future. Achieving that goal will require Biden and his team to integrate their approach to Russia with their efforts to shore up American democracy, tackle inequality and racism, and lead the country out of a period of intense division.

The polarization of American society has become a national security threat, acting as a barrier to the collective action necessary for combating catastrophes and thwarting external dangers. Partisan spectacles during the global COVID-19 pandemic have undermined the country's international standing as a model of liberal democracy and eroded its authority on public health. The United States' inability to get its act together has hindered the projection of American soft power, or what Biden has called "the power of our example." During my time in the Trump administration, I watched as every peril was politicized and turned into fodder for personal gain and partisan games. Successive national security advisers, cabinet members, and their professional staffs were unable to mount coherent responses or defenses to security issues in the face of personalized, chaotic, and opportunistic conduct at the top.

In this regard, Putin actually offers an instructive contrast. Trump railed against a mythological American deep state, whereas Putin—who spent

decades as an intelligence operative before ascending to office—is a product of Russia's very real deep state. Unlike Trump, who saw the U.S. state apparatus as his enemy and wanted to rule the country as an outsider, Putin rules Russia as a state insider. Also unlike Trump, Putin rarely dives into Russia's social, class, racial, or religious divisions to gain political traction. Instead, although he targets individuals and social groups that enjoy little popular support, Putin tends to promote a single, synthetic Russian culture and identity to overcome the domestic conflicts of the past that destabilized and helped bring down both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. That Putin seeks one Russia while Trump wanted many Americas during his time in office is more than just a difference in political styles: it is a critical data point. It highlights the fact that a successful U.S. policy approach to Russia will rest in part on denying Putin and Russian operatives the possibility to exploit divisions in American society.

The United States' vulnerability to the Kremlin's subversion has been amplified by social media. American-made technology has magnified the impact of once fringe ideas and subversive actors around the world and become a tool in the hands of hostile states and criminal groups. Extremists can network and reach audiences as never before on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are designed to attract people's attention and divide them into affinity groups. Putin has weaponized this technology against the United States, taking advantage of the ways that social media undermines social cohesion and

erodes Americans' sense of a shared purpose. Policymakers should step up their cooperation with the private sector in order to cast light on and deter Russian intelligence operations and other efforts to exploit social media platforms. They also need to figure out ways to educate the American public about the perils of posting personal and political information online.

Making the United States and its society more resilient and less vulnerable to manipulation by tackling inequality, corruption, and polarization will require innovative policies across a huge range of issues. Perhaps the highest priority should be given to investing in people where they reside, particularly through education. Education can lower the barriers to opportunity and accurate information in a way that nothing else can. It can help people recognize the difference between fact and fiction. And it offers all people the chance not only to develop knowledge and learn skills but also to continue to transform themselves and their communities.

One thing U.S. leaders should avoid in seeking to foster domestic unity is attempting to mobilize Americans around the idea of a common enemy, such as China. Doing so risks backfiring by stirring up xenophobic anger toward Americans and immigrants of Asian heritage and thus fueling more divisions at home. Instead of trying to rally Americans against China, Biden should rally them in support of the democratic U.S. allies that Trump spurned and derided. Many of those countries, especially in Europe, find themselves in the same political predicament as the United States, as authoritarian leaders and powers seek to exploit socioeconomic

strife and populist proclivities among their citizens. Biden should base a new transatlantic agenda on the mutual fight against populism at home and authoritarianism abroad through economic rebuilding and democratic renewal.

Most important, Biden must do everything in his power to restore trust in government and to promote fairness, equity, and justice. As many Americans learned during Trump's presidency, no country, no matter how advanced, is immune to flawed leadership, the erosion of political checks and balances, and the degradation of its institutions. Democracy is not self-repairing. It requires constant attention. 🌐

The Inevitable Rivalry

America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics

John J. Mearsheimer

It was a momentous choice. Three decades ago, the Cold War ended, and the United States had won. It was now the sole great power on the planet. Scanning the horizon for threats, U.S. policymakers seemed to have little cause for concern—and especially not about China, a weak and impoverished country that had been aligned with the United States against the Soviet Union for over a decade. But there were some ominous signs: China had nearly five times as many people as the United States, and its leaders had embraced economic reform. Population size and wealth are the main building blocks of military power, so there was a serious possibility that China might become dramatically stronger in the decades to come. Since a mightier China would surely challenge the U.S. position in Asia and possibly beyond, the logical choice for the United States was clear: slow China's rise.

Instead, it encouraged it. Beguiled by misguided theories about liberalism's

inevitable triumph and the obsolescence of great-power conflict, both Democratic and Republican administrations pursued a policy of engagement, which sought to help China grow richer.

Washington promoted investment in China and welcomed the country into the global trading system, thinking it would become a peace-loving democracy and a responsible stakeholder in a U.S.-led international order.

Of course, this fantasy never materialized. Far from embracing liberal values at home and the status quo abroad, China grew more repressive and ambitious as it rose. Instead of fostering harmony between Beijing and Washington, engagement failed to forestall a rivalry and hastened the end of the so-called unipolar moment. Today, China and the United States are locked in what can only be called a new cold war—an intense security competition that touches on every dimension of their relationship. This rivalry will test U.S. policymakers more than the original Cold War did, as China is likely to be a more powerful competitor than the Soviet Union was in its prime. And this cold war is more likely to turn hot.

None of this should be surprising. China is acting exactly as realism would predict. Who can blame Chinese leaders for seeking to dominate Asia and become the most powerful state on the planet? Certainly not the United States, which pursued a similar agenda, rising to become a hegemon in its own region and eventually the most secure and influential country in the world. And today, the United States is also acting just as realist logic would predict. Long opposed to the emergence of other regional hegemons, it sees China's

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ambitions as a direct threat and is determined to check the country's continued rise. The inescapable outcome is competition and conflict. Such is the tragedy of great-power politics.

What was avoidable, however, was the speed and extent of China's extraordinary rise. Had U.S. policymakers during the unipolar moment thought in terms of balance-of-power politics, they would have tried to slow Chinese growth and maximize the power gap between Beijing and Washington. But once China grew wealthy, a U.S.-Chinese cold war was inevitable. Engagement may have been the worst strategic blunder any country has made in recent history: there is no comparable example of a great power actively fostering the rise of a peer competitor. And it is now too late to do much about it.

REALISM 101

Soon after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, American leaders—wisely—worked to integrate China into the Western order and help it grow economically, reasoning that a more powerful China would be better able to help contain the Soviet Union. But then the Cold War ended, raising a question: How should U.S. policymakers deal with China now that it was no longer needed to check Moscow? The country had a per capita GDP that was one-75th the size of the United States'. But given China's population advantage, if its economy grew rapidly in the decades ahead, it could eclipse the United States in sheer economic might. Simply put, the consequences of an increasingly wealthy China for the global balance of power were enormous.

From a realist perspective, the prospect of China as an economic colossus

was a nightmare. Not only would it mean the end of unipolarity; a wealthy China would surely also build a formidable military, as populous and rich countries invariably convert their economic power into military power. And China would almost certainly use that military to pursue hegemony in Asia and project power into other regions of the world. Once it did, the United States would have no choice but to contain, if not try to roll back, Chinese power, spurring a dangerous security competition.

Why are great powers doomed to compete? For starters, there is no higher authority to adjudicate disputes among states or protect them when threatened. Furthermore, no state can ever be certain that a rival—especially one with abundant military power—will not attack it. Competitors' intentions are hard to divine. Countries figure out that the best way to survive in an anarchic world is to be the most powerful actor of all, which in practice means being a hegemon in one's own region and making sure no other great powers dominate their regions.

This realist logic has informed U.S. foreign policy since the very beginning. Early presidents and their successors worked assiduously to make the United States the most powerful country in the Western Hemisphere. After achieving regional hegemony around the start of the twentieth century, the country played a key role in preventing four great powers from dominating either Asia or Europe: it helped defeat imperial Germany in World War I and both imperial Japan and Nazi Germany in World War II and contained the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The United States feared these potential

hegemony not only because they might grow powerful enough to roam into the Western Hemisphere but also because that would make it harder for Washington to project power globally.

China is acting according to this same realist logic, in effect imitating the United States. It wants to be the most powerful state in its backyard and, eventually, in the world. It wants to build a blue-water navy to protect its access to Persian Gulf oil. It wants to become the leading producer of advanced technologies. It wants to create an international order that is more favorable to its interests. A powerful China would be foolish to pass up the opportunity to pursue these goals.

Most Americans do not recognize that Beijing and Washington are following the same playbook, because they believe the United States is a noble democracy that acts differently from authoritarian and ruthless countries such as China. But that is not how international politics works. All great powers, be they democracies or not, have little choice but to compete for power in what is at root a zero-sum game. This imperative motivated both superpowers during the Cold War. It motivates China today and would motivate its leaders even if it were a democracy. And it motivates American leaders, too, making them determined to contain China.

Even if one rejects this realist account, which emphasizes the structural forces driving great-power competition, U.S. leaders still should have recognized that turning China, of all countries, into a great power was a recipe for trouble. After all, it had long sought to settle its border dispute with India on terms favorable to itself and

harbored extensive revisionist goals in East Asia. Chinese policymakers have consistently stated their desire to reintegrate Taiwan, take back the Diaoyu Islands (known in Japan as the Senkaku Islands) from Japan, and control most of the South China Sea—all aims destined to be fiercely resisted by China's neighbors, not to mention the United States. China has always had revisionist goals; the mistake was allowing it to become powerful enough to act on them.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Had U.S. policymakers accepted the logic of realism, there was a straightforward set of policies they could have pursued to slow economic growth in China and maintain the wealth gap between it and the United States. In the early 1990s, the Chinese economy was woefully underdeveloped, and its future growth depended heavily on access to American markets, technology, and capital. An economic and political Goliath at the time, the United States was in an ideal position to hinder China's rise.

Beginning in 1980, U.S. presidents had granted China "most favored nation" status, a designation that gave the country the best possible trade terms with the United States. That favoritism should have ended with the Cold War, and in its place, U.S. leaders should have negotiated a new bilateral trade agreement that imposed harsher terms on China. They should have done so even if the agreement was also less favorable to the United States; given the small size of the Chinese economy, it would have taken a far bigger hit than the U.S. economy. Instead, U.S. presidents unwisely kept granting China most-favored-nation

status annually. In 2000, the error was compounded by making that status permanent, markedly reducing Washington's leverage over Beijing. The next year, the United States blundered again by allowing China to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). With global markets now open, Chinese businesses expanded, their products became more competitive, and China grew more powerful.

Beyond limiting China's access to the international trading system, the United States should have strictly controlled the export of sophisticated U.S. technologies. Export controls would have been especially effective in the 1990s and the early years of the next decade, when Chinese companies were mainly copying Western technology, not innovating on their own; denying China access to advanced technologies in areas such as aerospace and electronics would almost certainly have slowed its economic development. But Washington let technology flow with few limits, allowing China to challenge U.S. dominance in the critical realm of innovation. U.S. policymakers also made the mistake of lowering barriers to direct U.S. investment in China, which was tiny in 1990 but mushroomed over the next three decades.

If the United States had played hardball on trade and investment, China would surely have turned to other countries for help. But there were limits to what it was able to do in the 1990s. Not only did the United States produce the bulk of the world's most sophisticated technologies, but it also had several levers—including sanctions and security guarantees—that it could have used to persuade other countries to take a harder line on China. As part of an effort to constrain China's role in global

trade, Washington could have enlisted such allies as Japan and Taiwan, reminding them that a powerful China would pose an existential threat to them.

Given its market reforms and latent power potential, China would still have risen despite these policies. But it would have become a great power at a much later date. And when it did, it would still have been significantly weaker than the United States and therefore not in a position to seek regional hegemony.

Because relative, rather than absolute, power is what ultimately matters in international politics, realist logic suggests that U.S. policymakers should have coupled efforts to slow China's economic growth with a campaign to maintain—if not increase—their country's lead over China. The U.S. government could have invested heavily in research and development, funding the type of relentless innovation required to preserve American mastery over cutting-edge technologies. It could have actively discouraged manufacturers from moving overseas, in order to bolster the United States' manufacturing base and protect its economy from vulnerable global supply chains. But none of these prudent measures were adopted.

DELUSIONAL THINKING

Given the liberal triumphalism that pervaded the Washington establishment in the 1990s, there was little chance that realist thinking would inform U.S. foreign policy. Instead, U.S. policymakers assumed that global peace and prosperity would be maximized by spreading democracy, promoting an open international economy, and strengthening international institu-

tions. Applied to China, this logic prescribed a policy of engagement, whereby the United States would integrate the country into the global economy in the hopes that it would become more prosperous. Eventually, it was thought, China would even mature into a rights-respecting democracy and a responsible global actor. Unlike realism, which feared Chinese growth, engagement welcomed it.

For such a risky policy, the breadth and depth of support for engagement was remarkable, spanning four administrations. U.S. President George H. W. Bush was committed to engaging with China even before the Cold War ended. At a press conference after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Bush justified remaining economically engaged with China by arguing that U.S.-Chinese “commercial contacts [had] led, in essence, to this quest for more freedom” and that economic incentives made democratization “inexorable.” Two years later, when he was criticized for renewing China’s most-favored-nation status, he defended engagement by claiming that it would “help create a climate for democratic change.”

Bill Clinton criticized Bush for “coddling” China during the 1992 presidential campaign and tried playing tough with Beijing after moving into the White House. But he soon reversed course, declaring in 1994 that the United States should “intensify and broaden its engagement” with China, which would help it “evolve as a responsible power, ever growing not only economically, but growing in political maturity so that human rights can be observed.” Clinton led the way in convincing Congress to grant China

permanent most-favored-nation status, which laid the groundwork for its entry into the WTO. “If you believe in a future of greater openness and freedom for the people of China,” he maintained in 2000, “you ought to be for this agreement.”

George W. Bush also embraced efforts to bring China into the global economic fold, promising as a presidential candidate that “trade with China will promote freedom.” In his first year in office, he signed the proclamation granting China permanent most-favored-nation status and took the final steps to guide the country into the WTO.

The Obama administration was more of the same. “Since I’ve been president, my goal has been to consistently engage with China in a way that is constructive, to manage our differences and to maximize opportunities for cooperation,” Barack Obama said in 2015. “And I’ve repeatedly said that I believe it is in the interests of the United States to see China grow.” One might think that the “pivot to Asia,” unveiled by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, represented a shift away from engagement and toward containment, but that would be wrong. Clinton was a committed engager, and her *Foreign Policy* article making the case for the pivot was filled with liberal rhetoric about the virtues of open markets. “A thriving China is good for America,” she wrote. Moreover, save for placing 2,500 U.S. marines in Australia, no meaningful steps were taken to implement a serious containment strategy.

Support for engagement was also deep and wide within the U.S. business community, which viewed China as a manufacturing base as well as a giant market, with more than one billion

potential customers. Trade groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, and the National Association of Manufacturers undertook what Thomas Donohue, the Chamber of Commerce's president at the time, called a "nonstop lobbying blitz" to help China get into the WTO. Leading lights in the media also embraced engagement, including the editorial boards of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. The columnist Thomas Friedman spoke for many when he wrote, "Over time, China's leaders simply can't control and monitor their bursting free markets, or prevent little people from getting cheated and then rioting against the government, without the other institutions that must go with free markets—from an effective [securities and exchange commission] to a free and responsible press backed by the rule of law." Engagement was equally popular in academia. Few China experts or international relations scholars questioned the wisdom of helping Beijing grow more powerful. And perhaps the best indicator of the foreign policy establishment's overwhelming commitment to engagement is that both Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger—respectively, the most prominent Democratic and Republican Cold War hawks—supported the strategy.

Defenders of engagement argue that their policy allowed for the possibility of failure. Clinton admitted in 2000, "We don't know where it's going," and George W. Bush said the same year, "There are no guarantees." Doubts like these were rare, however. More important, none of the engagers foresaw the implications of failure. If China refused to democratize, they believed, it

would simply be a less capable country. The prospect that it would become more powerful and no less authoritarian did not appear to enter their calculations. Besides, they believed that *realpolitik* was old thinking.

Some engagers now maintain that the United States hedged its bets, pursuing containment side by side with engagement in case a friendship with China did not flourish. "Just to be safe, . . . we created an insurance policy in case this bet failed," Joseph Nye, who served in the Pentagon during the Clinton administration, wrote in these pages in 2018. This claim is at odds with the frequent refrain from U.S. policymakers that they were not containing China. In 1997, for example, Clinton described his policy as "not containment and conflict" but "cooperation." But even if U.S. policymakers were quietly containing China, engagement undermined their efforts, because that policy ultimately shifted the global balance of power in China's favor. Creating a peer competitor is hardly consistent with containment.

A FAILED EXPERIMENT

Nobody can say that engagement wasn't given ample opportunity to work, nor can anyone argue that China emerged as a threat because the United States was not accommodating enough. As the years went on, it became clear that engagement was a failure. China's economy experienced unprecedented economic growth, but the country did not turn into a liberal democracy or a responsible stakeholder. To the contrary, Chinese leaders view liberal values as a threat to their country's stability, and as rulers of rising powers normally do, they are pursuing an

increasingly aggressive foreign policy. There is no way around it: engagement was a colossal strategic mistake. As Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner—two former Obama administration officials who recognized that engagement had failed and now serve in the Biden administration—wrote in these pages in 2018, “Washington now faces its most dynamic and formidable competitor in modern history.”

Obama vowed a tougher line against Beijing during his presidency, contesting its maritime claims and filing suits against it within the WTO, but these halfhearted efforts amounted to little. Only in 2017 did the policy truly change. After Donald Trump became U.S. president, he quickly abandoned the engagement strategy that the previous four administrations had embraced, pursuing containment instead. As a White House strategy document released that year explained, great-power competition had returned, and China now sought to “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” Determined to stop China from succeeding, Trump initiated a trade war in 2018 and tried to undermine the technology giant Huawei and other Chinese corporations that threatened the United States’ technological dominance. His administration also developed closer relations with Taiwan and challenged Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea. Cold War II was underway.

One might have expected President Joe Biden to abandon containment and return to engagement, given that he staunchly supported that policy as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Com-

mittee and in the Obama administration. In fact, as president, he has embraced containment and has been as hard-nosed toward China as his predecessor was, pledging “extreme competition” with China shortly after taking office. Congress, too, has come around. In June, the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act sailed through the Senate with bipartisan support. The bill labels China “the greatest geopolitical and geo-economic challenge for United States foreign policy” and controversially calls for treating Taiwan as a sovereign state of “vital” strategic importance. The American public appears to share this view: a 2020 Pew Research Center poll found that nine in ten Americans considered China’s power a threat. The new U.S.-Chinese rivalry is not ending anytime soon. In fact, it is likely to intensify, no matter who is in the White House.

THE DANGER OF A HOT WAR

Engagement’s remaining defenders now portray the downward spiral in U.S.-Chinese relations as the work of individuals who are bent on creating a U.S.-Soviet-style confrontation—“New Cold Warriors,” in the words of the former George W. Bush administration official Robert Zoellick. In the engagers’ view, the incentives for further economic cooperation outweigh the need to compete for power. Mutual interests trump conflicting interests. Regrettably, the proponents of engagement are whistling in the wind. Cold War II is already here, and when one compares the two cold wars, it becomes apparent that the U.S.-Chinese rivalry is more likely to lead to a shooting war than the U.S.-Soviet rivalry was.

The first point of contrast between the two conflicts concerns capabilities. China is already closer to the United States in terms of latent power than the Soviet Union ever was. At the height of its power, in the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union had a small advantage in population (less than 1.2 to 1) and, using GNP as a rough indicator of wealth, was almost 60 percent as wealthy as the United States. In contrast, China now has four times as many people as the United States and is about 70 percent as wealthy. If China's economy continues growing at an impressive rate of around five percent annually, it will eventually have more latent power than the United States. It has been projected that by 2050, China will have a population advantage of approximately 3.7 to 1. If China has half of the United States' per capita GDP in 2050—roughly where South Korea is today—it will be 1.8 times as wealthy as the United States. And if it does better and reaches three-fifths of U.S. per capita GDP by then—roughly where Japan is today—it will be 2.3 times as wealthy as the United States. With all that latent power, Beijing could build a military that is much more powerful than the United States', which would be contesting China's from 6,000 miles away.

Not only was the Soviet Union poorer than the United States; during the height of the Cold War, it was also still recovering from the horrific devastation wreaked by Nazi Germany. In World War II, the country lost 24 million citizens, not to mention more than 70,000 towns and villages, 32,000 industrial enterprises, and 40,000 miles of railroad track. It was in no position to fight the United States. China, in

contrast, last fought a war in 1979 (against Vietnam) and in the ensuing decades became an economic juggernaut.

There was another drag on Soviet capabilities that is largely absent in China's case: troublesome allies. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union maintained a huge military presence in Eastern Europe and was deeply involved in the politics of almost every country in that region. It had to contend with insurrections in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia routinely challenged Moscow's economic and security policies. The Soviets also had their hands full with China, which switched sides midway through the Cold War. These allies were an albatross around Moscow's neck that distracted Soviet leaders from their principal adversary: the United States. Contemporary China has few allies and, except when it comes to North Korea, is far less tied to its friends than the Soviets were to theirs. In short, Beijing has greater flexibility to cause trouble abroad.

What about ideological motivations? Like the Soviet Union was, China is led by a nominally communist government. But just as Americans during the Cold War were wrong to view Moscow as primarily a communist threat, determined to spread its malign ideology around the globe, it would be a mistake to portray China as an ideological menace today. Soviet foreign policy was influenced only on the margins by communist thinking; Joseph Stalin was a hardcore realist, as were his successors. Communism matters even less in contemporary China, which is best understood as an authoritarian state that

embraces capitalism. Americans should wish that China were communist; then it would have a lethargic economy.

But there is an “ism” that China has in spades, one that is likely to exacerbate its rivalry with the United States: nationalism. Normally the world’s most powerful political ideology, nationalism had limited influence in the Soviet Union because it was at odds with communism. Chinese nationalism, however, has been gathering steam since the early 1990s. What makes it especially dangerous is its emphasis on China’s “century of national humiliation,” a period beginning with the First Opium War, during which China was victimized by great powers, especially Japan but also, in the Chinese narrative, the United States. The effects of this potent nationalist story were on display in 2012–13, when China and Japan skirmished over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, igniting anti-Japanese protests across China. In the coming years, the intensifying security competition in East Asia will surely ramp up Chinese hostility toward Japan and the United States, increasing the likelihood of a hot war.

Also raising the odds of war are China’s regional ambitions. Soviet leaders, busy recovering from World War II and managing their empire in Eastern Europe, were largely content with the status quo on the continent. China, by contrast, is deeply committed to an expansionist agenda in East Asia. Although the main targets of China’s appetite certainly have strategic value for China, they are also considered sacred territory, which means their fate is bound up with Chinese nationalism. This is especially true of Taiwan: the Chinese feel an emotional attachment to the island that the Soviets never felt for

Berlin, for example, making Washington’s commitment to defend it all the riskier.

Finally, the geography of the new cold war is more war-prone than that of the old one. Although the U.S.-Soviet rivalry was global in scope, its center of gravity was the Iron Curtain in Europe, where both sides had massive armies and air forces equipped with thousands of nuclear weapons. There was little chance of a superpower war in Europe, because policymakers on both sides understood the fearsome risks of nuclear escalation. No leader was willing to start a conflict that would likely have destroyed his own country.

In Asia, there is no clear dividing line like the Iron Curtain to anchor stability. Instead, there are a handful of potential conflicts that would be limited and would involve conventional arms, which makes war thinkable. They include fights for control over Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the maritime routes that run between China and the Persian Gulf. These conflicts would be fought mainly in open waters between rival air and naval forces, and in those instances in which control of an island was at play, small-scale ground forces would likely take part. Even a fight over Taiwan, which might draw in Chinese amphibious forces, would not involve huge nuclear-equipped armies crashing into each other.

None of this is to say that these limited-war scenarios are likely, but they are more plausible than a major war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was. Still, one cannot assume that there would be no nuclear escalation should Beijing and Washington fight over Taiwan or the South China Sea. Indeed, if one side were losing badly, it would at

least consider employing nuclear weapons to rescue the situation. Some decision-makers might conclude that nuclear weapons could be used without an unacceptable risk of escalation, provided the attacks took place at sea and spared the territory of China and the United States and its allies. Not only is a great-power war more likely in the new cold war, but so is nuclear use.

A RIVAL OF AMERICA'S MAKING

Although their numbers have dwindled, advocates of engagement remain, and they still think the United States can find common ground with China. As late as July 2019, 100 China watchers signed an open letter to Trump and members of Congress rejecting the idea that Beijing was a threat. "Many Chinese officials and other elites know that a moderate, pragmatic and genuinely cooperative approach with the West serves China's interests," they wrote, before calling on Washington to "work with our allies and partners to create a more open and prosperous world in which China is offered the opportunity to participate."

But great powers are simply unwilling to let other great powers grow stronger at their expense. The driving force behind this great-power rivalry is structural, which means that the problem cannot be eliminated with clever policymaking. The only thing that could change the underlying dynamic would be a major crisis that halted China's rise—an eventuality that seems unlikely considering the country's long record of stability, competence, and economic growth. And so a dangerous security competition is all but unavoidable.

At best, this rivalry can be managed in the hope of avoiding a war. That

would require Washington to maintain formidable conventional forces in East Asia to persuade Beijing that a clash of arms would at best yield a Pyrrhic victory. Convincing adversaries that they cannot achieve quick and decisive wins deters wars. Furthermore, U.S. policymakers must constantly remind themselves—and Chinese leaders—about the ever-present possibility of nuclear escalation in wartime. Nuclear weapons, after all, are the ultimate deterrent. Washington can also work to establish clear rules of the road for waging this security competition—for example, agreements to avoid incidents at sea or other accidental military clashes. If each side understands what crossing the other side's redlines would mean, war becomes less likely.

These measures can only do so much to minimize the dangers inherent in the growing U.S.-Chinese rivalry. But that is the price the United States must pay for ignoring realist logic and turning China into a powerful state that is determined to challenge it on every front. 🌐

ESSAYS



Many of the United States' plans in Afghanistan contained barely concealed prophecies of failure.
— Rory Stewart

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The Last Days of Intervention

Afghanistan and the Delusions of Maximalism

Rory Stewart

The extravagant lurches of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan—from a \$1 trillion surge to total withdrawal, culminating in the reestablishment of a Taliban government 20 years after the 9/11 attacks—must rank among the most surreal and disturbing episodes in modern foreign policy. At the heart of the tragedy was an obsession with universal plans and extensive resources, which stymied the modest but meaningful progress that could have been achieved with far fewer troops and at a lower cost. Yet this failure to chart a middle path between ruinous overinvestment and complete neglect says less about what was possible in Afghanistan than it does about the fantasies of those who intervened there.

The age of intervention began in Bosnia in 1995 and accelerated with the missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Over this period, the United States and its allies developed a vision of themselves as turnaround CEOs: they had the strategy and resources to fix things, collect their bonuses, and get out as soon as possible. The symbol of the age was the American general up at 4 AM to run eight miles before mending the failed state.

Had the same U.S. and European officials been seeking to improve the lives of people in a poor ex-coal town in eastern Kentucky or to work with Native American tribes in South Dakota, they might have

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been more skeptical of universal blueprints for societal transformation, paid more attention to the history and trauma of local communities, and been more modest about their own status as outsiders. They might have understood that messiness was inevitable, failure possible, and patience essential. They might even have grasped why humility was better than a heavy footprint and why listening was better than lecturing.

Yet in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq—places far more traumatized, impoverished, and damaged than anywhere at home—U.S. and European officials insisted that there could be a formula for success, a “clearly defined mission,” and an “exit strategy.” Any setback, they reasoned, could be blamed only on a lack of international planning or resources.

These ideas were damaging in Bosnia and Kosovo. But in the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq—unstable hybrids of humanitarianism and counterterrorism that soon became even more unstable hybrids of state building and counterinsurgency—they proved fatal. From the very beginning, the international plans were surreally detached from the local reality. The first draft of the development strategy for Afghanistan, written by international consultants in 2002, described the Afghans as committed to “an accountable, broad-based, multi-ethnic, representative government” based on “respect for human rights.” That same year, then U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice claimed that terrorism from Afghanistan posed “an existential threat to our security.”

Such hyperbolic untruths, which multiplied with each new strategy or plan, were designed to win resources and defend the intervention at home. By exaggerating both the potential for success and the risks of failure in Afghanistan, they made it difficult to resist calls for more troops. And when troops were killed (and more of them were killed than at any time since the Vietnam War), domestic politics dictated ever more strident mission statements, increasingly inflated plans, and additional troop deployments.

Eventually, the rhetorical Ponzi scheme collapsed. But having failed to fulfill their fantasies and realize their power as saviors, the United States and its allies now seemed unable to recognize or value the progress that was actually occurring on the ground—in part, because it was slow, unfamiliar, and often not in line with their plans. Political leaders had so overstated their case that once they were revealed to be wrong, they could not return to the moderate position of a light footprint and instead lurched from extreme overreach to

denial, isolationism, and withdrawal. In the end, they walked out, blaming the chaos that followed on the corruption, ingratitude, and the supposed cowardice of their former partners.

THE AGE OF INTERVENTION

The obsession with universal plans backed by heavy resources that led to the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq stemmed in part from a misunderstanding of an earlier success. The first act in the 20-year age of intervention, the NATO operation in Bosnia, was largely effective. Not only did it end the war and preserve the peace for decades at almost no cost to the United States and its NATO allies, but it achieved things that not long before had seemed impossible: the protection of civilians, the demobilization of vicious militias, the safe return of refugees to ethnically cleansed areas, and the imprisonment of war criminals. Today, the Bosnian state remains fragile, ethnically divided, and corrupt—but also peaceful.

This success, which emerged from a large but very restrained international presence, was misinterpreted as an argument for bold international interventions grounded in universal state-building templates and backed by overwhelming resources. Paddy Ashdown, the British politician who was the senior international representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, asserted that Bosnia demonstrated seven “pillars of peace-making” that “apply more or less universally” and provided a plan to create everything from security to water supplies, prisons, and an efficient market-based economy. In his view, an international administration with absolute executive power was needed to achieve these things. Local elections or consultations should be avoided. The intervening powers should, he said, “go in hard from the start,” establishing the rule of law as quickly and decisively as possible, “even if you have to do that quite brutally.”

Many embraced Ashdown’s vision and developed similar blueprints. James Dobbins, a former U.S. special envoy to Bosnia and a future special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, co-authored *The Beginner’s Guide to Nation-Building*, published by the RAND Corporation, which asserted that “heavy” peace-enforcement operations required 13 soldiers for every 1,000 inhabitants and “light” peacekeeping operations required two. The future president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, matched this with a co-authored textbook titled *Fixing Failed States* that defined ten functions of a state and laid out a universal state construction scheme that could be applied from the Horn of Africa to the Urals.

In Kosovo and Iraq, ever-greater power was deployed to advance such plans. In Kosovo, the UN administration assumed the authority to jail anyone, change the constitution, appoint officials, and approve the government's budget (although it used these powers relatively cautiously). In Iraq, Paul Bremer, the American administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, assumed full executive power and sent American and British officials—I was one of them—to govern the Iraqi provinces. They rewrote university curricula, remade the army, and fired hundreds of thousands of members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and detained tens of thousands more.

Afghanistan—the third of the four great interventions of the age—was the exception. There, the senior UN official, Lakhdar Brahimi, and U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

proposed a light footprint. Although they came from very different political traditions (Brahimi was an anticolonial independence leader in Algeria), they both mocked Kosovo as a neocolonial farce. Both feared that a heavy footprint in Afghanistan would make the government too dependent on foreign money and troops and provoke an insurgency. Rumsfeld initially authorized only 2,000 U.S. troops and forbade any nation building. No attempt was made to create anything comparable to the mission in Kosovo or, later, that in Iraq. And in order to ensure that his idealistic UN staff was not tempted into running Afghanistan, Brahimi blocked the opening of UN field offices in many of the provinces. Instead, the lead was given to the Afghan transitional government under President Hamid Karzai.

By 2004, three years into the intervention, most of Afghanistan was safer, freer, and more prosperous, with better services and opportunities than it had had in 30 years. But there was a dark side to this story: the corruption was far worse than during the Soviet occupation or Taliban rule, the police were brutal, and the judicial system worked only for those who could afford the bribes. The production of opium poppies—which had been nearly eliminated by the Taliban by 2000—soared, with profits flowing to the most senior government officials.

Helmand Province was perhaps the most extreme failure. It was controlled by local strongmen—confirmed in government positions by

At the heart of the tragedy in Afghanistan was an obsession with universal plans and extensive resources.

Karzai—whose families had run the province in the 1980s and early 1990s and who used their newfound power to reignite a decades-long civil war over land and drugs. (Helmand was then producing 90 percent of Afghanistan’s opium and much of the heroin that found its way to Europe.) Regularly robbed and tortured by these commanders, Afghans in some parts of the province became nostalgic for the Taliban.

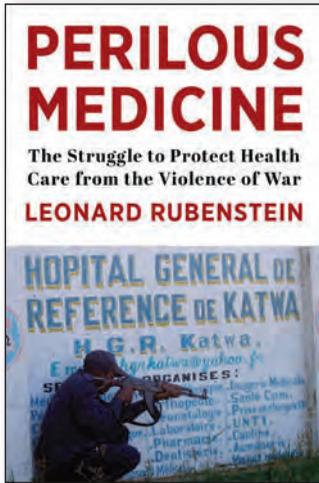
Many commentators blamed these setbacks on the light footprint, arguing that the United States had been distracted by Iraq, had failed to plan properly, and had not deployed enough resources or troops. UN officials, counternarcotics agents, journalists, and human rights and anticorruption campaigners all called for the toppling of the warlords. Academics warned that the lack of good governance would alienate the local population and undermine the credibility of the Afghan government. Practically everyone assumed that there was a realistic plan to fix governance in Afghanistan—and that the missing ingredients were more resources and international troops. As one 2003 RAND report on nation building argued: “The United States and its allies have put 25 times more money and 50 times more troops, on a per capita basis, into post-conflict Kosovo than into post-conflict Afghanistan. This higher level of input accounts in significant measure for the higher level of output measured in terms of democratic institutions and economic growth.”

These ideas led NATO to launch what was in effect a second, heavier intervention: a regime-change operation aimed this time not at the Taliban but at the power structures that had been established by the coalition’s ally Karzai. By 2005, NATO “provincial reconstruction teams” had sprouted up across the country, the UN had begun to disarm and demobilize the warlords and their militias, and the number of NATO troops had begun to climb. General John Abizaid, the head of U.S. Central Command, predicted that 2005 would be “the decisive year.”

By 2006, the most powerful warlords had been stripped of their posts in Helmand, and the United Kingdom had deployed thousands of troops to the province. Their aim was not to fight the Taliban, perceived at the time as a weak force. Rather, the troops focused on improving governance and justice and on stamping out corruption and drugs. This plan, dubbed “the comprehensive approach,” demanded an ever-heavier international footprint. Few seemed to doubt its feasibility. The commander of the NATO-led operation, British General David Richards, insisted that the mission was “doable if we get the

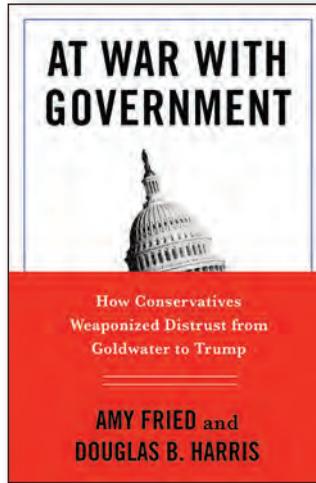


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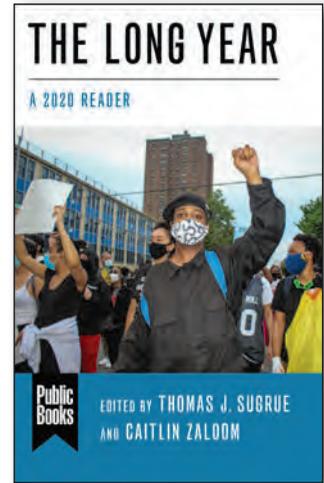
“[A] much-needed, eagerly awaited book ... Bravo, Professor Rubenstein, for speaking truth, however inconvenient it may be for world leaders.”

—Laurie Garrett, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and author of *Betrayal of Trust*



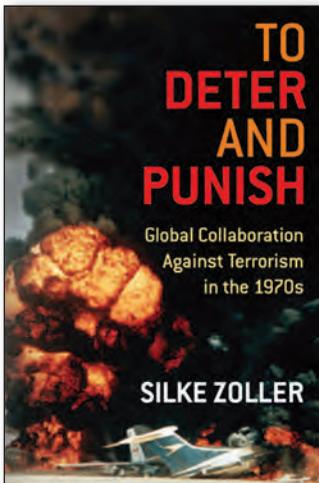
“[The book] offers a compelling analysis of current U.S. political travails and looks to a brighter future by spelling out a roadmap for citizen activists and public servants.”

—Theda Skocpol, coeditor of *Upending American Politics*



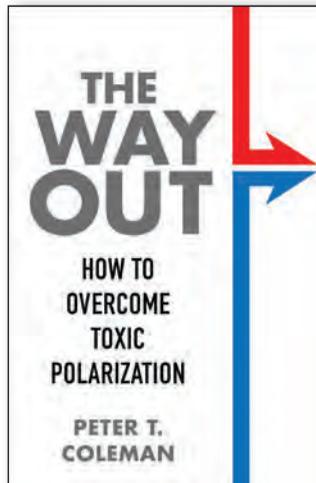
“A tremendous set of insights from an exceptional group of scholars, presented in short pieces that are digestible in one sitting. A wonderful chronicling of an extraordinary year.”

—Shamus Khan, coauthor of *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*



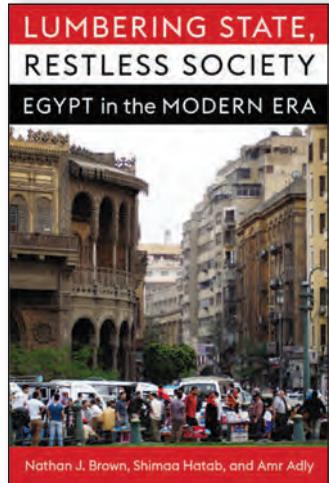
“An empirically rich and diverse analysis.”

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“Coleman’s multidisciplinary approach yields fresh insights and reasons for hope. Policymakers and community activists will want to take note.”

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formula right, and it is properly resourced.” He increased the number of troops under his command from 9,000 to 33,000 and claimed that 2006 would be “the crunch year.”

But as the troop counts rose, the problem of good governance became a problem of insurgency. In 2006, the number of Taliban bomb attacks increased fivefold, and the number of British casualties increased tenfold. This, too, was blamed on an imperfect plan and insufficient resources. In 2007, a new general announced another strategy, requiring still more resources. The same thing happened in 2008. NATO troop increases were followed by U.S. troop increases. In 2009, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal announced a new plan for 130,000 U.S. and NATO soldiers, claiming he was “knee-deep in the decisive year.”

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

By this point, tens of thousands of Afghans and thousands of international troops had been killed, and Afghanistan was considerably less safe than it had been in 2005. But the interveners still insisted that somewhere out there was a formula for state building and counterinsurgency that could succeed. Counterinsurgency experts began to suggest that perhaps 700,000 troops would do it.

As the U.S. presence in Afghanistan increased, so did the temperature of the political rhetoric in Washington. In 2003, when 30 U.S. service members were killed in Afghanistan, it was possible to justify the mission as one of a number of small U.S. operations stretching from Asia to the Horn of Africa. But by 2008, with five times as many U.S. soldiers dying per year and tens of billions of dollars being spent, more extreme justifications were demanded. Officials now argued that if Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, Pakistan would, too, and extremists would get their hands on nuclear weapons. Catching Osama bin Laden, President Barack Obama insisted, required “winning” in Afghanistan. Failure was not an option.

None of this was true, of course. Pakistan and much of the Middle East were more important threats in terms of terrorism and regional instability. Catching bin Laden required only catching bin Laden. But the savage and changeable winds of public opinion demanded ever more paranoid and grandiose statements. U.S. plans for state building and counterinsurgency became tissues of evasion and euphemism, justified with contorted logic, dressed in partial statistics, and decorated with false analogies. They were inflexible, simplistic, overly optimistic, and

shrilly confident. And because these plans remained obsessed with fixing the Taliban-dominated areas of southern Afghanistan, they diverted investment from the stable, welcoming areas of central and northern Afghanistan, where significant development progress was still possible.

Many of these optimistic plans contained barely concealed prophecies of failure. McChrystal, for example, maintained that no amount of U.S. military power could stabilize Afghanistan “as long as pervasive corruption and preying upon the people continue to characterize governance.” Obama himself acknowledged that such misconduct was unlikely to change—but he nonetheless authorized a slightly pared-down version of McChrystal’s request for almost 40,000 additional troops.

While the United States continued to refine its plans, the Taliban implemented their own vision for how to establish security, governance, and the rule of law. They called it sharia, and they sold it not from a military fort but from within tribal structures, appealing to rural habits and using Islamic references, in Pashto. And the more military power the interveners deployed against them, the more they could present themselves as leading a jihad for Afghanistan and Islam against a foreign military occupation.

To the Americans and their allies, it seemed impossible that the U.S. military, with its fleets of gunships and cyberwarfare capabilities, its cutting-edge plans for counterinsurgency and state building, and its billions of dollars in aid and investment, could be held off by a medieval group that lived in mud huts, carried guns designed in the 1940s, and rode ponies. The interveners continued to believe that the international community could succeed in nation building anywhere in the world, provided that it had the right plan and enough resources.

THE FALSE LESSONS OF BOSNIA

This view reflected a tragic misreading of the experience in Bosnia, which was a much more cautious and constrained intervention than many recall. The number of international troops was higher there than in the early days of the war in Afghanistan, but both foreign soldiers and foreign civilians in Bosnia were severely limited in what they could do. (Ashdown’s vision of an omnipotent international state builder, overruling local voices and implementing the perfect plan, was what he wished for, not what he found.)

Scarred by memories of Vietnam and the more recent failed intervention in Somalia, senior U.S. and European officials did not wish to

be drawn into the long history of ethnic strife in the Balkans and so approached the conflict with immense caution. When the United States belatedly mounted a military intervention, it was focused on air operations to bomb the Bosnian Serb artillery around Sarajevo. The ground fighting was conducted by the Sarajevo-based Bosnia authority and by Croatian soldiers, who received their training from U.S. contractors. When international troops were deployed after the Dayton peace accords, they spent most of their time on their bases. More U.S. soldiers were injured playing sports than in action.

The Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina had much less power than its equivalent would be given in Kosovo and could not order military or police officers to enforce its decrees. The Dayton agreement handed 49 percent of the country's territory to the Bosnian Serb aggressors and enshrined their power in areas that they had ethnically cleansed. The cautious international presence also initially left the Croatian and Serbian paramilitaries, special police forces, and intelligence services in place and did not disarm them. Instead of doing the equivalent of "de-Baathifying," as Bremer did in Iraq, or toppling the warlords, as U.S. and coalition forces did later in southern Afghanistan, the high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina was required to work with the war criminals. The party of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who was responsible for the massacre in Srebrenica, was allowed to participate in elections (and won the first postwar one, in 1996).

Bosnia was ultimately transformed not by foreign hands but by messy and often unexpected local solutions that were supported by international diplomacy. The first breakthrough came when Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavsic split from her mentor, the war criminal Karadzic, and then requested international support. Plavsic was herself a war criminal who had described Bosnian Muslims as "genetically deformed material." But the international forces worked with her to disarm the special police forces, Bosnian Serb units that acted as *de facto* militias. Later, the death of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and the toppling of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic fatally weakened their proxies in Bosnia. Neither of these events was part of a planned strategy by the international community, but both helped what had initially been a tiny and apparently toothless war crimes tribunal in The Hague expand its operations, leading eventually to the capture and prosecution not only of

Karadzic but also of Plavsic herself. Cautious compromises ultimately led not to appeasement but to justice.

The reversal of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia also owed very little to international plans. Despite the Dayton agreement's commitment to refugee return, many international experts considered it reckless to allow refugees to go back to villages that had been burned to the ground and occupied by hostile militias. Nonetheless, small groups of Bosnians tried to move back to their homes. Some were ejected immediately by armed groups, but others held on and persuaded international troops to follow and protect them. These small Bosnian-led initiatives—improvised, incremental, and following no international plan—opened the door for the return of over a million refugees.

Within a decade of the intervention, more than 200,000 homes had been given back to their owners, over 400,000 soldiers from three armies had been disarmed, and Bosnia had built a unified army of 15,000 soldiers. All the major war criminals were caught and tried, and Bosnia's homicide rate fell below that of Sweden. All of this was achieved at a cost of almost zero American and NATO lives. And as Gerald Knaus, the chair of the European Stability Initiative, a European think tank specializing in the Balkans, has argued, such successes were due not to the strength of the international presence but to its comparative weakness: a relatively restrained intervention forced local politicians to take the lead, necessitated often uncomfortable compromises, and made foreign civilians and troops act cautiously to reinforce unexpected and improvised local initiatives.

THE VANISHING MIDDLE GROUND

Could a light footprint in Afghanistan have eventually led to similar successes? Perhaps, but with greater difficulty. Afghanistan was much poorer when the United States invaded than Bosnia was at the time of the NATO intervention: adult life expectancy was about 48, one in seven children died before the age of five, and most men (and almost all women) were unable to read or write. Afghan communities were far more conservative, religious, and suspicious of foreigners than Bosnian communities had been (thanks in part to CIA efforts to develop their identity as heroic resisters of foreign occupation during the Soviet period). But the initially limited and restrained international presence in Afghanistan still enabled far more progress than most critics of the war have acknowledged.

The violence and poor governance—particularly in Helmand, elsewhere in southern Afghanistan, and in eastern Afghanistan—that were used to discredit the light-footprint approach were not representative of all of rural Afghanistan. In Bamiyan, for example, a province of three million people in the center of the country, military strongmen retained power, but there was peace. Between 2001 and 2004, locals established excellent schools, even in outlying settlements, providing most girls with their first experience of formal education and laying the foundation for some of them to attend college. The people of Bamiyan—long a marginalized community—began to take senior positions in universities, the media, ministries, and other government agencies. The government extended paved roads and electricity to villages

A light and sustained footprint modeled on the Bosnian intervention should have been the approach for Afghanistan.

that had never seen them before. Life was much better than it had been under the Taliban, which had led genocidal attacks against Bamiyan communities. (In the winter of 2001–2, I walked through village after village that had been burned to the ground by the Taliban.) All this progress occurred with only a few dozen foreign soldiers in the province and no international civilian administrators.

There also was progress in other central regions and in areas to the north, including in Herat, much of Mazar-e Sharif, the Panjshir Valley, the Shomali Plain, and Kabul. In all these places, a light international footprint meant fewer international casualties, which in turn reduced the pressure on American and European politicians and generals to make exaggerated claims. It also compelled the international community to engage in a more modest discussion with the Afghan people about what kind of society they themselves desired and to accept ideas and values that Americans and Europeans did not always share. In short, it forced a partnership.

By 2005, the Afghan economy was almost twice as big as it had been in 2001. The population of Kabul had quadrupled in size, and new buildings were shooting up. On television, young female and male presenters had the confidence to satirize their rulers. And the progress was not confined to the capital: across the country, 1.5 million girls went to school for the first time. Mobile phones spread like

wildfire. Health and life expectancy improved. There was less violence than at any point in the previous 40 years, and no insurgency remotely comparable to what had exploded in Iraq. Perhaps most encouraging of all was that although millions of people had fled in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, millions of Afghan refugees were choosing to return home during this period.

What would have happened if the United States and NATO had tried to retain a light footprint and a restrained approach beyond 2005? What if they had deployed fewer troops, invested in generous development aid, and resisted fighting the drug trade, toppling warlords, and pursuing a counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban? The answer would have depended to a great extent on the initiatives of local actors and the competition among them, the developments in neighboring countries, and luck—just as the outcome in Bosnia did. In many parts of Afghanistan, there would have been poverty, a lack of democratic representation, and strongman rule. In regions controlled by drug lords and racked by Pashtun infighting and Pakistani meddling, there probably would have been continued horror, especially if U.S. special operations forces and their proxies had continued to hunt for terrorists. But across much of the country, from Bamiyan to Panjshir, there could have been continued improvements in health, education, and employment—particularly if an overambitious surge had not diverted development funds away from these regions and to the insurgency areas. And for millions of people in Herat and Kabul, this progress could have been combined with an increasingly open and democratic civil society.

Most important, however, many of the problems caused by the heavier international presence and the surge would have been avoided. Well meaning though they were, the attempts to depose local warlords in the name of good governance created power vacuums in some of the most ungovernable regions of the country, alienated and undermined the elected government, and drove the warlords and their militias to ally with the Taliban. The counternarcotics campaigns alienated many others who lost their livelihoods.

The United States did attempt to return to a lighter footprint in 2014, but by then, immense damage had been done. The surge had formed an Afghan army that was entirely reliant on expensive U.S. aircraft and technology, created a new group of gangster capitalists fed from foreign military contracts, and supercharged corruption. Military

operations had killed thousands of people, including many civilians, deepening hatred. And the presence of more than 100,000 international troops in rural villages had allowed the Taliban—which had been a weak and fragile group—to present themselves as fighting for Afghanistan and Islam against a foreign occupation. In 2005, under the light footprint, a British intelligence analyst told me there were between 2,000 and 3,000 Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. Six years later, after tens of thousands of Afghans had been killed and half a trillion dollars had been spent, General Richard Barrons of the British army estimated that there were 36,000 Taliban fighters in the country.

But just as the initial light footprint was better than the surge, so the later light footprint was better than a total withdrawal. A few thousand international troops, supporting air operations, were still capable of preventing the Taliban from holding any district capital—much less marching on Kabul. And by preventing a Taliban takeover, the troops were able to buy valuable time for health and educational outcomes to improve, development assistance to continue, income and opportunity to grow, and rights to be more firmly established for millions of Afghans.

Although the cost of the surge had been immense, the cost of remaining beyond 2021 would have been minimal. The United States could have supported 2,500 soldiers in Afghanistan almost indefinitely—and with little risk. So long as U.S. airpower and support for the Afghan air force remained in place, the Taliban would have posed a minimal threat to U.S. troops in their heavily defended air bases. (Eighteen U.S. service members were killed in 2019, perhaps the fiercest year of the fighting, before the cease-fire agreement.) The Taliban were not on the verge of victory; they won because the United States withdrew, crippled the Afghan air force on its way out, and left Afghan troops without air support or resupply lines. In other words, the decision to withdraw was driven not by military necessity, the interests of the Afghans, or even larger U.S. foreign policy objectives but by U.S. domestic politics.

Yet many Americans welcomed the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan because their leaders had not properly explained to them how light the U.S. presence had become or what it was protecting. Politics in the West seems to abhor the middle ground, swinging inexorably from overreach and overstatement to isolationism and withdrawal. A light and sustained footprint modeled on the Bosnian

intervention should have been the approach for Afghanistan—and, indeed, for interventions elsewhere in the world. Yet instead of arguing that failure in Afghanistan was not an option, former U.S. President Donald Trump behaved as though failure had no consequences. He showed no concern for how a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would affect the United States' reputation and alliances, regional stability, terrorism, or the lives of ordinary Afghans. And he responded to exaggerated claims about Afghanistan's importance not with moderate claims but with a refusal to maintain even the smallest presence there or to bear the slightest cost.

President Joe Biden has followed Trump's Afghan policy in every detail, despite having famously advocated a light footprint—and argued against the surge—when he was Obama's vice president. Somehow, over the years, he seems to have convinced himself that such an approach had failed. But the light footprint did not fail. What failed was the political culture of the West and the imagination of Western bureaucrats. The United States and its allies lacked the patience, realism, and moderation needed to find the middle path. 🌐

Taiwan and the Fight for Democracy

A Force for Good in the Changing International Order

Tsai Ing-wen

The story of Taiwan is one of resilience—of a country upholding democratic, progressive values while facing a constant challenge to its existence. Our success is a testament to what a determined practitioner of democracy, characterized by good governance and transparency, can achieve.

Yet the story of Taiwan is not only about the maintenance of our own democratic way of life. It is also about the strength and sense of responsibility Taiwan brings to efforts to safeguard the stability of the region and the world. Through hard work and courage, the 23.5 million people of Taiwan have succeeded in making a place for themselves in the international community.

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, authoritarian regimes are more convinced than ever that their model of governance is better adapted than democracy to the requirements of the twenty-first century. This has fueled a contest of ideologies, and Taiwan lies at the intersection of contending systems. Vibrantly democratic and Western, yet influenced by a Chinese civilization and shaped by Asian traditions, Taiwan, by virtue of both its very existence and its continued prosperity, represents at once an affront to the narrative and an impediment to the regional ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party.

Taiwan's refusal to give up, its persistent embrace of democracy, and its commitment to act as a responsible stakeholder (even when its exclusion from international institutions has made that difficult) are

TSAI ING-WEN is President of Taiwan.

now spurring the rest of the world to reassess its value as a liberal democracy on the frontlines of a new clash of ideologies. As countries increasingly recognize the threat that the Chinese Communist Party poses, they should understand the value of working with Taiwan. And they should remember that if Taiwan were to fall, the consequences would be catastrophic for regional peace and the democratic alliance system. It would signal that in today's global contest of values, authoritarianism has the upper hand over democracy.

INDO-PACIFIC FUTURES

The course of the Indo-Pacific, the world's fastest-growing region, will in many ways shape the course of the twenty-first century. Its emergence offers myriad opportunities (in everything from trade and manufacturing to research and education) but also brings new tensions and systemic contradictions that, if not handled wisely, could have devastating effects on international security and the global economy. Chief among the drivers of these tensions is the rise of more assertive and self-assured authoritarianism, which is challenging the liberal democratic order that has defined international relations since the end of World War II.

Beijing has never abandoned its ambitions toward Taiwan. But after years of double-digit investment in the Chinese military, and expansionist behavior across the Taiwan Strait and in surrounding maritime areas, Beijing is replacing its commitment to a peaceful resolution with an increasingly aggressive posture. Since 2020, People's Liberation Army aircraft and vessels have markedly increased their activity in the Taiwan Strait, with almost daily intrusions into Taiwan's southern air defense identification zone, as well as occasional crossings of the tacit median line between the island and the Chinese mainland (which runs along the middle of the strait, from the northeast near Japan's outlying islands to the southwest near Hong Kong).

Despite these worrying developments, the people of Taiwan have made clear to the entire world that democracy is nonnegotiable. Amid almost daily intrusions by the People's Liberation Army, our position on cross-strait relations remains constant: Taiwan will not bend to pressure, but nor will it turn adventurist, even when it accumulates support from the international community. In other words, the maintenance of regional security will remain a significant part of Taiwan's overall government policy. Yet we will also continue to express our openness to dialogue with Beijing, as the current administration has

repeatedly done since 2016, as long as this dialogue proceeds in a spirit of equality and without political preconditions. And we are investing significant resources to deepen our understanding of the administration in Beijing—which will reduce the risks of misinterpretation and misjudgment and facilitate more precise decision-making on our cross-strait policies. We look to maintain a clear-eyed understanding of the external environment, both threats and opportunities, in order to ensure that Taiwan is prepared to meet its challenges.

At the same time, Taiwan is fully committed to working with other regional actors to ensure stability. In March, for example, Taiwan and the United States signed a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of a coast guard working group. This working group will improve communication and information sharing between the U.S. and Taiwanese coast guards, while also facilitating greater collaboration on shared objectives, such as preserving maritime resources and reducing illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Such an understanding should serve as a springboard for greater collaboration on nonmilitary matters with other partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Taiwan has also launched a series of initiatives to modernize and reorganize its military, in order to be better prepared for both present and future challenges. In addition to investments in traditional platforms such as combat aircraft, Taiwan has made hefty investments in asymmetric capabilities, including mobile land-based antiship cruise missiles. We will launch the All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency in 2022, a military reform intended to ensure that a well-trained and well-equipped military reserve force stands as a more reliable backup for the regular military forces. Such initiatives are meant to maximize Taiwan's self-reliance and preparedness and to signal that we are willing to bear our share of the burden and don't take our security partners' support for granted.

Taiwan's efforts to contribute to regional security do not end there. We are fully committed to collaborating with our neighbors to prevent armed conflict in the East China and South China Seas, as well as in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan lies along the first island chain, which runs from northern Japan to Borneo; should this line be broken by force, the consequences would disrupt international trade and destabilize the entire western Pacific. In other words, a failure to defend Taiwan would not only be catastrophic for the Taiwanese; it would overturn a security architecture that has allowed for peace and extraordinary economic development in the region for seven decades.



Tsai at a campaign rally in Chiayi City, Taiwan, September 2015

Taiwan does not seek military confrontation. It hopes for peaceful, stable, predictable, and mutually beneficial coexistence with its neighbors. But if its democracy and way of life are threatened, Taiwan will do whatever it takes to defend itself.

THE TAIWAN MODEL

Taiwan's history is filled with both hardship and accomplishments, and the authors of this history are the people of Taiwan. Over the past few decades, we have overcome adversity and international isolation to achieve one of modern political history's most successful democratic transitions. The key ingredients of this achievement have been patience, resourcefulness, pragmatism, and a stubborn refusal to give up. Understanding both the delicate balance of power in the region and the need for support, the Taiwanese know that practical collaboration is often better than being loud or adventurous and that a willingness to lend a hand is better than trying to provoke or impose a system on others.

While the people of Taiwan have not always achieved consensus, over time, a collective identity has emerged. Through our interactions with the rest of the world, we have absorbed values that we have made our own, merging them with local traditions to create a liberal, progressive order and a new sense of what it means to be Taiwanese.

At the heart of this identity is our embrace of democracy, reflecting a choice that the Taiwanese made and fought for after decades of authoritarian rule. Once the Taiwanese had made that choice, there was no looking back. Imperfect though it may be, democracy has become a nonnegotiable part of who we are. This determination gives Taiwan the resilience to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and provides a firewall against

If Taiwan were to fall, the consequences would be catastrophic.

forces, both internal and external, seeking to undermine its hard-won democratic institutions.

A fundamental part of this embrace of democracy is a firm belief that the future of Taiwan is to be de-

ecided by the Taiwanese through democratic means. Although Taiwanese in some ways differ in their sense of what exactly this future should look like, we are united in our commitment to democracy and the values and institutions that allow us to fight back against external efforts to erode our identity and alter the way of life we cherish. The great majority of us regard democracy as the best form of government for Taiwan and are willing to do what is necessary to defend it. Those beliefs are tested every day, but there is no doubt that the people would rise up should the very existence of Taiwan be under threat.

Civil society has always played a major role in Taiwan. During the period of authoritarian rule under the Kuomintang, the Dangwai movement pushed to lift martial law and democratize Taiwan; even after being instrumental in ending martial law, it continued to offer an active and effective check on government power. Today, the extent of Taiwanese civil society's role in governance is unmatched anywhere in the region—a reflection of the trust between elected officials and citizens, who as a result are able to influence policy both through and between elections.

Taiwan's civil society has also proved integral to the island's international standing. Taiwan's exclusion from the United Nations and most other international institutions could have led to isolation, but Taiwan instead tapped into the tremendous creativity and capacity of its people, allowing us to establish global connections by other means—through small businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and various semi-official groupings. Rather than being an impediment, the refusal of many countries to officially recognize Taiwan compelled us to think asymmetrically, combating efforts to

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negate Taiwan's existence by deepening our engagement with the world through nontraditional channels.

In short, despite decades of isolation, the people of Taiwan have succeeded in making a place for themselves within the international community—and transforming Taiwan itself into an economic powerhouse and one of the most vibrant democracies in the Indo-Pacific.

CHANGING THE RULES

Taiwan's ability to survive and even thrive as a liberal democracy despite the extraordinary challenges to its existence has important implications for the prevailing rules of international relations. Our bid to play a more meaningful role in the international community is evolving in the context of changing regional politics, with more assertive challenges to the liberal international order, backed by the economic and political power to turn those ambitions into action. With increasing awareness of the potential impact of such authoritarian ambitions, more and more countries have been willing to reexamine their long-standing assumptions about, and self-imposed limitations on, engagement with Taiwan.

Through its evolution as an economic powerhouse and a participatory democracy, Taiwan seeks to be—and in many ways already is—part of the solution to emerging challenges with ramifications on a planetary scale, from climate change and new diseases, to proliferation and terrorism, to human trafficking and threats to supply chains. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the world is now so interconnected that the outbreak of a disease in one corner of the planet can, within a matter of months, reach pandemic proportions. In many cases, the speed with which new emergencies arise and spread is beyond the ability of states and existing international institutions to respond. To prepare for future emergencies, the international community must move toward inclusiveness rather than rigidly adhering to current structures.

Even as it experienced a flare-up in COVID-19 cases last spring, Taiwan has demonstrated to the world that democratic systems can respond effectively to a pandemic, harnessing the powers of artificial intelligence, big data, and surveillance networks while ensuring that the information gathered is used responsibly. The pandemic has also given Taiwan an opportunity to share its experience with the world and to provide much-needed medical assistance to struggling countries. This is so despite its long exclusion from global institutions such as the

World Health Organization, which has left Taiwan little choice but to develop its own methods of cooperating and communicating with international partners. Being left out of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions has encouraged resilience and spurred novel approaches to dealing with challenges and crises of all kinds.

Despite being kept out in the cold, Taiwan has strived to adhere to international protocols, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, amending its domestic laws and seeking its own formulas for meeting increasingly complex challenges. Taiwan is also working proactively with its partners on the development of its region. In 2016, we launched the New Southbound Policy, which facilitates regional prosperity through trade and investment partnerships, educational and people-to-people exchanges, and technological and medical cooperation with countries in South and Southeast Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Taiwan is also making investments in these partners through its business community, simultaneously fostering secure supply chains and regional development.

The people of Taiwan have made clear to the entire world that democracy is nonnegotiable.

Indeed, with its high-tech leadership and educated and globalized workforce, Taiwan is well positioned to help create secure global supply chains in sectors such as semiconductors, biotechnology, and renewable energy—all areas where international cooperation is needed now more than ever. Our semiconductor industry is especially significant: a “silicon shield” that allows Taiwan to protect itself and others from aggressive attempts by authoritarian regimes to disrupt global supply chains. We are working to further strengthen our role in securing global supply chains with a new regional high-end production hub initiative, which will solidify our position in the global supply chain. Besides making computer chips, Taiwan is active in high-precision manufacturing, artificial intelligence, 5G applications, renewable energy, biotechnology, and more, helping create more diverse and global supply chains that can withstand disruption, human or otherwise.

Taiwan derives additional soft power from expertise and capabilities in a variety of other fields, including education, public health, medicine, and natural-disaster prevention. And these are fields in which our experts and institutions are taking on a growing regional role. Our

universities, for example, are prepared to work with other universities in the region to develop Chinese-language training. Our medical facilities are sharing expertise in medical technology and management with partners around Asia. And we are ready to work with major countries to provide infrastructure investment in developing countries, leveraging efficiency while promoting good governance, transparency, and environmental protection. Similar efforts are being made through an agreement with the United States to enhance cooperation on infrastructure financing, investment, and market development in Latin America and Southeast Asia. In short, Taiwan can be a crucial force in the peaceful development and prosperity of our region and the world.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Sitting on the frontlines of the global contest between the liberal democratic order and the authoritarian alternative, Taiwan also has an important part to play in strengthening global democracy. In 2003, we established the region's first nongovernmental organization devoted to democracy assistance and advocacy, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. Following the models set by the United States' National Endowment for Democracy and the United Kingdom's Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the TFD provides funding for other nongovernmental organizations, international and domestic, that advocate democratic development and human rights. It also works to promote public participation in governance through mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and to encourage youth engagement through initiatives such as the annual Asia Young Leaders for Democracy program. In 2019, the TFD organized its inaugural regional forum on religious freedom, and my government appointed its first ambassador-at-large for religious freedom.

Taiwan's strong record on democracy, gender equality, and press and religious freedom has also made it a home for a growing number of global nongovernmental organizations, which have faced an increasingly difficult environment in Asia. Organizations including Reporters Without Borders, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the European Values Center for Security Policy, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom have set up regional offices in Taiwan. From Taiwan, they are able to continue their important work in the region without the constant threats of surveillance, harassment, and interruptions by authorities. We have also made

ourselves hospitable to international institutions interested in establishing a presence in the Indo-Pacific, helping turn Taiwan into a hub for advancing the interests of the democratic community.

Meanwhile, the Global Cooperation and Training Framework—a platform jointly administered by Taiwan, the United States, and other partners that allows us to share our expertise with countries around the world—has fostered creative cooperation on issues such as law enforcement, public health, and good governance. One recent round of GCTF activity, for example, focused on media literacy and how democracies can combat disinformation—an area in which Taiwan has an abundance of experience.

Over the past five years, more than 2,300 experts and officials from more than 87 countries have attended GCTF workshops in Taiwan, and the forum will continue to expand—offering a path to greater collaboration between Taiwan and countries around the world, including the United States. Indeed, Taiwan works closely with the United States on many issues, in the service of regional peace and stability. Our hope is to shoulder more responsibility by being a close political and economic partner of the United States and other like-minded countries.

A FORCE FOR GOOD

The threat posed by authoritarian regimes has served as an important wake-up call for democracies, spurring them to emerge from their complacency. Although extraordinary challenges remain, democracies around the world are now working to safeguard their values and renew their ossified institutions. Alliances are being rekindled to serve the interests of the international community.

Taiwan may be small in terms of territory, but it has proved that it can have a large global presence—and that this presence matters to the world. It has persevered in the face of existential threats and made itself an indispensable actor in the Indo-Pacific. And through it all, the Taiwanese commitment to democracy has never been stronger: the people of Taiwan know that democracy is the lasting path and the only game in town.

Over the past two years, our handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our assistance to and collaboration with countries around the world, has offered one more example of the crucial role that Taiwan can play and of why Taiwan matters. Going forward, our high-tech industries, and especially our production of advanced semiconduc-

tors, will continue to fuel the global economy. And Taiwan's ability to balance ties to various countries while defending its democratic way of life will continue to inspire others in the region.

We have never shied away from challenges. Although the world faces an arduous journey ahead, this presents Taiwan with opportunities not seen before. It should increasingly be regarded as part of the solution, particularly as democratic countries seek to find the right balance between the need to engage and trade with authoritarian countries and the need to defend the values and democratic ideals that define their societies. Long left out in the cold, Taiwan is ready to be a global force for good, with a role on the international stage that is commensurate with its abilities. 🌐

The Age of America First

Washington's Flawed New Foreign Policy Consensus

Richard Haass

Donald Trump was supposed to be an aberration—a U.S. president whose foreign policy marked a sharp but temporary break from an internationalism that had defined seven decades of U.S. interactions with the world. He saw little value in alliances and spurned multilateral institutions. He eagerly withdrew from existing international agreements, such as the Paris climate accord and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and backed away from new ones, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He coddled autocrats and trained his ire on the United States' democratic partners.

At first glance, the foreign policy of U.S. President Joe Biden could hardly be more different. He professes to value the United States' traditional allies in Europe and Asia, celebrates multilateralism, and hails his administration's commitment to a "rules-based international order." He treats climate change as a serious threat and arms control as an essential tool. He sees the fight of our time as one between democracy and autocracy, pledging to convene what he is calling the Summit for Democracy to reestablish U.S. leadership in the democratic cause. "America is back," he proclaimed shortly after taking office.

But the differences, meaningful as they are, obscure a deeper truth: there is far more continuity between the foreign policy of the current president and that of the former president than is typically recognized. Critical elements of this continuity arose even before Trump's presidency, during the administration of Barack Obama, suggesting a longer-term development—a paradigm shift in the United States' approach to the world. Beneath the apparent volatility, the outlines of a post-post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy are emerging.

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The old foreign policy paradigm grew out of World War II and the Cold War, founded on the recognition that U.S. national security depended on more than just looking out for the country's own narrowly defined concerns. Protecting and advancing U.S. interests, both domestic and international, required helping shepherd into existence and then sustaining an international system that, however imperfect, would buttress U.S. security and prosperity over the long term. Despite missteps (above all, the misguided attempt to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force and the war in Vietnam), the results largely validated these assumptions. The United States avoided a great-power war with the Soviet Union but still ended the Cold War on immensely favorable terms; U.S. GDP has increased eightfold in real terms and more than 90-fold in nominal terms since the end of World War II.

The new paradigm dismisses the core tenet of that approach: that the United States has a vital stake in a broader global system, one that at times demands undertaking difficult military interventions or putting aside immediate national preferences in favor of principles and arrangements that bring long-term benefits. The new consensus reflects not an across-the-board isolationism—after all, a hawkish approach to China is hardly isolationist—but rather the rejection of that internationalism. Today, notwithstanding Biden's pledge "to help lead the world toward a more peaceful, prosperous future for all people," the reality is that Americans want the benefits of international order without doing the hard work of building and maintaining it.

The hold of this emerging nationalist approach to the world is clear, accounting for the continuity across administrations as different as those of Obama, Trump, and Biden. Whether it can produce a foreign policy that advances American security, prosperity, and values is another matter entirely.

THE SQUANDERING

As with any paradigm shift, the one taking place now is possible only because of the failures—both real and perceived—of much of what came in the years before. The Cold War ended 30 years ago, and the United States emerged from that four-decade struggle with a degree of primacy that had few, if any, historical precedents. U.S. power was immense in both absolute and relative terms. It may have been an exaggeration to hail a "unipolar moment," but not by much.



Contrasts and continuities: Trump and Biden debating in Cleveland, September 2020

Historians who look back on these three decades will be rightly critical of a lot that the United States did, and did not do, with its position. There were some important accomplishments: the reunification of Germany within NATO, the disciplined handling of the 1990–91 Gulf War, the U.S.-led military and diplomatic effort to help end the war and slaughter in the former Yugoslavia, the fashioning of new trade agreements, the millions of lives saved thanks to the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR.

But these achievements must be weighed against American failures, both of commission and omission. Washington managed little in the way of relationship and institution building, lacking the creativity and ambition that characterized U.S. foreign policy in the wake of World War II. It wasn’t considered much of a stretch when Dean Acheson, who was secretary of state during the Truman administration, titled his memoir *Present at the Creation*; no recent secretary of state could credibly include the word “creation” in his or her memoir. Despite its unmatched power, the United States did little to address the widening gap between global challenges and the institutions meant to contend with them.

The list of missteps is long. Washington largely failed to adapt to China’s rise. Its decision to enlarge NATO, in violation of Churchill’s dictum “In victory, magnanimity,” fanned Russian hostility without

sufficiently modernizing or strengthening the alliance. Africa and Latin America received only intermittent, and even then limited, attention. Above all, the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were failures of both design and execution, resulting in costly overreach, part of a broader U.S. focus on the greater Middle East that defied strategic logic. The George W. Bush and Obama administrations dedicated a high percentage of their foreign policy focus to a region home to only about five percent of the world's population, no great powers, and economies dependent on the wasting asset of fossil fuels.

The word that comes to mind in assessing U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War is “squander.” The United States missed its best chance to update the system that had successfully waged the Cold War for a new era defined by new challenges and new rivalries. Meanwhile, thanks to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American public largely soured on what was widely seen as a costly, failed foreign policy. Americans came to blame trade for the disappearance of millions of manufacturing jobs (despite new technologies being the main culprit), and growing inequality, exacerbated by both the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic, fueled populist suspicion of elites. In the face of looming domestic problems, including decaying infrastructure and faltering public education, foreign involvement came to be viewed as a costly distraction. The stage for a new foreign policy paradigm was set.

EXTREME COMPETITION

The first and most prominent element of continuity between Trump and Biden is the centrality of great-power rivalry—above all, with China. Indeed, U.S. policy toward China has hardly changed since Biden became president: as Matthew Pottinger, a senior official on the National Security Council during the Trump administration who was the lead architect of that administration's approach to China, rightly noted in these pages, “The Biden administration has largely maintained its predecessor's policy.” Biden himself has spoken of “extreme competition” with China, and his coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs has proclaimed that “the period that was broadly described as engagement has come to an end.” This new posture reflects the pervasive disillusionment in the American foreign policy establishment with the results of efforts to integrate China into the world economy and the broader international system, along with heightened concern about how Beijing is using its growing strength abroad and engaging in repression at home.

The continuity between the two administrations can be seen in their approaches to Taiwan, the most likely flash point between the United States and China. Far from rescinding a policy introduced in the final weeks of the Trump administration that removed restrictions on official U.S. interactions with Taiwanese officials, the Biden administration has actively implemented it, publicizing high-level meetings between U.S. officials and their Taiwanese counterparts. Just as the Trump administration worked to improve U.S.-Taiwanese ties, the Biden administration has repeatedly stressed its “rock solid” support for Taiwan and has inserted language emphasizing the importance of cross-strait stability into joint statements not just with Asian allies, such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, but also with global bodies, such as the G-7.

The continuity goes beyond Taiwan. The Biden administration has kept in place Trump-era tariffs and export controls and is reportedly looking into launching an investigation into China’s large-scale industrial subsidies. It has doubled down on criticism of China’s refusal to allow an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and given credence to the possibility that the new coronavirus leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. Like its predecessor, it has called Beijing’s repression of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang a “genocide” and denounced its violation of the “one country, two systems” principle in Hong Kong. It has strengthened efforts to upgrade the Quad, a dialogue meant to enhance cooperation among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and launched a complementary strategic initiative with Australia and the United Kingdom. It has also continued to use the term “Indo-Pacific,” first brought into common official usage by the Trump administration.

To be sure, there are differences in the Biden administration’s approach in some important areas, including a focus on finding ways to cooperate on climate change, the decision to refrain from echoing the call by Trump’s secretary of state Mike Pompeo for regime change in Beijing, and an effort to build a common stance with allies. Yet the view that China is the United States’ chief competitor and even adversary has become widespread and ingrained, and the similarities in the two administrations’ approaches far outweigh any differences.

Americans want the benefits of international order without doing the hard work.

Much the same can be said of the administrations' policies toward the United States' other great-power competitor. Since Biden took over, U.S. policy toward Russia has changed little in substance. Gone is Trump's inexplicable admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. But whatever Trump's personal regard for Putin, the Trump administration's posture toward Russia was in fact fairly tough. It introduced new sanctions, closed Russian consulates in the United States, and enhanced and expanded U.S. military support to Ukraine—all of which has continued under Biden. The common view between the two administrations seems to be that U.S. policy toward Russia should mostly consist of damage limitation—preventing tensions, whether in Europe or in cyberspace, from deteriorating into a crisis. Even Biden's willingness to extend U.S.-Russian arms control pacts and start “strategic stability” talks is mostly about preventing additional erosion, not making further progress. The days of seeking a “reset” with Moscow are long gone.

AMERICAN NATIONALISM

Accompanying this focus on great powers is a shared embrace of American nationalism. The Trump administration eagerly adopted the slogan and idea of “America first,” despite the label's origins in a strand of isolationism tinged with sympathy for Nazi Germany. The Biden administration is less overt in its nationalism, but its mantra of “a foreign policy for the middle class” reflects some similar inclinations.

“America first” tendencies also characterized the Biden administration's initial response to COVID-19. U.S. exports of vaccines were limited and delayed even as domestic supply far exceeded demand, and there has been only a modest effort to expand manufacturing capacity to allow for greater exports. This domestic focus was shortsighted, as highly contagious variants were able to emerge in other parts of the world before coming to do immense damage in the United States. It also forfeited an opportunity to cultivate goodwill internationally by demonstrating the superiority of American technology and generosity in the face of Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy.

U.S. trade policy has been shaped by similar forces, demonstrating further continuity between Trump and Biden. The latter has avoided the hyperbole of the former, who savaged all trade pacts except for the ones his own administration had negotiated. (No matter that the Trump administration's agreements were mostly updated versions of



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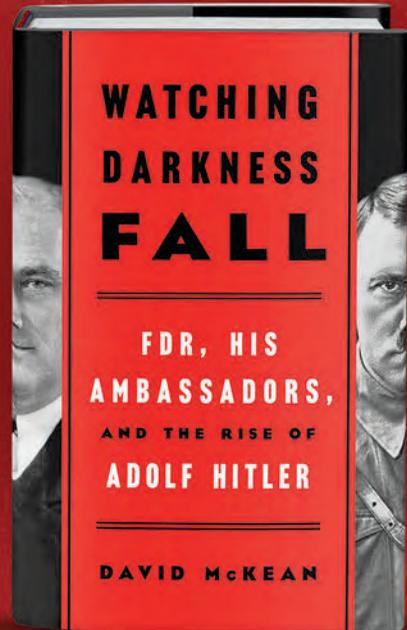
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existing pacts: the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, for example, largely followed the much-denounced North American Free Trade Agreement and, in modernizing certain elements, made generous use of the text of the equally denounced TPP.) But the Biden administration has shown little, if any, interest in strengthening the World Trade Organization, negotiating new trade accords, or joining existing ones, including the successor agreement to the TPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP, despite the overwhelming economic and strategic reasons for doing so. Staying outside the agreement leaves the United States on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific economic order and also means missing opportunities in other areas, such as advancing global climate goals through cross-border carbon taxes or using the deal to provide an economic counterweight to China.

WITHDRAWAL AT ANY COST

Central to the new foreign policy is the desire to pull back from the greater Middle East, the venue of the so-called forever wars that did so much to fuel this paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy. Afghanistan is the most striking example of this shared impetus. In February 2020, the Trump administration signed an accord with the Taliban that set a May 1, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country. The negotiations cut out and undercut the government of Afghanistan, and the agreement itself failed to call for the Taliban to lay down their arms or even to commit to a cease-fire. It was not so much a peace agreement as a pact to facilitate American military withdrawal.

By the time Biden assumed the presidency, the overreach that had once characterized U.S. strategy in Afghanistan was a thing of the past. U.S. troop levels, which had hit 100,000 during the Obama administration, were down to under 3,000, with their role largely limited to training, advising, and supporting Afghan forces. U.S. combat fatalities had plummeted with the end of combat operations in 2014 (years before the U.S.-Taliban accord). The modest U.S. presence provided an anchor for some 7,000 troops from allied countries (and an even larger number of contractors) and a psychological and military backstop for the Afghan government—a sufficient presence, that is, to avert Kabul's collapse, but not enough to achieve victory or peace. After 20 years, the United States seemed to have found a level of commitment in Afghanistan commensurate with the stakes.

Yet the Biden administration rejected the options of renegotiating or scrapping the accord. Instead, it honored Trump's agreement in every way but one: the deadline for a full U.S. military withdrawal was extended by some 100 days, to September 11, 2021 (and then the withdrawal was completed ahead of schedule). Biden rejected tying the removal of U.S. troops to conditions on the ground or to additional Taliban actions. Like Trump before him, he considered the war in Afghanistan a "forever war," one he was determined to get out of at any cost. And Biden didn't just implement the Trump policy he had inherited; his administration did so in a Trumpian way, consulting minimally with others and leaving NATO allies to scramble. (Other decisions, including supplanting French sales of submarines to Australia or being slow to lift COVID-related restrictions against European visitors to the United States, have likewise set back transatlantic ties.) Multilateralism and an alliance-first foreign policy in principle gave way to America-first unilateralism in practice.

In the rest of the greater Middle East, the Biden administration has similarly continued the Trump approach of reducing the U.S. footprint. It has resisted any temptation to get more involved in Syria, much less Libya or Yemen; announced it will maintain only a small, noncombat military presence in Iraq; embraced the Abraham Accords while participating only reluctantly in diplomatic efforts to end the fighting between Israel and Hamas; and eschewed launching any new attempt to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

At first glance, Iran may seem like a glaring exception to the broader similarity. Trump was a fierce critic of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran (negotiated when Biden was vice president) and unilaterally exited the accord in 2018; by contrast, the Biden administration (which is staffed at the senior level by several officials who had a large hand in negotiating the pact) has made clear its desire to return to the agreement. But restoring the deal has proved easier said than done, as the two governments have been unable to agree on either specific obligations or sequencing. In addition, a new hard-line Iranian government has shown no interest in signing on to the sort of "longer and stronger" pact the Biden administration seeks. As a result, the Biden

Greater disarray in the world will make it much more difficult to "build back better."

administration may well face the same choices its predecessor did, with Iran advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities and its influence throughout the region. Even if Iran once again accepts time-limited constraints on its nuclear activities, the United States will still have to decide how to respond to other Iranian provocations.

QUESTIONS OF VALUE

Even on those issues on which Biden's rhetoric starkly differs from Trump's, the policy shifts have been more modest than might have been expected. Consider the two presidents' views on the role of values in foreign policy. Trump was a transactional leader who often seemed to consider democracy a hindrance and tried to establish close personal relationships with many of the world's dictators. He lavished praise on Putin and exchanged "love letters" with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. He spoke highly of China's Xi Jinping, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Hungary's Viktor Orban, while denigrating the leaders of democratic allies, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. He even levied tariffs on Canada and the European Union.

Biden, by contrast, has declared that the United States is in "a contest with autocrats," announced plans to hold his Summit for Democracy, and pledged to prioritize relations with countries that share American values. Yet such commitments, however sincere, have hardly made human rights and democracy promotion a more prominent part of U.S. foreign policy. Well-warranted expressions of outrage have not led to significant changes in behavior by others; the targets of such outrage are generally willing and able to absorb U.S. criticism and increasingly even U.S. sanctions, thanks to the growth of alternative sources of support. Myanmar in the wake of a military coup is a textbook example: the United States sanctioned members of the regime, but Chinese largess and diplomatic support have helped the military weather the sanctions. Washington has offered only a minimal response to incidents such as the Cuban government's brutal reaction to protests last summer or the assassination of Haiti's president. Whatever concerns Washington may have about Saudi human rights violations, it's unlikely that those concerns would prevent cooperation with Riyadh on Iran, Yemen, or Israel if, for example, Saudi Arabia's leaders showed an interest in joining the Abraham Accords.

Of course, U.S. presidents have always allowed professed commitments to human rights and democracy to be set aside when other interests or priorities have come to the fore. The “free world” of the Cold War was often anything but free. But the broader shift in U.S. foreign policy today, with its stress on both great-power competition and short-term domestic priorities, has made those tradeoffs more frequent and acute. In China’s neighborhood, for example, the Biden administration set aside concerns about human rights violations by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in order to make it easier for the U.S. military to operate in his country, and it has worked to bolster ties with Vietnam, another autocracy ruled by a communist party. With Russia, it signed an arms control accord while overlooking the imprisonment of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny. It has largely ignored the rise of Hindu nationalism in India in favor of stronger ties with the country to balance China.

With its poorly executed withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the abandonment of many Afghans most vulnerable to Taliban reprisals, Washington further forfeited the high ground: the United States walked away from a project that, for all its flaws and failings, had done much to improve the lives of millions of Afghans, above all women and girls. And of course, the sad reality of the fragile state of democracy in the United States—particularly in the wake of the January 6 insurrection—has further undercut Washington’s ability to promote democratic values abroad.

None of this is to say that there are not important areas of difference between the Trump administration and the Biden administration on foreign policy—consider climate change, for example: climate denial has given way to new investments in green technology and infrastructure, the regulation of fossil fuel production and use, and participation in the Paris process. But these areas of difference have rarely taken priority when other issues, many of which reflect more continuity, are at stake. Washington has been unwilling to use trade to advance climate goals, sanction Brazil for its destruction of the Amazon, or make meaningful contributions to help poorer countries shift to green energy.

THE PROBLEM WITH CONTINUITY

In theory, more continuity in U.S. foreign policy should be a good thing. After all, a great power is unlikely to be effective if its foreign policy lurches from administration to administration in a way that

unnerves allies, provides openings to adversaries, confuses voters, and makes impossible any long-term commitment to building global norms and institutions. The problem with the emerging American approach to the world is not an absence of domestic political consensus; to the contrary, there is considerable bipartisanship when it comes to foreign policy. The problem is that the consensus is woefully inadequate, above all in its failure to appreciate just how much developments thousands of miles away affect what happens at home.

It is also rife with self-defeating contradictions, especially when it comes to China. Detering China will require sustained increases in military spending and a greater willingness to use force (since successful deterrence always requires not just the ability but also the perceived will to act). Many Republicans but few Democrats back the former; few in either party seem ready to sign up for the latter. Both parties favor symbolically upgrading U.S.-Taiwanese relations, even though going too far in that direction has the potential to trigger a costly conflict between the United States and China. As much as the United States sees China as an adversary, Washington still needs Beijing's support if it is to tackle a host of regional and global challenges, from North Korea and Afghanistan to global health. And while the Biden administration has talked much about its support for alliances, U.S. allies are in many cases unprepared to do what the administration believes is necessary to counter China. Indeed, when it comes to both China and Russia, most U.S. allies resist U.S. calls to limit trade and investment ties in sensitive sectors for geopolitical reasons. A posture does not a policy make.

Competing with China is essential, but it cannot provide the organizing principle for American foreign policy in an era increasingly defined by global challenges, including climate change, pandemic disease, terrorism, proliferation, and online disruption, all of which carry enormous human and economic costs. Imagine that the United States successfully deters China from using aggression against its neighbors, from Taiwan to India and Japan, and in the South China Sea. Better yet, imagine that China even stops stealing U.S. intellectual property and addresses U.S. concerns about its trade practices. Beijing could still frustrate U.S. efforts to tackle global challenges by supporting Iranian and North Korean nuclear ambitions, conducting aggressive cyberattacks, building more coal-fired power plants, and resisting reforms to the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization.

The contradictions go on. The war in Afghanistan revealed limits to Americans' support for nation building, but building up the capacity of friends is essential in much of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East if the governments in those regions are to become better able to meet local security challenges, a prerequisite for their becoming more democratic and for the United States' shouldering less of the burden. Participation in trade blocs is desirable not just for economic reasons but also to help rein in China's unfair trade practices and mitigate climate change. Economic nationalism (especially "Buy America" provisions) sets a precedent that, if others follow, will reduce global trade and work against collaborative approaches to developing and fielding new technologies that could make it easier to compete with China. And in the Middle East, for all the focus on limiting U.S. involvement, it is not clear how pulling back squares with U.S. commitments to counter an Iran intent on developing its nuclear and missile capabilities and on expanding its regional influence, both directly and through proxies. Even a successful effort to revive the 2015 nuclear deal would not change this reality, given what the agreement does not address and given the sunset provisions for its nuclear restrictions.

AMERICA ALONE

Whatever the failings of this new paradigm, there is no going back; history does not offer do-overs. Nor should Washington return to a foreign policy that, for much of three decades, largely failed both in what it did and in what it did not do.

The starting point for a new internationalism should be a clear recognition that although foreign policy begins at home, it cannot end there. The United States, regardless of its diminished influence and deep domestic divisions, faces a world with both traditional geopolitical threats and new challenges tied to globalization. An American president must seek to fix what ails the United States without neglecting what happens abroad. Greater disarray in the world will make the task to "build back better"—or whatever slogan is chosen for domestic renewal—much more difficult, if not impossible. Biden has acknowledged the "fundamental truth of the 21st century . . . that our own success is bound up with others succeeding as well"; the question is whether he can craft and carry out a foreign policy that reflects it.

The United States also cannot succeed alone. It must work with others, through both formal and informal means, to set international

norms and standards and marshal collective action. Such an approach will require the involvement of traditional allies in Europe and Asia, new partners, countries that may need U.S. or international help at home, and nondemocracies. It will require the use of all the instruments of power available to the United States—diplomacy, but also trade, aid, intelligence, and the military. Nor can the United States risk letting unpredictability give it a reputation as unreliable; other states will determine their own actions, especially when it comes to balancing or accommodating China, based in no small part on how dependable and active they believe the United States will be as a partner.

In the absence of a new American internationalism, the likely outcome will be a world that is less free, more violent, and less willing or able to tackle common challenges. It is equal parts ironic and dangerous that at a time when the United States is more affected by global developments than ever before, it is less willing to carry out a foreign policy that attempts to shape them. 🌐

The Coming Democratic Revival

America's Opportunity to Lead the Fight Against Authoritarianism

Madeleine K. Albright

For two centuries, American leaders have quarreled about how high to place support for democracy on the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities. The Biden administration's recent tragedy-marred withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan reinforced the view of skeptics from across the domestic political spectrum that actively promoting democracy overseas is naive and less likely to advance the country's core interests than to embroil it in no-win quagmires. They point as well to a steady decline in global freedom over the past 15 years as evidence that emphasizing democratic values is out of touch with prevailing trends and therefore a losing strategy, one that actually detracts from the country's international standing. With the United States confronted by partisan divisions at home and fierce adversaries abroad, these critics assert that U.S. leaders can no longer afford to indulge in Lincolnesque fantasies about democracy as the last best hope on earth. They must instead shift their focus inward and accept the world as it is.

This thesis, although in keeping with the emotions of the hour, is shortsighted and wrong. It would be a grave error for the United States to waver in its commitment to democracy. Historically, the republic's claim on the global imagination has been inseparable from its identity—however imperfectly embodied—as a champion of human freedom, which remains a universal aspiration. The more disturbing events of the

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twenty-first century, for all their complications, have dented, but not destroyed, what remains a unique foreign policy asset. Nothing would be more foolish than to toss away this comparative advantage or to flee the global stage entirely due to past disappointments and self-doubt.

The United States still has immense resources it can deploy for purposes that serve both its immediate needs and its enduring ideals. Should the country conclude otherwise, however, and decide to absent itself from the democratic struggle, it would disappoint its friends, aid its enemies, magnify future risks to its citizens, impede human progress, and compromise its ability to lead on any issue. What is more, American leaders would be sounding the call for retreat at precisely the moment an opportunity has arisen to spark a democratic resurgence. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the momentum is not with the enemies of democracy. It's true that in recent years, some authoritarians have grown stronger. But in many cases, they are now failing to deliver, including in countries where people increasingly expect accountable leadership even in the absence of democratic rule. This is a key point that few observers have yet grasped. Democracy is not a dying cause; in fact, it is poised for a comeback.

DEMOCRACY STRIKES BACK

According to Freedom House, authoritarian leaders took advantage of international indifference amid the COVID-19 pandemic last year to crush opponents and shrink the space available for democratic activism. As a result, "countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006. The long democratic recession is deepening."

There is, however, a silver lining in this cloud: it is easier to move upward from a valley than from a peak. Measurements of democracy's slump typically start with the period following the breakup of the Soviet Union, when newly free democratic governments emerged in almost every region. Many states whose democracies are now troubled were under authoritarian rule until about 30 years ago. Today, the world takes note when authorities in Tanzania arrest an opposition leader, leaders in Sri Lanka consolidate their power, the president of Brazil threatens to cancel elections, or the prime minister of Hungary rules by decree. Yet there was a time in recent memory when those countries were not democracies at all. Despite their current distress, the forces of freedom have an enlarged platform from which to mount a revival.



Ballot power: at a polling station in Marikana, South Africa, May 2014

Observers should also note that democracy's decline coincided with the rise of international terrorism, the 2008 global financial meltdown, the Syrian civil war, a global refugee crisis, and a worldwide public health catastrophe. These events stoked a host of popular frustrations and fears, with most blame settling on elected leaders. The next 20 years can hardly be less conducive to liberty's growth than the last.

This is the case in part because the world's two most prominent authoritarian states, China and Russia, have squandered their best chance to offer an appealing alternative to liberal democracy. With the United States missing in action during President Donald Trump's four years in office, and Europe preoccupied with Brexit and other intramural disputes, the governments in Beijing and Moscow had their opportunity to establish themselves as global models. They blew it. According to a 2021 survey of people in 17 developed countries conducted by the Pew Research Center, unflattering views of China are at a historic high, and a median of 74 percent of those polled reported that they had no confidence in Russian President Vladimir Putin to do the right thing in world affairs. The results are easily explained. The Chinese government's transactional approach, lack of transparency, and tendency to bully have left it with more contracts

than friends. The regime in the Kremlin, meanwhile, is widely thought to be corrupt, untrustworthy, and a one-man show rapidly approaching its final curtain. Russia, a country that according to the World Health Organization ranked 97th in average life expectancy in 2019, does not have much to brag about.

Further, the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election was a blow to autocrats everywhere. Trump's belly flop demolished the myth he helped create that relentless egotism is a political winner. Many of Trump's most outspoken international admirers have also suffered losses or are under siege. These include Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and France's Marine Le Pen. The Philippines is one of the few countries where a charismatic strongman still has an appreciative audience. But the 76-year-old Rodrigo Duterte's term as president ends next May.

PUSHBACK

For all these reasons, a democratic comeback is possible. But should one begin, it will meet resistance. Although some authoritarians are self-obsessed amateurs, many are skilled at shaping public perceptions and checkmating potential opponents. Their ranks are split between those who insist that they are democrats—albeit “illiberal” ones—and those who openly scoff at even the most basic democratic norms. All of them assert that in a dangerous and amoral world, leaders must be able to act decisively to impose order, repel threats, and foster national greatness. In recent years, authoritarians have provided cover for one another through their influence in multilateral bodies and by insisting that governments not be criticized by outsiders for doing whatever they wish within their countries' borders. National sovereignty, they assert, is a sufficient defense against any allegation.

Dictators also have the advantage of intimidation. Few are above using force to harass political rivals and disrupt protests. Their goal in so doing is less to change minds than to convince women and men yearning for freedom to surrender that aspiration. Sometimes, this works.

But people should not abandon hope. There was a period late in the Cold War when it was fashionable to conclude that Soviet-style governments would last forever because of their willingness to quash dissent before it could take hold. That proposition was used to justify U.S. support for anticommunist dictators on the grounds that if only des-

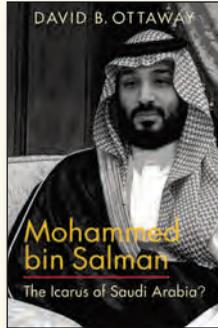


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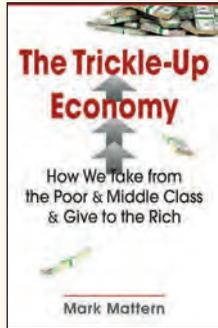
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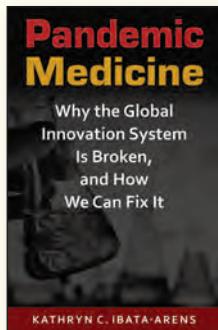
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pots could survive in countries lacking a democratic tradition, Washington should want them to be pro-Western despots. Then the Iron Curtain lifted, and the theory of totalitarian permanence collapsed.

Could something similar happen again? That depends on what metaphor one prefers. If history moves like a locomotive, in a single direction, today's trends will become tomorrow's reality. But if the human desire for change causes history's course to swing back and forth like a pendulum, a reversal can be expected.

Because people today are more connected and demanding than ever before, governing is harder than it has ever been. Compared to in the past, younger generations have easier access to education, more awareness of one another, less respect for traditional hierarchies, and an ingrained belief in their own autonomy. People of all ages observe what others have—and want more. Technology has created in many a thirst for speed and a dearth of patience. Citizens increasingly question what leaders say and are drawn to voices that reject present conditions and promise something better.

These factors have fueled the rise of demagogues, but they can also undermine the staying power of authoritarian regimes old enough to embody the status quo. There is a limit to how long an autocrat can sustain popularity simply by comparing himself to a despised predecessor. In Russia, Putin is rarely contrasted anymore with the hapless Boris Yeltsin; in Venezuela, few remember the ineffectual civilians who governed before Hugo Chávez; Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega can hardly justify his broken promises by pointing to Anastasio Somoza, who was deposed in 1979. Hungary's Orban has ruled for more than a decade, and Turkey's Erdogan for nearly two, so neither can easily escape responsibility for the beleaguered condition of his country.

Some of the more vulnerable heavy-handed governments are already facing intensifying pressure from below. In Belarus, a major protest movement has emerged because a growing number of citizens consider President Alexander Lukashenko to be a Russian puppet and want him to leave. In Cuba, where for the first time since 1959 neither of the Castro brothers holds power, the street demonstrations last July were the largest in decades. Although it is true that repression may work for a time, that strategy has to fail only once. Should a well-known authoritarian leader be forced out, there is a good chance that others will be too, as happened during the last democratic wave, when the triumph of Poland's Solidarity move-

ment led rapidly to democratic transitions throughout central Europe and the ouster of a strongman in Manila was followed by similar departures in Chile, South Africa, Zaire, and Indonesia. In a world where most people are able to peer beyond national borders, a trend of any kind can gather strength quickly.

It helps as well that the techniques the current generation of phony democrats rely on may already be suffering from overuse. In their lexicon, “constitutional reform” is code for evading term limits, diminishing the clout of parliaments, and seizing control of the courts. They issue emergency decrees not to safeguard the public but to criminalize opposition and silence the press. They employ patriotic appeals to equate pro-democracy agitation with foreign subversion. They rig elections to hide the ugly visage of despotism beneath a veneer of respectability. Although still harmful, these efforts no longer fool anyone—which makes them easier to discredit and oppose.

Even more important, despite the battering that democracy has endured, most people want to strengthen, not discard, their democratic systems. According to the German scholar Christian Welzel, support for democracy has increased since the mid-1990s in more countries than it has declined in, and it remains steady overall at roughly 75 percent. Similarly, the research institution Afrobarometer reports that those surveyed this year in 34 African countries still overwhelmingly prefer democracy when compared to single-party or one-man rule. This is true even for the minority of Africans who see China as a better model for their countries than the United States. Arab attitudes are less clear, but democracy has recently made modest gains in some tough neighborhoods—Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan—while somehow surviving almost nonstop chaos in Lebanon.

Today, more talented women and men are striving in more places on behalf of democratic principles than ever before. The National Democratic Institute, a nongovernmental U.S. organization that supports democratic institutions overseas, is working with around 28,000 local partners in more than 70 countries on five continents. Despite democracy’s struggles, popular participation in shaping public agendas is up, not down. Strides toward gender equality have contributed to this rising level of commitment, as has the fact that a record percentage of today’s young adults grew up in relative freedom. They consider self-expression a right to be exercised regularly and regardless of obstacles. Far from giving up on democracy, they are generat-

ing a steady stream of proposals for its improvement, including more rigorous term limits, reforms of campaign financing, equal access for candidates to the media, ranked-choice voting, citizen assemblies, referendums, shorter campaigns, and steps to make it simpler or more complicated to establish new political parties. Not all such ideas are likely to prove both practical and beneficial, but the energy they attract is evidence of a hunger that no dictator can satisfy.

AMERICA'S CHANCE

Another reason to be optimistic is that U.S. President Joe Biden is better positioned than any American president in 20 years to argue on behalf of democracy. George W. Bush saw himself as a champion of freedom, but he wrapped that mission so thoroughly around his invasion of Iraq that denigrators equated his stance with violent American overreach. Wary of the association, Barack Obama was less outspoken than he might have been in advocating democratic ideals. Trump, of course, had the most antidemocratic instincts of any president. Having replaced him, Biden faces an international pro-freedom constituency that has learned to be skeptical about the steadiness of U.S. leadership but is also anxious for Washington to regain its voice on matters of liberty and human rights.

In his inaugural address, Biden characterized his election as a victory not of a candidate or a cause but of democracy itself. He has since stressed the benefits of political freedom; condemned specific acts of repression in such places as Cuba, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, and Myanmar; and invited democratic leaders to an important and timely summit. The challenge he must address next is how to build on this start.

One good way to begin would be to draw a clear line separating past U.S. military interventions from U.S. support for democracy. The distinction is important because many observers at home and abroad still confuse the two. The U.S. mission in Afghanistan, launched toward the end of 2001, was prompted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The invasion of Iraq 16 months later was triggered by faulty intelligence concerning that country's weapons programs. Both were military operations. In neither instance was the buttressing of democracy a primary motivating factor, and neither experience should discourage the United States from pursuing future civilian initiatives on democracy's behalf.

There are, after all, numerous examples of successful nonmilitary American engagement in support of freedom. These include the Mar-

shall Plan, the Point Four Program, Radio Free Europe, the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and overseas technical assistance on topics as varied as public health and digital access. Projects such as these create, at modest expense, a reservoir of respect that can serve the United States well in times of crisis. Washington should invest far more in them than it does, because that is how democracy is best promoted—with an outstretched hand, not a pointed gun.

The Biden administration should also defend the American example while acknowledging that U.S. democracy, although the world's oldest, remains a work in progress. Numerous commentators point to the bitterness surrounding recent U.S. elections to suggest that the country's democracy is unraveling and therefore no longer a suitable model for others. Such claims are exaggerated. Despite widespread fears and false allegations, the 2020 balloting was free of both significant locally engineered fraud and disruptions traceable to foreign disinformation campaigns. The high voter turnout was a sign of robust democratic health, as were the actions of courts and state officials to uphold the results. As for the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, less than one-fourth of Trump voters approved of the tactics that the protesters employed, and a recent effort to organize a follow-up demonstration fizzled. The debates currently underway regarding election standards and early and mail-in voting mostly involve issues that were not even under consideration a decade or two ago. The important question now is not whether the country has made progress toward more liberal electoral norms but whether those gains can be preserved and enhanced. A positive answer—delivered via legislative debate and, if necessary, the judicial branch—will only strengthen the country's democratic system. U.S. leaders should speak about American democracy with humility, but dictators overseas who claim that the United States' long experiment with freedom is nearing its end will be proved wrong.

Even while working to set the record straight about U.S. democracy, Biden should launch a multipart strategy aimed at sparking a renewal of faith overseas in the power of collaboration among free governments, workers, enlightened corporations, and civil society. His core message, exemplified by his planned Summit for Democracy,

Democracy is not a dying cause; in fact, it is poised for a comeback.

should be that democratic leaders must support one another and use their combined influence to bolster civil discourse, due process, fair elections, and the essential freedoms of speech, worship, and the press.

For this strategy to attract followers, the United States must show the way by integrating its commitment to democracy into all aspects

Biden is better positioned than any American president in 20 years to argue on behalf of democracy.

of its foreign policy. In national security decision-making, when other interests appear to conflict, the benefit of the doubt should be given whenever possible to the backers of political openness and the rule of law. In bilateral diplomacy, considerations of human rights should be at the top of the agenda, instead of an afterthought. The most coura-

geous democratic leaders, whether of countries large or small, should be acknowledged, supported, and invited to the White House. Through the UN and regional bodies, the United States should strive to hold countries accountable to the principles proclaimed in multilateral declarations and charters.

Biden and his team should also stress the economic advantages of democracy. In the late 1990s, when I was serving as U.S. secretary of state, I assured people everywhere that democracy would enable them not only to vote without fear but also to better provide for their families. What I said was reinforced by what audiences saw. Aside from the oil-rich Arab states, most prosperous nations were free. The reason was plain: open societies were more likely to generate good jobs by encouraging new ideas and innovative thinking. In the time since, China's domestic rise and subsequent increase in foreign commercial engagement have, to some minds, undercut this thesis. Consider, however, that even today, the per person income in the authoritarian People's Republic is around one-third of that in democratic Taiwan.

Since ancient times, authoritarian leaders have masqueraded as modernizers, building great works that invariably double as advertisements for themselves. Current examples of such leaders include Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Although there is obvious merit in looking forward, there are flaws in the notion that a single all-powerful leader is best for driving progress. In Egypt, Sisi has allowed the military to

sink its teeth into virtually every part of the economy, thereby inhibiting opportunities for the private sector. Saudi Arabia remains overly dependent on oil revenue and continues to spend vast sums on vanity projects. Meanwhile, in Turkey, the “economic miracle” touted by Erdogan has given way to rising poverty, joblessness, currency devaluation, and debt. The troubles intensified after 2016, when Erdogan assumed emergency powers.

GETTING THE MESSAGE RIGHT

U.S. officials must also deal aggressively with problems that can chip away at support for democracy. For instance, few factors do more damage to the appeal of free institutions than the perception that leaders who claim to be democratic are in fact ripping off their countries. The message from Washington must be that open government is the remedy for, not the breeding ground of, crooked, self-serving regimes. The point is harder to establish than it should be because many demagogues confuse the issue by arguing that only a single powerful leader can clean house—or “drain the swamp”—to get rid of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. Consider that one of Putin’s favorite tactics is to accuse opponents of corruption, arrest them in front of government cameras, and then prosecute them in puppet courts. The most compelling answer to this brand of deception is the truth. Real democrats, such as Presidents Zuzana Caputova of Slovakia and Maia Sandu of Moldova, are showing that free institutions can be used to purge graft through honest investigations, judicial reform, and incentives to reduce bribery at every level. The international press has often done a good job of exposing corrupt practices, and so democratic leaders should do all they can to ensure that the rights of journalists are fortified and their freedoms preserved. Meanwhile, the United States should mobilize a global effort to seize the overseas assets of rulers who have been pillaging their countries and return them to those countries. By serving as agents of justice, democracy’s caretakers can thwart greedy foes and win lasting friends.

The Biden administration must act, too, on its understanding that democracy’s future is linked to how well societies handle the promise and perils of cyber-capabilities and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. That, in turn, demands effective solutions to an array of puzzles: how to establish a consensus on balancing freedom of

expression with protection of the public good; how to counter the ability of authoritarian governments to spread lies, block communications, and criminalize even private indications of dissent; how to derail the use of ransomware; how best to regulate Big Tech platforms to ensure competition and honor individual privacy; and how to shield democracies from the security threat posed by cyberwar.

The last time a new technology raised such profound questions was at the dawn of the nuclear age. Back then, a small cadre of diplomats, scientists, and military strategists devised ways to prevent the worst outcomes; the solutions were necessarily top down. The dilemma created by digital threats cannot be resolved so narrowly. Any successful approach must incorporate not only better cyberdefenses but also more transparency for consumers, responsibility from high-tech companies, scrutiny from legislatures, input from academia, and research into the design of enforceable regulatory regimes. Over time, the answers must take into account the interests of all stakeholders (not just governments), including the millions of entrepreneurs and billions of consumers who live in nondemocratic states and who use, or would like to use, online technology to learn, shop, grow their businesses, and vent their opinions. As the world develops new rules for the digital road, it is essential that the United States join with allies to prevent authoritarian states from dictating those norms.

Biden can accomplish much by rallying friends of freedom from across the globe, highlighting the tangible and moral benefits of open government, and pushing for fairness in the regulation of new technologies. Past efforts to do so, however, have stumbled when democracy's advocates have done a poor job of framing the issue. If the alternatives presented are freedom or repression, freedom clearly wins. The odds become less favorable, however, when the choice advertised is between "the common people" and "arrogant elites." As has been shown in recent years, popular demagogues feed eagerly on the condescension that many in academia, the arts, and the press exhibit toward the less well educated and others they deem culturally backward. The notion that despots care most about the welfare of the average family is nonsense, and they should not be allowed to create that impression. For democracy to prosper, its champions must do a better job of defending and justifying their beliefs in an inclusive manner.

THE TIME IS NOW

Progress in the democratic resurgence is less likely to be sudden than gradual and more likely to be spotty than universal. A pendulum, after changing direction, takes a while to gain velocity. In his later years, Vaclav Havel counseled freedom's friends against impatience. If democracy can be compared to a flower, he said, gardeners may use fertilizer and water to speed its growth but will only cause harm should they become anxious and yank at the stem from above.

The importance of patience, however, is no excuse for idleness or cynicism. Small-*d* democrats cannot compete successfully with the likes of China and Russia by mimicking their methods, for that would concede the match before it begins. Democracy has its faults, but so, too, does every variety of despotism. Democracy's assets are superior, however, because they demand the best from everyone and are grounded in respect for human rights, individual freedom, and social responsibility. By contrast, dictators seek only obedience, and there is nothing inspiring about that.

After too many years of handwringing, the time is right for democratic forces to regain the initiative. Democracy is fragile, but it is also resilient. In every region, the generation coming of age is smart, outspoken, and fearless. Worldwide, people are demanding more, while authoritarian leaders are tiring and running out of answers. The Biden administration has before it an opportunity it must seize. Although tattered and torn, freedom's flag is ready to rise. 🌐

The Technopolar Moment

How Digital Powers Will Reshape the Global Order

Ian Bremmer

After rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, some of the United States' most powerful institutions sprang into action to punish the leaders of the failed insurrection. But they weren't the ones you might expect. Facebook and Twitter suspended the accounts of President Donald Trump for posts praising the rioters. Amazon, Apple, and Google effectively banished Parler, an alternative to Twitter that Trump's supporters had used to encourage and coordinate the attack, by blocking its access to Web-hosting services and app stores. Major financial service apps, such as PayPal and Stripe, stopped processing payments for the Trump campaign and for accounts that had funded travel expenses to Washington, D.C., for Trump's supporters.

The speed of these technology companies' reactions stands in stark contrast to the feeble response from the United States' governing institutions. Congress still has not censured Trump for his role in the storming of the Capitol. Its efforts to establish a bipartisan, 9/11-style commission failed amid Republican opposition. Law enforcement agencies have been able to arrest some individual rioters—but in many cases only by tracking clues they left on social media about their participation in the fiasco.

States have been the primary actors in global affairs for nearly 400 years. That is starting to change, as a handful of large technology companies rival them for geopolitical influence. The aftermath of the January 6 riot serves as the latest proof that Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Twitter are no longer merely large companies; they have taken control of aspects of society, the economy, and national

IAN BREMMER is President of Eurasia Group.

security that were long the exclusive preserve of the state. The same goes for Chinese technology companies, such as Alibaba, ByteDance, and Tencent. Nonstate actors are increasingly shaping geopolitics, with technology companies in the lead. And although Europe wants to play, its companies do not have the size or geopolitical influence to compete with their American and Chinese counterparts.

Most of the analysis of U.S.-Chinese technological competition, however, is stuck in a statist paradigm. It depicts technology companies as foot soldiers in a conflict between hostile countries. But technology companies are not mere tools in the hands of governments. None of their actions in the immediate aftermath of the Capitol insurrection, for instance, came at the behest of the government or law enforcement. These were private decisions made by for-profit companies exercising power over code, servers, and regulations under their control. These companies are increasingly shaping the global environment in which governments operate. They have huge influence over the technologies and services that will drive the next industrial revolution, determine how countries project economic and military power, shape the future of work, and redefine social contracts.

It is time to start thinking of the biggest technology companies as similar to states. These companies exercise a form of sovereignty over a rapidly expanding realm that extends beyond the reach of regulators: digital space. They bring resources to geopolitical competition but face constraints on their power to act. They maintain foreign relations and answer to constituencies, including shareholders, employees, users, and advertisers.

Political scientists rely on a wide array of terms to classify governments: there are “democracies,” “autocracies,” and “hybrid regimes,” which combine elements of both. But they have no such tools for understanding Big Tech. It’s time they started developing them, for not all technology companies operate in the same way. Even though technology companies, like countries, resist neat classifications, there are three broad forces that are driving their geopolitical postures and worldviews: globalism, nationalism, and techno-utopianism.

These categories illuminate the choices facing the biggest technology firms as they work to shape global affairs. Will we live in a world where the Internet is increasingly fragmented and technology companies serve the interests and goals of the states in which they reside, or will Big Tech decisively wrest control of digital space from govern-

ments, freeing itself from national boundaries and emerging as a truly global force? Or could the era of state dominance finally come to an end, supplanted by a techno-elite that assumes responsibility for offering the public goods once provided by governments? Analysts, policymakers, and the public would do well to understand the competing outlooks that determine how these new geopolitical actors wield their power, because the interplay among them will define the economic, social, and political life of the twenty-first century.

BIG TECH IS WATCHING YOU

To understand how the struggle for geopolitical influence between technology firms and governments will play out, it is important to grasp the nature of these companies' power. The tools at their disposal are unique in global affairs, which is why governments are finding it so hard to rein them in. Although this isn't the first time that private corporations have played a major role in geopolitics—consider the East India Company and Big Oil, for example—earlier giants could never match the pervasive global presence of today's technology firms. It is one thing to wield power in the smoke-filled rooms of political power brokers; it is another to directly affect the livelihoods, relationships, security, and even thought patterns of billions of people across the globe.

Today's biggest technology firms have two critical advantages that have allowed them to carve out independent geopolitical influence. First, they do not operate or wield power exclusively in physical space. They have created a new dimension in geopolitics—digital space—over which they exercise primary influence. People are increasingly living out their lives in this vast territory, which governments do not and cannot fully control.

The implications of this fact bear on virtually all aspects of civic, economic, and private life. In many democracies today, politicians' ability to gain followers on Facebook and Twitter unlocks the money and political support needed to win office. That is why the technology companies' actions to deplatform Trump after the Capitol Hill riot were so powerful. For a new generation of entrepreneurs, Amazon's marketplace and Web-hosting services, Apple's app store, Facebook's ad-targeting tools, and Google's search engine have become indispensable for launching a successful business. Big Tech is even transforming human relationships. In their private lives, people increasingly connect with one another through algorithms.



Monopoly man: Amazon's Jeff Bezos in New York, September 2011

Technology companies are not just exercising a form of sovereignty over how citizens behave on digital platforms; they are also shaping behaviors and interactions. The little red Facebook notifications deliver dopamine hits to your brain, Google's artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms complete sentences while you type, and Amazon's methods of selecting which products pop up at the top of your search screen affect what you buy. In these ways, technology firms are guiding how people spend their time, what professional and social opportunities they pursue, and, ultimately, what they think. This power will grow as social, economic, and political institutions continue to shift from the physical world to digital space.

The second way these technology companies differ from their formidable predecessors is that they are increasingly providing a full spectrum of both the digital and the real-world products that are required to run a modern society. Although private companies have long played a role in delivering basic needs, from medicine to energy, today's rapidly digitizing economy depends on a more complex array of goods, services, and information flows. Currently, just four companies—Alibaba, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft—meet the bulk of the world's demand for cloud services, the essential computing infra-

structure that has kept people working and children learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The future competitiveness of traditional industries will depend on how effectively they seize new opportunities created by 5G networks, AI, and massive Internet-of-Things deployments. Internet companies and financial service providers already depend heavily on the infrastructure provided by these cloud leaders. Soon, growing numbers of cars, assembly lines, and cities will, too.

Along with owning the world's leading search engine and its most popular smartphone operating system, Google's parent company, Alphabet, dabbles in health care, drug development, and autonomous vehicles. Amazon's sprawling e-commerce and logistics network furnishes millions of people with basic consumer goods. In China, Alibaba and Tencent dominate payment systems, social media, video streaming, e-commerce, and logistics. They also invest in projects important to the Chinese government, such as the Digital Silk Road, which aims to bring to emerging markets the undersea cables, telecommunications networks, cloud capabilities, and apps needed to run a digital society.

Private-sector technology firms are also providing national security, a role that has traditionally been reserved for governments and the defense contractors they hire. When Russian hackers breached U.S. government agencies and private companies last year, it was Microsoft, not the National Security Agency or U.S. Cyber Command, that first discovered and cut off the intruders. Of course, private companies have long supported national security objectives. Before the biggest banks became "too big to fail," that phrase was applied to the U.S. defense company Lockheed Corporation (now Lockheed Martin) during the Cold War. But Lockheed just made the fighter jets and missiles for the U.S. government. It didn't operate the air force or police the skies. The biggest technology companies are building the backbone of the digital world and policing that world at the same time.

Big Tech's eclipse of the nation-state is not inevitable. Governments are taking steps to tame an unruly digital sphere: whether it is China's recent moves targeting Alibaba and Ant Group, which derailed what would have been one of the world's biggest-ever initial public offerings; the EU's attempts to regulate personal data, AI, and the large technology companies that it defines as digital "gatekeepers"; the numerous anti-trust bills introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives; or India's ongoing pressure on foreign social media companies—the technology industry is facing a political and regulatory backlash on multiple fronts.

Moreover, technology firms cannot decouple themselves from physical space, where they remain at the mercy of states. The code for the virtual worlds that these companies have created sits in data centers that are located on territory controlled by governments. Companies are subject to national laws. They can be fined or subjected to other sanctions, their websites can be blocked, and their executives can be arrested if they break the rules.

But as technology grows more sophisticated, states and regulators are increasingly constrained by outdated laws and limited capacity. Digital space is ever growing. Facebook now counts nearly three billion monthly active users. Google reports that over one billion hours of video are consumed on YouTube, its video-streaming platform, each day. Over 64 billion terabytes of digital information was created and stored in 2020, enough to fill some 500 billion smartphones. In its next phase, this “datasphere” will see cars, factories, and entire cities wired with Internet-connected sensors trading data. As this realm grows, the ability to control it will slip further beyond the reach of states. And because technology companies provide important digital and real-world goods and services, states that cannot provide those things risk shooting themselves in the foot if their draconian measures lead companies to stop their operations.

Governments have long deployed sophisticated systems to monitor digital space: China created the so-called Great Firewall to control the information its citizens see, and the United States’ spy agencies established the ECHELON surveillance system to monitor global communications. But such systems can’t keep tabs on everything. Fines for failing to take down illegal content are a nuisance for businesses, not an existential threat. And governments realize that they could sabotage their own legitimacy if they go too far. The potential for a popular backlash is one reason why even Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to ever go as far as Beijing has in restricting citizens’ access to the global Internet.

That is not to say that Big Tech is massively well liked. Even before the pandemic, public opinion polls in the United States showed that what once was the most admired sector in the country was losing popularity among Americans. A majority of Americans are in favor of stricter regulations for big technology companies, according to a

Technology companies are shaping the global environment in which governments operate.

February 2021 Gallup survey. Global trust in those companies—especially social media firms—has also been hit hard during the pandemic, according to the annual Trust Barometer published by Edelman, a public relations consultancy.

But even if getting tough on Big Tech is one of the few things on which both Democrats and Republicans agree, the fact that there hasn't been a major crackdown yet is telling. In the United States, a combination of congressional dysfunction and Silicon Valley's potent lobbying power will likely continue to preclude expansive new regulations that could pose a serious threat to the digital giants. It is different in Europe, where the lack of homegrown cloud, search, and social media conglomerates makes passing ambitious legislation easier. And it is certainly different in China, where a recent round of regulatory crackdowns has sent shares of the country's own technology heavyweights reeling.

In both Brussels and Beijing, politicians are trying to channel the power of the biggest technology companies in pursuit of national priorities. But with the cloud, AI, and other emerging technologies set to become even more important to people's livelihoods—and to the ability of states to meet their people's basic needs—it is far from certain that the politicians will succeed.

THE STATE STRIKES BACK

The most important question in geopolitics today might be, Will countries that break up or clamp down on their biggest technology firms also be able to seize the opportunities of the digital revolution's next phase, or will their efforts backfire? The EU, alarmed that it has not given rise to digital giants the way the United States and China have, appears intent on finding out. It is at the forefront of democratic societies pushing for greater sovereignty over digital space. In 2018, the EU passed a sweeping data protection law that restricts transfers of personal data outside the 27-member bloc and threatens steep fines on companies that fail to protect EU citizens' sensitive information.

A new regulatory package advancing in Brussels would give the European Commission new powers to fine Internet platforms over illegal content, control high-risk AI applications, and potentially break up technology companies that EU bureaucrats deem too powerful. The EU and influential member states, such as France, are also calling for technology-focused industrial policies—including billions of euros of government funding—to encourage new approaches to

pooling data and computing resources. The goal is to develop alternatives to the biggest cloud platforms that, unlike the current options, are grounded in “European values.”

This is a massive gamble. Europe, acting from a position of weakness, is betting that it can corral the technology giants and unleash a new wave of European innovation. If it turns out instead that only the biggest technology platforms can muster the capital, talent, and infrastructure needed to develop and run the digital systems that companies rely on, Europe will have only accelerated its geopolitical decline. The outcome hinges on whether a handful of large-scale cloud platforms, with all the attendant economic opportunities and challenges, can continue to drive innovation or whether a group of companies operating under greater government supervision can still produce cutting-edge digital infrastructure that is globally competitive.

It is expensive to create and maintain digital space on a massive scale. Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft plowed a combined \$109 billion into research and development in 2019. That is roughly equal to Germany’s total public and private R & D spending in the same period and more than double the amount spent that year by the United Kingdom’s government and private sector put together. If European states want greater control of the technology sector, they’re going to have to invest much more money. But even if governments were willing to finance these digital capabilities themselves, money is only part of the picture. They would likely struggle to bring together the engineering and other talent required to design, maintain, operate, and grow the complex cloud infrastructure, AI applications, and other systems that make these technologies work at scale.

Achieving and maintaining global leadership in fields such as cloud computing or semiconductors requires huge and sustained investments of financial and human capital. It also requires close relationships with customers and other partners across complex global supply chains. Today’s modern semiconductor plants can cost in excess of \$15 billion apiece and require legions of highly trained engineers to set them up and run them. The world’s leading cloud service providers can invest billions of dollars in R & D each year because they are continually refining their products in response to customers’ needs and

Technology companies are increasingly geopolitical actors in and of themselves.

funneling their profits back into research. Governments—and even groups of small firms working together—would struggle to muster the resources needed to deliver these technologies at the scale required to power the global economy. Even in China, where the government is not afraid to throw its weight around, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is counting on the country's biggest private-sector technology companies to do the heavy lifting as it aims to build a wealthy and digitally advanced society.

The next decade will test what happens as the politics of digital space and physical space converge. Governments and technology companies are poised to compete for influence over both worlds—hence the need for a better framework for understanding what the companies' goals are and how their power interacts with that of governments in both domains.

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN BIG TECH

Technology companies' orientations are no less diverse than the states with which they compete. Strands of globalism, nationalism, and techno-utopianism often coexist within the same company. Which outlook predominates will have important consequences for global politics and society.

First are the globalists—firms that built their empires by operating on a truly international scale. These companies, including Apple, Facebook, and Google, create and populate digital space, allowing their business presence and revenue streams to become untethered from physical territory. Each grew powerful by hitting on an idea that allowed it to dominate an economically valuable niche and then taking its business worldwide.

The likes of Alibaba, ByteDance, and Tencent emerged at the top of China's massive domestic market before setting their sights on global growth. But the idea was the same: set up shop in as many countries as possible, respect local rules and regulations as necessary, and compete fiercely. Sure, they have also benefited from policy and financial support from Beijing, but it is still a cutthroat, profit-driven approach to global expansion that is driving innovation at these firms.

Then there are the national champions, which are more willing to align themselves explicitly with the priorities of their home governments. These firms are partnering with governments in various important domains, including the cloud, AI, and cybersecurity. They secure

massive revenues by selling their products to governments, and they use their expertise to help guide these same governments' actions. The companies hewing closest to the national-champion model are in China, where firms have long faced pressure to further national goals. Huawei and SMIC are China's core national champions in 5G and semi-conductors. And in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping named Alibaba and Tencent, along with the search engine Baidu and the voice recognition company iFlytek, to China's "national AI team," giving each of them a leading role in building out parts of China's AI-powered future.

More than perhaps any other country, China has enlisted its technology giants during the pandemic, leaning heavily on digital services—including videoconferencing and telemedicine—and even using them to enforce lockdowns and other travel restrictions as the pandemic took hold. It has also tapped Chinese technology firms to manage reopenings by providing digital health passports and to engage in "mask diplomacy" by shipping badly needed medical supplies to needy countries to enhance China's soft power.

Today, even historically globalist U.S. companies are feeling the pull of the national-champion model. Microsoft's growing role in policing digital space on behalf of the United States and allied democracies and targeting misinformation spread by state actors (particularly China and Russia) and international crime syndicates is leading it in that direction. Amazon and Microsoft are also competing to provide cloud-computing infrastructure to the U.S. government. Amazon's new CEO, Andy Jassy, who previously headed its cloud business, was a member of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, a blue-ribbon advisory panel that published a major report earlier this year that is having a strong influence on the evolution of the United States' national AI strategy.

The forces of globalism and nationalism sometimes clash with a third camp: the techno-utopians. Some of the world's most powerful technology firms are headed by charismatic visionaries who see technology not just as a global business opportunity but also as a potentially revolutionary force in human affairs. In contrast to the other two groups, this camp centers more on the personalities and ambitions of technology CEOs rather than the operations of the companies themselves. Whereas globalists want the state to leave them alone and maintain favorable conditions for global commerce, and national champions see an opportunity to get rich off the state, techno-utopians look to a future in which the

nation-state paradigm that has dominated geopolitics since the seventeenth century has been replaced by something different altogether.

Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, is the most recognizable example, with his open ambition to reinvent transportation, link computers to human brains, and make humanity a “multiplanetary species” by colonizing Mars. Yes, he is also providing space lift capacity to the U.S. government, but he is chiefly focused on dominating near-space orbit and creating a future in which technology companies help societies evolve beyond the concept of nation-states. Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, has similar tendencies, even if he has become more open to government regulation of online content. Diem, a Facebook-backed digital currency, had to be scaled back dramatically after financial regulators almost universally raised concerns. Thanks to the dominance of the U.S. dollar, governments retain a far stronger grip on finance than on other domains in digital space.

That may not be true for long if Vitalik Buterin and the entrepreneurs building on top of his Ethereum ecosystem get their way. Ethereum, the world’s second most popular blockchain after Bitcoin, is rapidly emerging as the underlying infrastructure powering a new generation of decentralized Internet applications. It may pose an even greater challenge to government power than Diem. Ethereum’s design includes smart contracts, which enable the parties to a transaction to embed the terms of doing business into hard-to-alter computer code. Entrepreneurs have seized on the technology and the surrounding hype to cook up new businesses, including betting markets, financial derivatives, and payment systems that are almost impossible to alter or abolish once they have been launched. Although much of this innovation to date has been in the financial realm, some proponents believe that blockchain technology and decentralized apps will be the keys to unlocking the next big leap forward for the Web: the metaverse, a place where augmented and virtual reality, next-generation data networks, and decentralized financing and payment systems contribute to a more realistic and immersive digital world where people can socialize, work, and trade digital goods.

China still has its globalists and national champions, albeit with a more statist tilt than those in the United States. But it no longer has its own techno-utopians. The CCP once exalted Jack Ma, a co-founder of Alibaba and the country’s most prominent entrepreneur, who revolutionized how people buy and sell goods and tried to create a new version of the World Trade Organization to facilitate e-commerce and

promote direct global trade. But the party reined him in after he gave a speech in October 2020 criticizing its financial regulators for stifling innovation. Beijing now has Ma and Alibaba on a much tighter leash, a cautionary tale for any would-be techno-utopians in China who might consider challenging the state.

Even so, China depends on the digital infrastructure provided by the likes of Ma to boost productivity and living standards—and thus ensure the CCP’s long-term survival. China’s authoritarianism enables it to be more forceful in its regulation of digital space and the companies that build and maintain it, but Beijing ultimately faces the same tradeoffs as Washington and Brussels. If it tightens its grip too much, it risks harming the country itself by smothering innovation.

OUR DIGITAL FUTURES

As technology companies and governments negotiate for control over digital space, U.S. and Chinese technology giants will operate in one of three geopolitical environments: one in which the state reigns supreme, rewarding the national champions; one in which corporations wrest control from the state over digital space, empowering the globalists; or one in which the state fades away, elevating the techno-utopians.

In the first scenario, the national champions win, and the state remains the dominant provider of security, regulation, and public goods. Systemic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and long-term threats, such as climate change, coupled with a public backlash against the power of technology firms, entrench government authority as the only force that can resolve global challenges. A bipartisan push for regulation in the United States rewards “patriotic” companies that deploy their resources in support of national goals. The government hopes that a new generation of technology-enabled services for education, health care, and other components of the social contract will boost its legitimacy in the eyes of middle-class voters. Beijing and other authoritarian governments double down on cultivating their own national champions, pushing hard for self-sufficiency while competing for influence in important global swing markets, such as Brazil, India, and Southeast Asia. China’s private technology sector becomes less independent, and its technology companies no longer go public on international stock exchanges.

U.S. allies and partners find it much harder to balance their ties with Washington and Beijing. Europe is the big loser here, as it lacks technology companies with the financial capacity or technological wherewithal

to hold their own against those of the two major powers. As the EU's push for digital sovereignty sputters and the U.S.-Chinese cold war makes national security in the technology space a dominant priority, Europe's technology sector has little choice but to follow Washington's agenda.

As the United States and China decouple, companies that can recast themselves as national champions are rewarded. Washington and Beijing both funnel resources to technology firms to align them with their national goals. The increasingly fragmented nature of the Internet,

Governments and technology companies are poised to compete for influence.

meanwhile, makes operating on a truly global scale increasingly difficult: when data, software, or advanced semiconductor technology can't move across borders because of legal and policy barriers or when computers or phones made by U.S. and Chinese companies can't talk to

one another, it raises costs and regulatory risks for companies.

Amazon and Microsoft might not find it hard to adapt to this new order, as they are already responding to growing pressure to support national security imperatives. Both companies already compete to provide cloud services to the U.S. government and intelligence agencies. But Apple and Google could find working with the U.S. government more uncomfortable; the former has balked at government requests to crack encrypted smartphones, and the latter pulled out of a project with the Pentagon on image recognition. Facebook might have the hardest time navigating a landscape that favored national champions if it is seen as providing a platform for foreign disinformation without also offering useful assets for the government, such as cloud computing or military AI applications.

This would be a more geopolitically volatile world, with a greater risk of strategic and technological bifurcation. Taiwan would be a major concern, as U.S. and Chinese companies continue to rely on the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company as a major supplier of cutting-edge chips. Washington is already moving to cut off leading Chinese technology firms from Taiwan and TSMC, fueling impressions in Beijing that Taiwan is being dragged further into the U.S. orbit. Although it remains unlikely that China would choose to invade Taiwan over semiconductors alone—the potential for a military conflict with the United States that escalates beyond Taiwan would be too great, and

the damage to China's international standing and business environment would be too severe—it remains a potentially potent tail risk.

A world of national champions would also impede the international cooperation needed to address global crises—whether a pandemic disease more lethal than COVID-19 or a surge of global migration induced by climate change. It would be ironic if technology nationalism made it harder for governments to address these problems, given the role of such crises in shoring up the state's position as the provider of last resort in the first place.

In the second scenario, the state holds on but in a weakened condition—paving the way for the ascendancy of the globalists. Unable to keep pace with technological innovation, regulators accept that governments will share sovereignty over digital space with technology companies. Big Tech beats back restrictions that could curtail its overseas operations, arguing that the loss of market opportunities will harm innovation and, ultimately, governments' ability to create jobs and meet global challenges. Rather than accept a technological cold war, companies pressure governments to agree on a set of common rules that preserve a global market for hardware, software, and data.

Apple and Google would arguably have the most to gain from this outcome. Instead of being forced to choose between a U.S.- and a Chinese-dominated Internet, Apple could continue to offer its own unique technology ecosystem catering to elites in both San Francisco and Shanghai. Google's advertising-heavy revenue model would thrive as people in democracies and authoritarian countries alike consumed products and services that commodified every piece of personal data.

The triumph of globalism would also help Alibaba, which hosts the world's largest e-commerce websites. ByteDance, whose video-sharing app TikTok has helped it achieve a valuation north of \$140 billion, would be free to serve up viral videos to a global audience, supercharging its AI algorithms and its global revenues. Tencent is also a globalist but cooperates far more deeply with China's internal security apparatus than Alibaba. It would find it easier to trend in the direction of a national champion as ideological competition between Washington and Beijing intensified.

The globalists need stability to succeed over the coming decade. Their worst fear is that the United States and China will continue to decouple, forcing them to choose sides in an economic war that will raise barriers to their attempts to globalize their businesses. Their fortunes would improve if Washington and Beijing decided that over-

regulation risks undercutting the innovation that drives their economies. In the case of Washington, that means pulling back from an industrial policy designed to convince companies that they can thrive as national champions; for Beijing, it means preserving the independence and autonomy of the private sector.

A world in which the globalists reign supreme would give Europe a chance to reassert itself as a savvy bureaucratic player capable of designing the rules that allow technology companies and governments to share sovereignty in digital space. Washington and Beijing would still be the two dominant global powers, but the failure of the former's industrial policy push and the latter's quest to elevate national champions would loosen the two powers' grip on geopolitics, increase the demand for global governance, and create more opportunities for global rule setting. This is a world with somewhat weaker American and Chinese governments but one that offers both countries their best chance to cooperate on urgent global challenges.

In the final scenario, the oft-predicted erosion of the state finally comes to pass. The techno-utopians capitalize on widespread disillusionment with governments that have failed to create prosperity and stability, drawing citizens into a digital economy that disintermediates the state. Confidence in the dollar as a global reserve currency erodes—or collapses. Cryptocurrencies prove too much for regulators to control, and they gain wide acceptance, undermining governments' sway over the financial world. The disintegration of centralized authority renders the world substantially less capable of addressing transnational challenges. For technological visionaries with vaulting ambitions and commensurate resources, the question of patriotism becomes moot. Musk plays an ever-greater role in deciding how space is explored. Facebook substitutes for the public square, civil society, and the social safety net, creating a blockchain-based currency that gains widespread usage.

The implications of a world in which techno-utopians call the shots are the hardest to tease out, in part because people are so accustomed to thinking of the state as the principal problem-solving actor. Governments would not go down without a fight. And the erosion of the U.S. government's authority would not give techno-utopians free rein; the Chinese state would also need to suffer a collapse in domestic credibility. The less that governments stand in their way, the more techno-utopians will be able to shape the evolution of a new world order, for good and for ill.

A BRAVE NEW DIGITAL WORLD

A generation ago, the foundational premise of the Internet was that it would accelerate the globalization that transformed economics and politics in the 1990s. Many hoped that the digital age could foster the unfettered flow of information, challenging the grip of authoritarian holdouts who thought they could escape the so-called end of history. The picture is different today: a concentration of power in the hands of a few very large technology firms and the competing interventions of U.S.-, Chinese-, and EU-centered power blocs have led to a much more fragmented digital landscape.

The consequences for the future world order will be no less profound. Right now, the world's largest technology firms are assessing how best to position themselves as Washington and Beijing steel themselves for protracted competition. The United States believes that its foremost geopolitical imperative is to prevent its displacement by its techno-authoritarian rival. China's top priority is to ensure that it can stand on its own two feet economically and technologically before a coalition of advanced industrial democracies stifles its further expansion. Big Tech will tread cautiously for now to make sure it does not further compound government insecurity about losing authority.

But as U.S.-Chinese competition grows more entrenched, these firms will wield their leverage more proactively. If they manage to establish themselves as "the indispensable companies"—much like the United States considers itself "the indispensable nation"—the national champions will push for greater government subsidies and preferential treatment over their rivals. They will also press for greater decoupling, arguing that their vital work needs maximum protection from adversarial hacking.

The globalists will argue that governments will be unable to sustain economic and technological competitiveness over the long haul if they turn inward and adopt a bunker mentality. American globalists will note that big Asian and European companies, far from exiting China, are boosting their presence there—and that Washington will hurt only itself by forcing American companies out of the world's largest consumer market. To preempt the government charge that they are putting their bottom lines above national security, they will argue that deeper levels of decoupling will inhibit U.S.-Chinese cooperation on urgent transnational challenges, such as deadly pandemics and climate change. The Chinese globalists will argue that the CCP's ability to sus-

tain robust growth—and therefore domestic legitimacy—will ride on whether China can establish itself as a hub of global innovation.

And the techno-utopians? They will be happy to work quietly, biding their time. While the national champions and the globalists duke it out over who will shape government policy, the techno-utopians will use traditional companies and decentralized projects, such as Ethereum, to explore new frontiers in digital space, such as the metaverse, or new approaches to providing essential services. They will strike an understanding tone when the U.S. government hauls them in before Congress every now and then, per usual, to denounce their egos and power, taking minimal steps to appease policymakers but deploying aggressive lobbying efforts to undermine any efforts by Washington to bring them to heel.

This does not mean that societies are heading toward a future that witnesses the demise of the nation-state, the end of governments, and the dissolution of borders. There is no reason to think these predictions are any more likely to come true today than they were in the 1990s. But it is simply no longer tenable to talk about big technology companies as pawns their government masters can move around on a geopolitical chessboard. They are increasingly geopolitical actors in and of themselves. And as U.S.-Chinese competition plays an increasingly dominant role in global affairs, they will hold growing leverage to shape how Washington and Beijing behave. Only by updating our understanding of their geopolitical power can we make better sense of this brave new digital world. 🌐

America's Crypto Conundrum

Protecting Security Without Crushing Innovation

Justin Muzinich

This is the year that digital currencies went mainstream. In the span of just three months last spring, China tested its first-ever digital currency in some of its largest cities, hackers breached a major U.S. oil pipeline and successfully demanded a ransom of more than \$4 million in Bitcoin, cryptocurrencies surged to a record combined market capitalization of over \$2 trillion, and Jerome Powell, the chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve, warned that cryptocurrencies are “highly volatile” and “may carry potential risks to . . . users and to the broader financial system.”

What for years many in Washington had dismissed as a pet project of techies and West Coast libertarians suddenly became one of the most important, if least understood, policy issues on the agenda of the Biden administration. Digital currencies are driving tremendous innovation that has the potential to make whole economic sectors more efficient. But they also pose various national security and financial threats and could even diminish U.S. influence abroad.

One reason that digital currencies are so potentially transformative is that their software design often reflects a particular policy view—that government should have less control over money. Early adopters routinely imbued their use of digital currencies with political and philosophical meaning. And even if many people buying Bitcoin today are just looking to make a profit, the values embedded in the code still come with every purchase. Reduced government control of money

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has potential benefits, such as lowering the cost of payments. But it can also undermine the ability of authorities to respond to economic crises or fight cybercrime and financial crime, among other basic services that citizens across the political spectrum expect.

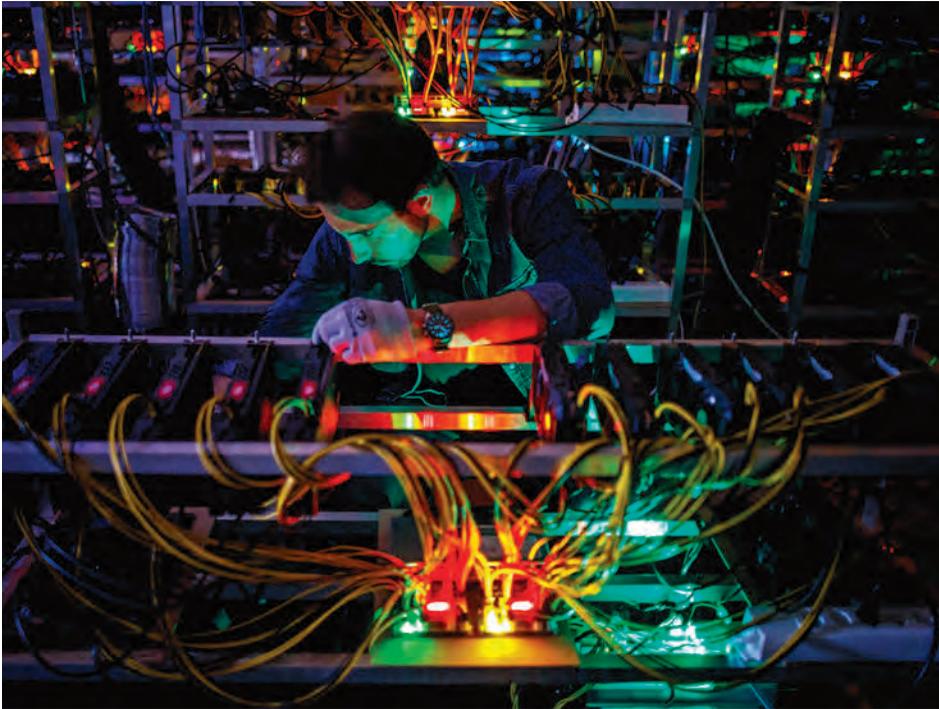
The enormous potential for upside as well as downside has driven the policy debate around digital currencies to extremes. On one side, opponents of digital currencies see them mainly as tools for illicit finance and have called on the government to curb their spread, in some cases going as far as advocating a ban on private-sector coins. On the other side are evangelists who see digital currencies as revolutionary and have pushed for the private market to determine their fate.

But what the United States needs is a public policy framework that takes a balanced approach, preserving the market's ability to innovate without sacrificing the government's capacity to perform essential functions. In other words, policymakers need both the humility to recognize that markets will be best at separating useful innovation from hype and the confidence to adopt critical safeguards. To that end, the Biden administration should establish guardrails in the areas where these currencies pose the greatest collateral risk—namely, in the government's ability to set monetary policy, ensure financial stability, and fight illicit finance. At the same time, the United States should lay the groundwork to launch a digital dollar or bless a private-sector solution that ensures the dollar's preeminent role in international payments. This two-track approach would chart a shrewd path between the fruitless extremes of banning digital currencies and allowing the market to operate unhindered.

U.S. policymakers should act swiftly. Beijing recently cracked down on the mining of Bitcoin, and China and other countries are forging ahead with sovereign digital currencies. Uncertainty about what the United States will do has added to the cloud of regulatory risk that hangs over the industry. The sooner the United States takes common-sense steps to provide policy clarity, the sooner innovation will be able to thrive.

CHEAPER, FASTER, RISKIER

Digital currencies come in public- and private-sector variants. Sovereign digital currencies, such as China's digital yuan, are government issued and give holders a direct claim on the central bank. Like transactions with normal currencies, transactions with sovereign digital currencies are validated by a central bank. In other words, these cur-



Tales from the crypto: at a cryptocurrency mine in Gondo, Switzerland, May 2018

rencies are just digital extensions of regular currencies—except they can make central banks look more like retail banks. Depending on their design, sovereign digital currencies can even enable ordinary depositors to have accounts directly with central banks and can potentially increase, rather than decrease, government control of money.

Private-sector digital currencies, by contrast, generally rely on decentralized blockchain technology to settle accounts between users. These currencies include cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ether, which fluctuate in value relative to the U.S. dollar, and a subset of cryptocurrencies called “stablecoins,” such as USD Coin, commonly known as USDC, and Facebook’s Diem, which are pegged to a fiat currency and designed not to fluctuate in value. The blockchain technology that undergirds these currencies comes in a number of variations, but it generally allows a community of users to validate transactions on a ledger instead of relying on a central authority such as the U.S. Federal Reserve. For instance, a certain number of coin holders might have to validate a transaction before coins can move from one user to another, or coin holders might have to confirm a cryptographic key. Regardless of the exact process, network users perform the formerly centralized job of a central bank.

VALENTIN FLAURAUD / KEYSTONE / REUTERS

One consequence of moving transactions outside the banking system is that transaction fees may be lower. Since 2018, sending Bitcoin from one digital wallet to another has cost an average of about \$4. For transactions of a similar speed, the largest American banks charge consumers far more: roughly \$28 for a domestic wire transfer (slower options, such as using the Federal Reserve banks' Automated Clearing House, cost less) and about \$40 for an international transfer. But decentralized systems are not inherently cheaper than centralized ones. A centralized ledger can be run as efficiently as a decentralized one. One reason that sending Bitcoin is cheaper than sending dollars is that Bitcoin

Cryptocurrencies can undermine essential government functions.

avoids much of the infrastructure—and associated fees—of the legacy centralized banking system. Some of this infrastructure, such as anti-money-laundering systems, serves a vital function. To a certain degree, therefore, the lower cost of trans-

ferring Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies reflects lower regulatory and compliance costs that may not last. But other costs associated with the legacy payments system stem from inefficiencies that could be eliminated through competition. If the challenge posed by cryptocurrencies forces the legacy payments system to cut costs, that will clearly be good for the United States as a whole.

In addition to offering lower fees, cryptocurrencies are giving rise to a new generation of decentralized business models. For instance, blockchain-enabled file-storage businesses allow anyone who joins a network to rent spare hard-drive capacity directly to others on the network, instead of relying on Dropbox or Amazon Web Services in the middle. Other businesses allow the sharing and monetization of social media content without Facebook or Instagram as an intermediary. And in what is known as “decentralized finance,” the blockchain can facilitate lending without a bank. Lots of business models might be reimagined with a community of users managing a network rather than a central company. How successful emerging technologies will be at replacing legacy systems is always difficult to predict, but the market will do a much better job of determining this than the government.

Decentralization is not, however, just another example of a new technology upending entrenched businesses, as some cryptocurrency evangelists argue. True, companies threatened by blockchain technol-

ogy will have to adapt. But cryptocurrencies don't just promise to displace private-sector incumbents. They can undermine some essential government functions valued on both sides of the aisle—and therein lies the risk that a limited public policy framework should address.

WHO CONTROLS THE MONEY SUPPLY?

One of the biggest risks posed by cryptocurrencies is that they could weaken the U.S. Federal Reserve's ability to set monetary policy. Although such a scenario is unlikely, a cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin could conceivably become a common enough medium of exchange that it puts a meaningful portion of the money supply beyond the Fed's control. In addition, although cryptocurrencies usually have predetermined formulas for coin growth or limits on the total number of coins, most allow a certain group of decision-makers, such as a majority of coin holders, to alter these protocols. As a result, coin holders, rather than central bankers, could end up deciding to increase or decrease the amount of digital currency in circulation.

So far, this is a theoretical concern. Despite being labeled "currencies," Bitcoin and its cryptocurrency brethren are mostly held as investment assets in the United States. Goods and services are not priced in Bitcoin, so most holders are using it as a substitute for assets such as gold or equities, sometimes as a hedge against inflation. One reason Bitcoin has not become a medium of exchange is that the Internal Revenue Service has said that any transaction involving digital currency is a taxable "realization event"—meaning that users need to pay tax on any gain in the value of Bitcoin between when they bought it and when they used it to purchase something. In other words, for tax purposes, Bitcoin is treated like stock, which makes it impractical to use as currency.

But even if the IRS were to change its view, Bitcoin and similar cryptocurrencies would not be widely used as a medium of exchange for a more fundamental reason: their price volatility relative to the dollar. The price of Bitcoin has varied widely in just the last year—from a low of less than \$15,000 to a high of over \$60,000 per coin. As a result, anyone pricing goods and services in Bitcoin would either have to accept this volatility risk or perpetually change their prices to maintain purchasing power in dollars.

Not all digital currencies face the same obstacles to widespread use, however. Unlike Bitcoin and similar cryptocurrencies, stablecoins,

such as Diem, are for the most part neither volatile nor taxable at the time of use. They are stable, as their name suggests, because they are tied to the value of a fiat currency—for example, always being worth \$1. For this reason, there are no gains to be taxed when stablecoins are used in transactions, nor is there a price risk for merchants who denominate their goods and services in a stablecoin.

Over the last year, the total value of stablecoins has grown from about \$10 billion to over \$100 billion. And the fact that large platforms such as Facebook are behind these currencies makes them even more likely to achieve widespread use as a medium of exchange. This would not necessarily pose a risk to the Fed's ability to set monetary policy, as long as stablecoin platforms deposit a fixed dollar amount in a reserve account for every stablecoin that is in circulation. But if a stablecoin were to achieve widespread use and then change its reserve requirement from, say, \$1 per coin to ten cents, the money supply could increase meaningfully. Such a decision would be made not by the Fed but by whatever group is permitted to alter the stablecoin's protocol—a private governing association or some proportion of coin holders, for example. Not only would that take important monetary policy decisions out of the hands of the government, but it could potentially allow foreign powers to gain influence over the U.S. money supply, for instance, by acquiring a majority of that particular stablecoin.

Such possibilities remain remote, but in a world where it is difficult to predict how technology will develop, policymakers should take proactive measures to prevent private-sector digital currencies from eroding the Fed's control over monetary policy. In particular, they should step up the enforcement of tax rules, including those requiring the payment of capital gains tax on cryptocurrency transactions, so that non-stablecoins remain more attractive as an asset than as a medium of exchange. Congress's effort to include properly tailored cryptocurrency tax reporting language in recent legislation is a good step in this direction. Policymakers should also require that stablecoins always maintain a fixed reserve ratio, so that they will not impede the Fed's ability to set monetary policy even if they achieve widespread use.

UNCLEAR RULES, UNCERTAIN AUTHORITIES

In addition to complicating monetary policy, cryptocurrencies could create risks within the financial system, as Powell warned earlier this year. They trade on secondary markets, both over the counter and

through exchanges that are broadly accessible to the public, but the regulatory regime around them is unclear. One source of confusion is whether cryptocurrencies are securities, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), or commodities, which are the purview of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC). Lawyers differ on this question, and there is considerable uncertainty within the industry over which regulatory regime, if any, applies to which currency. A \$2 trillion market needs more clarity than this.

Even if a cryptocurrency were to fall clearly in the CFTC's jurisdiction, a second set of ambiguities would remain. The CFTC can regulate futures markets for cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, but it has more limited powers—just the ability to punish fraud and manipulation—when it comes to cash markets. The same exchange might facilitate trading in both futures and cash markets for Bitcoin, for instance, but the CFTC would have regulatory authority only over the former. Absent federal regulatory authority, cash markets could be subject to different regulations in all 50 states, which would be both confusing to consumers and bad for American competitiveness; entrepreneurs will do less business in the United States if they have to comply with 50 different legal regimes there but only a single regime in other countries.

Federal regulators may be able to find creative ways to assert jurisdiction, depending on the nuances of individual digital currencies. But since cash markets for digital currencies can slide through a gap in regulatory coverage between the SEC and the CFTC, Congress needs to ensure that someone has clear regulatory authority. Congress need not be heavy-handed; setting price controls to stop speculation is not the government's job. But Congress should act quickly.

Beyond jurisdictional questions, cryptocurrencies also raise financial stability concerns. For example, few rules govern reserve or liquidity management for stablecoins. As a result, coin holders may have trouble exchanging their coins for dollars, and they may assume more risk than they realize. The popular stablecoin Tether, for instance, initially claimed that its coins were backed by dollars but later disclosed that it had invested its reserves in a variety of risky assets, to the surprise of many coin holders.

As long as these currencies are not widely held, such risks will be borne solely by individual coin holders. But if the collateral underlying

a systemically important stablecoin were to be impaired, a run on the currency could occur and affect the stability of multiple markets—a scenario that becomes more likely when the economy is already experiencing difficulty. These are solvable problems that policymakers are discussing, and existing regulatory frameworks, such as the one that governs money markets, could be partially adopted for cryptocurrencies. But so far, Washington has taken few steps in this direction.

ILLICIT FINANCE

Perhaps the most immediate risk posed by cryptocurrencies stems from the anonymity they allow. The United States does not permit large numbers of dollars to move both anonymously and electronically. It requires that banks and money transfer businesses, such as Western Union, collect identifying information and perform some due diligence for high-risk transactions. Suspicious transfers and those over \$10,000 must be reported to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, the bureau of the U.S. Department of the Treasury devoted to fighting illicit finance. These regulations haven't put financial criminals out of business, but they have created many obstacles for them. Suitcases of cash are cumbersome and risky, and electronic payments are difficult to anonymize.

Unlike bank accounts, most digital currency ledgers do not require any identifying information beyond a cryptographic key. This makes illicit activity much easier, even though anonymous flows can be tracked on a blockchain ledger that occasionally facilitates recovery from criminals. The majority of digital currency transactions—roughly between 60 and 99 percent, depending on how one measures—are for legal purposes, but the appeal of cryptocurrencies for criminals is obvious: virtually all ransomware attacks, including the one earlier this year on a U.S. oil pipeline, demand payment in digital currency, and money launderers, terrorists, drug traffickers, and tax evaders also make use of the technology.

U.S. banking laws allow the government to require identifying information for some digital currency accounts, but only at financial institutions, such as the currency exchange platform Coinbase, that are already taking steps to be good corporate citizens. The government has less clear authority to require the identification of users who hold their currency directly—on a thumb drive, for instance, or in some other form of “unhosted” digital wallet. Some private companies are developing

technology that would help identify the users of anonymous accounts, but as long as banking laws permit anonymity, there is only so much they can do. Tracing digital currency transactions across countries and through previously unused, unhosted wallets is extremely difficult.

Congress needs to pass legislation to limit the harmful effects of anonymity, in particular by barring large anonymous transfers of cryptocurrency that would be illegal within the banking system. Anonymity isn't all bad, however, and policymakers could preserve it under certain circumstances. For instance, in authoritarian countries, ID verification would make it easier for governments to track their opponents and potentially seize their assets. Policymakers must therefore balance the interest of promoting freedom abroad against the need to ensure security at home. One way to do this would be to forgo ID requirements for digital currency transactions under \$10,000. Such an exception would allow most families to meaningfully protect their assets—the median savings of a U.S. family is under \$10,000, and it is far less for families in most autocratic countries—while making it much more difficult to buy expensive weapons with digital currencies or demand six- and seven-figure ransoms. Such an exception could also allow anonymity for smaller day-to-day transactions, consistent with the use of cash.

One obstacle to limiting anonymity is the lack of a centralized authority to oversee ID verification. By their very nature, decentralized digital currencies resist this type of oversight. But creative thinking can likely overcome this challenge. For instance, digital currency exchanges or other private companies could maintain lists of wallets whose users have been verified, and the programs running these currencies could automatically check users against such a list. Policymakers should maintain a degree of humility, however, and not be too prescriptive about how to regulate a fast-evolving industry. If policymakers require ID verification, the market will find solutions that are compatible with decentralization and that minimize disruption.

Policymakers will also have to think creatively about enforcement. Requiring ID verification could end up driving some digital currency users to so-called anonymity-enhanced coins or to offshore exchanges and wallets beyond U.S. jurisdiction. Anonymity-

Perhaps the most immediate risk posed by cryptocurrencies stems from the anonymity they allow.

enhanced coins, such as Monero, are more difficult to track, since in addition to not requiring ID verification, they obscure other transaction details, including amounts and wallet addresses. Because their brands are so closely tied to anonymity, these coins might be less likely to comply with ID verification rules and therefore more likely to attract illicit users. Yet such an outcome would not necessarily be all bad, because it would give authorities tracking illicit finance a place to focus their efforts. The overwhelming majority of digital currency users are not doing anything illegal, and many would probably accept ID requirements similar to those needed for cash deposits or stocks, as evidenced by the broad use of regulated platforms such as Coinbase. Users who balk at these requirements and shift their transactions to anonymity-enhanced coins will have signaled something useful to law enforcement.

The spread of offshore digital currencies is a problem that the G-7 and the G-20 could tackle through the kind of coordination they already carry out on other financial issues. In fact, digital currencies are already a topic of discussion when these multilateral groups meet, and a number of countries have signaled a willingness to crack down on the use of digital currencies for illicit activity. The United States should actively engage in shaping these discussions and push other countries to adopt regulations similar to those it adopts at home in order to prevent criminals from forum shopping.

A DIGITAL DOLLAR

The final category of risks posed by digital currencies is geopolitical. Spurred by the growth of private digital currencies and the problem of slow and expensive payments, a majority of the world's major central banks are considering launching sovereign digital currencies, also known as "central bank digital currencies." Against this backdrop, the United States must consider the risks to the international role of the dollar if it does not launch its own digital dollar.

This danger is often framed too narrowly as a worry that China's digital yuan could threaten the dollar's reserve status. Beijing has made no secret about its desire to increase the share of international payments in yuan at the expense of the dollar. Mu Changchun, the digital currency chief at China's central bank, has spoken publicly about China's desire to reduce "dollarization" in the international economy. And the Chinese Communist Party certainly values the

data and surveillance capabilities the digital yuan will give the authoritarian state. Considered alongside its vast infrastructure investment project, known as the Belt and Road Initiative, China's ambition to use the digital yuan to project economic power seems clear.

Yet the United States must weigh Beijing's ambitions against its capabilities. China faces a host of structural disadvantages, including a managed exchange rate and a lack of economic transparency, that will make it difficult for its sovereign digital currency to threaten the dollar's reserve status anytime soon. Some will embrace the digital yuan, and others may be induced or forced to use it as a condition of doing business with China—something for which Washington must be prepared to hold Beijing to account. But wary of capital controls and weaker property rights in China, most people will likely think long and hard before ditching the dollar for the digital yuan at a scale that would threaten the dollar's reserve status. Put another way, the real world factors that have historically constrained China's fiat currency will also constrain its digital currency.

A more significant but largely overlooked risk of the digital yuan is that it could help Beijing facilitate sanctions evasion. One way the United States stops weapons sales to North Korea, for instance, is by imposing secondary sanctions that prevent Americans from doing business not just with the North Korean military but also with any foreign entity that transacts with the North Korean military. Because no bank can afford to lose access to the U.S. financial system, virtually none will facilitate payments for Pyongyang's military purchases. The digital yuan could provide North Korea with a way around the banking system. If a foreign company that does no business in the United States wants to sell to a North Korean military entity, both parties could open accounts with the Chinese central bank, and money could flow between them via the central bank without touching any commercial banks, avoiding the bite of U.S. sanctions. Launching a digital dollar would do little to address this threat.

Although the United States must be clear-eyed about the risks posed by the digital yuan, in particular that it could undermine U.S. sanctions, the threat to the dollar-based international system is much broader than China. International payments are notoriously slow and expensive. They flow through a patchwork of different national systems, touching multiple commercial banks in a process that adds cost and time. A new system built with a global economy in mind could

clearly improve efficiency, which is one reason so many countries are considering adopting central bank digital currencies. If central banks were to agree to provide foreigners direct account access, adopt common standards, or even share technology, international payments could become more seamless and cost effective than the current dollar-dependent system, thereby gradually eroding the dollar's international role.

Yet as real as this danger is, the United States should not panic. With the exception of China, most countries are in the early stages of developing central bank digital currencies, and the United States is engaged in international discussions aimed at setting standards for the underlying technology—meaning that it will be able to shape those standards. Moreover, the Federal Reserve is currently exploring possibilities for the technology that would enable a digital dollar, including by working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Even if it does not adopt a digital dollar, the United States may be able to bless a private-sector digital currency—or currencies—that can facilitate low-cost international payments. A properly regulated stablecoin, for instance, might meet the need for efficient dollar transfers, depending on how the international landscape develops.

The United States must also consider the domestic policy implications of a digital dollar. Providing the public with direct access to accounts at the Fed could make it easier to integrate the roughly five percent of Americans who are currently unbanked into the country's financial system. But a digital dollar could also raise privacy concerns if the government has insight into individual spending decisions, or it could lead to government overreach if deposits are promised in exchange for conformity with a controversial social policy. In addition, Fed accounts could cause banks to lose deposits, diminishing their ability to make loans and hurting economic growth.

There are ways to mitigate these risks, such as using private-sector intermediaries that do not share spending information with Washington, limiting what the government can do through Fed accounts, or capping the size of Fed accounts. The United States, however, will have to balance these domestic considerations with the need to ensure that international dollar transactions are powered by technology that is efficient, resilient, and interoperable with technology being developed by other central banks. This could be achieved through a digital dollar or a properly regulated private-sector alternative, such as a stablecoin. But to secure the global role of the dollar, which has

for decades provided stability for the United States and its allies, Washington will need to adjust to—and shape—the global shift toward central bank digital currencies.

A PATH FORWARD

If digital currencies continue to gain traction, the debate over how to regulate them will only get louder. It will not be easy for Washington to find a middle path. Because digital currencies touch so many policy areas, they cut across the normal decision-making silos of the U.S. government, creating more potential for bureaucratic sticking points and risking an uncoordinated, patchwork approach. Within the executive branch, various agencies have a stake in the issue, including the Treasury Department, the SEC, the CFTC, the Federal Reserve, the Justice Department, and the State Department. In Congress, several different committees have an interest in digital currencies, including those on banking, finance, agriculture, and foreign relations.

To forge an interagency path forward, the Biden administration should regularly convene a high-level group akin to the President's Working Group on Financial Markets, which includes the treasury secretary, the Fed chair, the SEC chair, and the CFTC chair, but add the attorney general and the secretary of state or their deputies. Congress could also set up a bipartisan task force to seek consensus across committees.

Most Americans want their government to be able to respond to economic downturns, to prevent broad financial instability, and to fight terrorism and other types of crime. But most also wish to benefit from the innovative potential of new technologies such as digital currencies. Both these things can be achieved only with common-sense guardrails—and, ultimately, through a digital dollar or a properly regulated private-sector alternative. Decisions about the government's control of money must be shaped not just by software developers but by elected representatives who are accountable to the American people. 🌐

The Myth of Russian Decline

Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power

*Michael Kofman and
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The Biden administration came into office with a clear and unambiguous foreign policy priority: countering a rising China. The administration's public statements, its early national security planning documents, and its initial diplomatic forays have all suggested that pushing back against Beijing's growing global influence will be Washington's national security focus, alongside transnational threats such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. The question of how to deal with Russia, by contrast, has taken a back seat, returning to the fore only when Russian troops amassed on Ukraine's border in April. That crisis served as a reminder of the danger of looking past Moscow—yet by July, President Joe Biden was back to declaring that Russia was “sitting on top of an economy that has nuclear weapons and oil wells and nothing else.”

Biden is not the first American leader to think along these lines. Ever since the end of the Cold War, American politicians have periodically suggested that Russia's days as a true global power are numbered. In 2014, John McCain, a Republican senator from Arizona, called Russia a “gas station masquerading as a country.” That same year, U.S. President Barack Obama dismissed Russia as a mere “regional power.” Not long thereafter, Russia successfully intervened in the Syrian war, interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and

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inserted itself into the political crisis in Venezuela and the civil war in Libya. And yet, the perception of Russia as a paper tiger persists.

The problem is that the case for Russian decline is overstated. Much of the evidence for it, such as Russia's shrinking population and its resource-dependent economy, is not as consequential for the Kremlin as many in Washington assume. Nor should the United States expect that Russia will automatically abandon its course of confrontation once President Vladimir Putin leaves office. Putin's foreign policy enjoys widespread support among the country's ruling elite, and his legacy will include a thicket of unresolved disputes, chief among them that over the annexation of Crimea. Any disagreements with the United States are here to stay.

Put simply, Washington cannot afford to fixate on China while hoping to simply wait Russia out. Rather than viewing Russia as a declining power, U.S. leaders should see it as a persistent one—and have a frank conversation about the country's true capabilities and vulnerabilities. Rethinking American assumptions about Russian power would allow policymakers to address what will be a period of prolonged confrontation with a capable adversary.

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

Expectations of Russian decline contain important truths. The country's economy is stagnant, with few sources of value other than the extraction and export of natural resources. The entire system is rife with corruption and dominated by inefficient state-owned or state-controlled enterprises, and international sanctions limit access to capital and technology. Russia struggles to develop, retain, and attract talent; the state chronically underfunds scientific research; and bureaucratic mismanagement hinders technological innovation. As a result, Russia lags considerably behind the United States and China in most metrics of scientific and technological development. Military spending has largely plateaued in the last four years, and the population is forecast to decline by ten million people by 2050.

With such a dismal outlook, it is natural to assume that Russia's capacity for disruption and hostility on the international stage will soon diminish, too—that the Kremlin will simply run out of resources for its aggressive foreign policy. But those data points miss the broader picture. They highlight Russia's weaknesses and downplay its strengths. Russia may be “a downshifter country,” as Herman Gref,



Show of force: at a military parade in Moscow, August 2021

the head of Russia's largest bank, complained in 2016. But its economic, demographic, and military potential will remain substantial, rather than entering a precipitous decline.

Consider the country's economy, which, stagnant as it may be, is still larger and more resilient than many believe. Analysts like to point out that Russia's GDP of \$1.5 trillion is comparable to that of Italy or Texas. But that \$1.5 trillion is calculated using market exchange rates. Factor in purchasing power parity, and it balloons to \$4.1 trillion, which would make Russia the second-largest economy in Europe and the sixth-largest in the world. Neither measure is wholly accurate—one is likely an underestimate, the other an overestimate—but the comparison shows that Russia's economy is nowhere near as small as the conventional wisdom holds. At any rate, raw GDP is often a poor measure of geopolitical power: it no longer translates easily into military potential or international influence.

To be sure, Russia's economy has not been kind to its citizens. Real disposable incomes are ten percent lower today than they were in 2013, wiping out nearly a decade of growth. But macroeconomic indicators are stable enough to allow Moscow to project power well into the future. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine in 2014, international sanctions and falling oil prices caused its economy to tumble. In the years since, however, the government has

reined in its spending and adapted to lower oil prices, creating budget surpluses and a growing war chest. The latest estimates, as of August 2021, put the value of Russia's National Wealth Fund at about \$185 billion and its foreign currency reserves at \$615 billion—hardly a picture of destitution. A new policy of import substitution, devised in response to international sanctions, has breathed new life into the agricultural sector, whose exports now rake in more than \$30 billion annually. The Kremlin has also reoriented trade away from the West and toward China, currently its number one trading partner. Trade with China is expected to exceed \$200 billion by 2024, twice what it was in 2013.

What of Russia's dependence on extractive industries? Oil and gas sales continue to account for about 30–40 percent of the government's budget, meaning that a future shift away from fossil fuels will sting. But it is unclear how near that future really is. And Russia produces energy at such a low price that other exporting countries are likely to get squeezed well before it sees its budget crimped. In addition, Russia is the main energy supplier to the European Union, whose dependency has only grown over the past decade: the EU gets 41 percent of its natural gas, 27 percent of its oil, and 47 percent of its solid fossil fuels from Russia. The problem Moscow faces is that its resources are not infinite. Russia's oil production will peak in the coming decade—some think it may have done so already—meaning that the country's capacity to export easily extractable (and thus cheap) oil will hit a ceiling.

Meanwhile, although Russia lags behind the United States in technological innovation, it still ranks among the top ten worldwide in research-and-development spending. In the case of artificial intelligence, it may not even matter whether the country is a leader or a follower: given the many applications and the commercial utility of this technology, Moscow will likely realize some second-mover advantages while letting the United States and China take on the costs and risks of pioneering its development. Moreover, Russia has a struggling but viable technology sector and has developed its own analogs to Facebook, Google, and other popular online platforms, all of which are fairly successful within Russia.

OF MILITARY AND MEN

Among the most common misconceptions about Russia is that the country's demographic outlook will dramatically constrain its future capabilities. Such demographic determinism has historically failed to predict Russia's fortunes. According to UN forecasts, Russia's popula-

tion will shrink by about seven percent by 2050; more pessimistic projections see a decline of up to 11 percent. Even in the latter case, Russia would remain the most populous country in Europe and Eurasia by a wide margin. It may lag behind highly developed Western countries in life expectancy and mortality rates, but it has substantially narrowed those gaps since the 1990s. The country is certainly not on the brink of demographic collapse.

More important, the relevance of demographics to state power needs rethinking. Modern great powers are defined not by the size of their populations but by their populations' quality: people's health, educational levels, and labor productivity, among other indicators. Were it otherwise, countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nigeria would be among the world's most powerful states. As the American scholar Hal Brands has written, "All things equal, countries with healthy demographic profiles can create wealth more easily than their competitors." On this front, Russia has shown considerable improvement since the 1990s, with reduced mortality, increased lifespans, and an improved fertility rate. Until 2015, it steadily rose on indexes such as the UN's Human Development Index and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's labor productivity measures. An economic recession has since slowed down this trend, and undone some of the progress, but Russia's overall situation has considerably improved from a demographic crisis in the 1990s and predictions of demographic doom in the early years of this century.

Brain drain remains a major problem, with many of Russia's brightest leaving the country. Its economic impact, however, has been difficult to measure. And even as many middle-class Russians who are essential to the knowledge economy leave, Russia benefits from substantial immigration by job seekers from the former Soviet republics. Russia's demographic profile is composed of mixed indicators that show qualitative improvements alongside quantitative decline. Meanwhile, the demographic outlooks for many of the United States' allies and partners are equally problematic, if not more so.

MILITARY MIGHT

Above all, Russia will remain a military force to be reckoned with. Military power has historically been a Russian strength, compensating for the country's relatively undiversified economy, technological backwardness, and lack of political dynamism. It is in part why Russia man-

aged to sustain prolonged competitions with economically much stronger states in the past, whether it was the United States or the British Empire. After its nadir in the early post-Soviet era, Russian military power has been revived—and will only improve in the coming decade, even as American policymakers turn their attention to China.

Russia remains the United States' primary peer in nuclear weapons technology. Aside from NATO, it also fields the strongest conventional military in Europe, reformed following a period of military reforms and investments since

2008. That transformation was largely overlooked prior to 2014, which explains why Russia's military moves in Ukraine and, later, in Syria took many analysts by surprise. Today, the Russian military is at its highest level of readiness, mobility, and technical capability in decades. NATO remains superior on paper, but much is contingent in war, and NATO's apparent superiority does not guarantee victory or the ability to deter Russia across the range of possible conflicts. Russia also fields a flexible array of special forces, mercenaries, and military intelligence operatives. This is before considering the country's status as a leading power in space or its extensive cyberwarfare capabilities, which were recently demonstrated by the so-called SolarWinds breach, in which Russian hackers penetrated and spied on several U.S. government agencies.

Adjusting for purchasing power parity and for the peculiarities of autarkic defense sectors such as Russia's, analysts have estimated that Russia spends somewhere between \$150 billion and \$180 billion per year on defense, considerably more than the market exchange rate figure of \$58 billion suggests. Half of Russia's annual defense budget is spent on procuring new weapons, modernizing old ones, and researching military technology, which is a far greater share than is spent in these areas by most Western militaries. Those, moreover, are conservative estimates, since some Russian expenditures remain hidden, obscured, or classified. Using these generous budgets, the Russian military-industrial complex has developed many next-generation weapons, from hypersonic missiles to directed-energy weapons (such as lasers), electronic warfare systems, advanced submarines, and integrated air defenses, along with antisatellite weapons of various types.

The Russian military is not without its problems and remains a

Washington cannot afford to fixate on China while hoping to simply wait Russia out.

laggard in some areas. In practice, however, Russia is well positioned to remain a dominant actor in the post-Soviet space and to challenge U.S. interests in other regions, such as the Middle East. Russia retains the airlift and sealift capabilities needed to deploy its troops at some distance from its borders. Its defense spending looks stable at current levels, despite the triple shock of an economic recession, low oil prices, and international sanctions. The Russian military still sees itself as a relative underdog, but it has grown more confident that it can deter NATO even without nuclear weapons, and the outcome of a prolonged war between Russian and NATO forces is difficult to predict. Under these circumstances, the United States and its allies should stop dismissing Russia as a mere “disrupter” and recognize it as a serious military adversary in both ability and intent.

IT'S NOT JUST A PUTIN PROBLEM

Tied up in the narrative of Russian decline is the notion that the United States primarily has a Putin problem—that once the Russian president leaves office, his country's foreign policy will grow less assertive. Yet that is unlikely to be the case. For one thing, Putin can legally remain in office until 2036, thanks to a referendum that he pushed through last year that allows him to serve two more six-year terms after his current term expires in 2024. Research that one of us (Kendall-Taylor) conducted with the political scientist Erica Frantz showed that such longevity is common for leaders like the Russian president. In the post-Cold War era, autocrats who, like Putin, had made it to 20 years in office, were at least 65 years of age, and had concentrated power in their own hands ended up ruling for 36 years, on average.

Research on longtime authoritarian leaders also suggests that once Putin does depart—even if earlier than expected—there will be little prospect for substantial political improvement. Most often, the regimes that such longtime leaders create persist, or a different dictatorship emerges. The odds that democratization will follow a regime like Putin's—run by an older, personalist leader who has clung to power for 20 years or more—are less than one in ten. Extending term limits, as Putin did after last year's referendum, is also a bad sign. According to data from the Comparative Constitutions Project, 13 leaders around the world pursued term-limit extensions in the period from 1992 to 2009. In all but one case, their regimes either are still in power or simply transitioned to a new authoritarian regime after the leader's departure.

This is not to suggest that Russia is doomed to authoritarianism or that a change in the president would not matter. Nonetheless, the empirical record shows that the actions longtime authoritarian leaders typically take to ensure control—such as undermining civil society and hollowing out institutions that could constrain their power—create barriers to the emergence of democracy. Likewise, a mere change in leadership would likely matter only at the margins. Unless Putin's departure ushers in a significant turnover in the ruling elite, key pillars of Russian foreign policy, such as the notion that Russia maintains the right to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, will remain incompatible with the values of the United States and its allies. Simply put, American policymakers must prepare for the possibility that the contours of Russian foreign policy, and thus the Kremlin's intent to undermine U.S. interests, will endure long after Putin leaves office.

THE PERSISTENT POWER

The United States should think of Russia not as a declining power but as a persistent one, willing and able to threaten U.S. national security interests for at least the next ten to 20 years. Even if China proves to be the more significant long-term threat, Russia will remain a long-term challenger, too—a “good enough” power, as the political scientist Kathryn Stoner has put it, with the ability to shape global affairs and substantially affect U.S. interests. The former Soviet space remains a tinderbox, still reckoning with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which should be thought of not as an event but as a process, as the historian Serhii Plokhy has aptly put it. No matter how much Washington would like to focus on the Indo-Pacific, therefore, it must consider the prospect of another Russian-Ukrainian war, a military conflict resulting from political unrest in Belarus, or crises akin to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Compared with China, Russia also poses a more significant danger to the U.S. homeland. For one thing, it remains the United States' preeminent nuclear threat, despite China's growing arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons. The same goes for Russia's ability to reach the continental United States with long-range conventional missiles. Russia also has more troops stationed abroad than does China, with bases in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, putting its military in regular proximity to U.S. and NATO forces. When it comes to indirect warfare, Moscow's record of election interference and hacking

demonstrates that it can and will employ emerging technologies against the United States and its allies. It is also worth underscoring that the Kremlin can endanger U.S. interests on the cheap. Russia's military interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya have been limited and inexpensive. So, too, are its cyberattacks and disinformation efforts.

It is perhaps in these domains—cyberwarfare and attacks on liberal democracy—where Russia is likely to pose the most sustained threat. Russia has refined a low-cost toolkit that allows it to bolster other authoritarian regimes, amplify illiberal voices in established democracies, poison information ecosystems, and subvert elections and other democratic institutions. Since Moscow believes that weakening democracy can accelerate the decline of U.S. influence, it will persist in its efforts on this front. Other states have taken note of Russia's success in this sphere and have begun to emulate it, as shown by China's adoption of Kremlin-style information warfare during the pandemic.

A final concern is that Moscow is increasingly finding common cause with Beijing. In effect, the two governments have formed a strategic partnership, exchanging technical and material support to offset Western pressure and focus their resources on competing with the United States rather than with each other. Their defense and military cooperation has grown, too. The impact of this alignment will be greater than the sum of its parts, amplifying the challenge to U.S. interests that each state poses individually. The challenge, therefore, will be not just properly prioritizing China and Russia in U.S. strategy but recognizing that the problems presented by the two countries are not necessarily discrete and separable.

RIGHTSIZING RUSSIA

Washington must move past the myth that Russia is a beleaguered or cornered state, lashing out in recognition of its own demise. In truth, there is little evidence that Russia's leaders see their country in this way—on the contrary, they consider Russia to be the center of power in its own region and an assertive player globally. Events such as the bungled U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan only reinforce Moscow's perception that it is rather the United States that is in decline. Ignoring that view will create false expectations for Russia's behavior, leaving the United States and its allies poorly positioned to anticipate Russian actions.

The Biden administration has taken steps in the right direction. Among them is its focus on fostering democratic resilience. By ele-

vating cybersecurity as a national security priority, strengthening critical infrastructure, improving information ecosystems, and rooting out the corruption that Russia weaponizes to subvert democratic institutions, Washington and its allies can cut off a major source of Moscow's influence abroad. Meanwhile, the administration's efforts to pursue arms control and strategic stability with Russia, which should extend to cyberspace and space, will set up the necessary guardrails for a prolonged confrontation.

The United States should think of Russia not as a declining power but as a persistent one.

Moving forward, however, Washington must resist overly focusing on China to the point of neglecting other important issues, such as Russia. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released in March as one of the Biden administration's earliest national security analyses, discussed China in considerable depth while allocating barely a few sentences to Russia. Future strategic documents, such as the upcoming National Security and National Defense Strategies, should correct this imbalance.

The same approach should guide the administration's defense budgeting. The Russian military threat has not decreased, yet the funding allocated by Washington to deal with it has: successive budget requests since 2020 have cut support for the European Deterrence Initiative (a U.S. effort to bolster its military presence in Europe after Russia's annexation of Crimea), most recently by 19 percent. Reallocating that money to East Asia, as the Biden administration wants to do, is unlikely to make a marked difference in the military balance vis-à-vis China—the amount involved is too modest for that—but it will create unnecessary risks in Europe. That is particularly true considering the possibility of simultaneous conflicts with China and Russia, in which one of those states takes advantage of a crisis involving the other to pursue its own aims. Washington must hedge against such a scenario and ensure that Europe does not become the weak link in its strategy.

NATO will play a central role in that endeavor. The alliance has recently begun updating its official guiding document, and Washington must ensure that Russia, not China, remains the clear priority. The United States should also continue to encourage its European allies and partners to shoulder more of the burden for deterrence and defense on the continent. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has

reenergized European calls to enhance its own capabilities. Now is the time, through careful transatlantic coordination, for real steps toward strengthening the European pillar within NATO.

Finally, Washington must be bolder still in its efforts to defend democracy against outside subversion. The United States and its allies and partners should step up their collective responses to Moscow's cyberwarfare, election interference, and other actions that threaten the health of their political and economic systems. They should, for example, agree to take collective action against any foreign election interference that crosses agreed-on thresholds. Russia's digital ambitions may be overshadowed by China's, yet Russia is developing its own brand of digital dictatorship, designed in part to undermine democracy worldwide. Addressing that threat also requires working with like-minded democratic partners in international organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union to ensure that it is not Beijing and Moscow that write the digital rules and norms of the future.

The gravitational pull of the threat posed by a rising and revisionist China is understandably strong, but the United States is capable of dealing with two powers at once: China, a pacing threat, and Russia, a persistent one. In talking about their approach to Russia, Biden administration officials are fond of saying that the United States "can walk and chew gum at the same time." Now they will have to prove it. 🌐

Order Before Peace

Kissinger's Middle East Diplomacy and Its Lessons for Today

Martin Indyk

The ignominious end to the U.S. war in Afghanistan dramatically underscored the complexity and volatility of the broader Middle East. Americans may try to console themselves that at last they can turn their backs on this troubled region since the United States is now energy self-sufficient and thus much less dependent on Middle Eastern oil. Washington has learned the hard way not to attempt to remake the region in the United States' image. And if American leaders are tempted to make war there again, they are likely to find little public support.

Nevertheless, pivoting away from the broader Middle East is easier said than done. If Iran continues to advance its nuclear program to the threshold of developing a weapon, it could trigger an arms race or a preemptive Israeli strike that would drag the United States back into another Middle Eastern war. The region remains important because of its geostrategic centrality, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Israel and Washington's Arab allies depend on the United States for their security. Failing states such as Syria and Yemen remain a potential breeding ground for terrorists who can strike the United States and its allies. And although the United States no longer depends on the free flow of oil from the Gulf, a prolonged interruption there could send the global economy into a tailspin. Like it or not, the United States needs to devise a post-Afghanistan strategy for promoting order in the Middle East even as it shifts its focus to other priorities.

In crafting that strategy, there is a precedent that can serve as a useful template. It comes from the experience of Washington's preemi-

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The incrementalist: Kissinger in his office in Washington, D.C., August 1978

nent strategist, Henry Kissinger. Although he is little remembered for it, during the four years he served as secretary of state to U.S. Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Kissinger presided over a successful effort to build a stable Middle Eastern order, one that lasted for 30 years. Kissinger managed to achieve that while the United States was withdrawing all its troops from Vietnam and pulling back from Southeast Asia. It was a time, like today, when diplomacy had to substitute for the use of force. It coincided with the Watergate scandal, which plunged the United States into a deep political crisis and forced Nixon from office, creating a potential vacuum in U.S. leadership on the world stage. And yet during this period of American malaise, in the midst of the Cold War, Kissinger's diplomacy managed to sideline the Soviet Union and lay the foundations for an American-led peace process that effectively ended the conflict between the Arab states and Israel, even though it failed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One of the most important lessons from the Kissinger era is that an equilibrium in the regional balance of power is insufficient for maintaining a stable order. To legitimize that order, Washington needs to find ways to encourage its allies and partners to address the region's

grievances. Although policymakers should be circumspect in their peacemaking efforts, prioritizing stability over end-of-conflict deals, they should also avoid underreaching, because that can destabilize the order, too. While there is little appetite in Washington to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Biden administration should resist the temptation to neglect the issue. As Kissinger learned the hard way, conflicts that appear dormant can erupt into full-blown crises at unexpected moments. Dealing with one of the central conflicts in the Middle East by employing a Kissingerian strategy of incremental steps is the best way to avoid yet another conflagration in this combustible region.

ORDER, NOT PEACE

It was order, not peace, that Kissinger pursued, because he believed that peace was neither an achievable nor even a desirable objective in the Middle East. In Kissinger's view, preserving Middle Eastern order required the maintenance of a stable balance of power. In his doctoral dissertation, which was subsequently published in 1957 as *A World Restored*, Kissinger demonstrated how the Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternich and the Anglo-Irish statesman Lord Castlereagh produced 100 years of relative stability in Europe by artfully tending to the balance of power and skillfully manipulating those who tried to disrupt it.

Kissinger sought to replicate that approach in the Middle East when he had the opportunity. But he understood that an equilibrium in the balance of power was not enough. For the order to be sustainable, it also had to be legitimate, meaning that all the major powers within the system had to adhere to a commonly accepted set of rules. Those rules would be respected only if they provided a sufficient sense of justice to a sufficient number of states. It did not require the satisfaction of all grievances, he wrote, "just an absence of the grievances that would motivate an effort to overthrow the order." A legitimate order, Kissinger argued, did not eliminate conflict, but it did limit its scope.

This conclusion also came from what he observed during World War II, when the Wilsonian idealism that sought a peace to end all wars had instead led to appeasement and Hitler's conquest of Europe. As Kissinger noted in his memoirs, "For most people in most periods of history, peace had been a precarious state and not the millennial disappearance of all tension." Consequently, in his diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, Kissinger would consistently avoid the pursuit of peace treaties, instead seeking agreements that would give all sides a

stake in preserving the existing order. As he told me decades later, “I never thought there could be a moment of universal reconciliation.”

Kissinger’s skepticism first found expression in the subtitle he chose for *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace*. The fact that after years of deep research, he concluded that peace was problematic would have a formative influence on his approach to diplomacy in the Middle East. On the first page of the introduction to *A World Restored*, Kissinger explains why he came to this conclusion. “The attainment of peace,” he writes, “is not as easy as the desire for it.” Eras like the period he had studied turned out, paradoxically, to be the most peaceful because the statesmen involved were not preoccupied with brokering peace.

The eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant was another influence on Kissinger’s Middle East policymaking. Kant believed that peace was inevitable. But what Kissinger took away from the philosopher’s essay “Perpetual Peace” was that conflict between states would lead over time to the exhaustion of their powers. Eventually, they would prefer peace to the misery of war. In other words, peacemaking was a gradual process that could not be rushed. As Kissinger noted, Kant understood that “the root dilemma of our time is that if the quest for peace turns into the sole objective of policy, the fear of war becomes a weapon in the hands of the most ruthless; it produces moral disarmament.”

When Kissinger applied this prism to the Middle East, he assumed that the Arabs were not ready to reconcile with the Jewish state and that Israel was unable to make the territorial concessions they demanded without jeopardizing its existence. So he developed a peace process that provided for Israel to withdraw in small, incremental steps from the Arab territory it had occupied in the 1967 Six-Day War. The legitimizing principle for this approach was enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 242, which provided for an exchange of territory for peace.

Kissinger’s peace process, however, was designed to buy time rather than peace: time for Israel to build its capabilities and reduce its isolation, and time for the Arabs to tire of the conflict and recognize the advantages of working with an increasingly powerful Israeli neighbor. In the meantime, he would pursue Middle East peace with caution, skepticism, and gradualism, which is why he labeled it “step-by-step diplomacy.”

Equilibrium and legitimacy in the pursuit of order and incrementalism in the pursuit of peace were the basic concepts of Kissinger’s

strategic approach. He managed to negotiate three interim agreements among Egypt, Syria, and Israel and laid the foundations for the subsequent peace treaties that Israel forged with Egypt and Jordan. His process began to unravel, however, when U.S. President Bill Clinton ignored Kissinger's emphasis on caution and tried and failed to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And then President George W. Bush launched his ill-fated invasion of Iraq, destabilizing Kissinger's order by making it possible for revolutionary Iran to challenge U.S. dominance in the Sunni Arab world.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

Kissinger's approach to the Middle East is particularly relevant in the present moment. The United States is pulling back from the region in an obvious parallel to the U.S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia in Kissinger's time. Then, as now, the aftermath of a botched, long-running war meant there was a strict limit on Washington's ability to deploy force in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Kissinger knew that a stable equilibrium depended on the United States backing up its diplomacy with the credible threat of military action. He squared this circle by relying on and working with capable regional partners.

For example, in September 1970, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) sought to overthrow King Hussein in Jordan. Three Soviet-backed Syrian armored tank brigades supported the organization's attempt by occupying the northern Jordanian city of Irbid. Fearing they would advance on Amman, Hussein called on Washington to intervene. The United States, however, could not do so quickly and risked getting stuck there if it did.

So Kissinger, on Hussein's urging and with Nixon's eventual support, turned to Israel to deter the Syrians. Prime Minister Golda Meir ordered the Israel Defense Forces to mobilize on the Golan Heights and on the Jordanian border adjacent to Irbid. Meanwhile, to deter the Soviets, Kissinger deployed two U.S. carrier battle groups off the Lebanese coast and ordered a third into the Mediterranean. Emboldened by Israeli and American backing, the Jordanian army inflicted heavy losses on the Syrian tank brigades, and the Syrians withdrew. Within days, the crisis was over, without one American boot on the ground.

Kissinger also harnessed the support of regional allies in dealing with Egypt's nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. When Kissinger entered the White House as Nixon's national security adviser, in 1969,

Nasser fit the mold of a revolutionary seeking to disrupt the existing Middle Eastern order in much the way that Napoleon had challenged the European order at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In dealing with Nasser's Soviet-backed gambit, Kissinger eschewed regime change, a policy pursued by France and the United Kingdom during the 1956 Suez crisis with disastrous results. Instead, he sought to contain Nasser by promoting a balance of power tipped in favor of the regional defenders of the status quo: Israel in the heartland of the Middle East and Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf. The *détente* that Nixon and Kissinger developed with the Soviet Union bolstered that balance because it involved, among other things, a joint commitment by the two superpowers to maintain stability in the region.

Kissinger recognized that Washington had to address the Arab states' demand for justice in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, in which they lost significant territory to Israel. Neglecting to do so would threaten the legitimacy of the new Middle Eastern order. Nevertheless, he assumed that as long as the superpowers maintained an equilibrium in the regional balance of power, justice could be delayed. He badly miscalculated, as the outbreak of the 1973 Yom Kippur War demonstrated.

In the lead-up to that conflict, Kissinger relied on Israeli and U.S. intelligence assessments that Egypt would never risk war because a militarily superior Israel, bolstered by sophisticated U.S. weapons systems, would rapidly defeat it. That analysis led Kissinger to ignore Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat, when he warned repeatedly that he would go to war if Egypt's aspirations to regain the territory it had lost were disregarded. Kissinger brushed aside Sadat's pronouncements even when they assumed an apocalyptic tone: in one interview, for example, the Egyptian leader declared, "Everything in this country is now being mobilized in earnest for the resumption of the battle, which is now inevitable."

Still, in 1973, when Egypt invaded the Sinai Peninsula and Syria attempted to retake the Golan Heights on the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Kissinger sprang into action with the confidence that his study of the nineteenth-century European order had provided. His objective was to adjust the prewar arrangements in a way that the Middle East's major players would view as more just and equitable. He also wanted to position the United States to play the role of the predominant manipulator of the competing forces in the region.

To back his diplomacy with force, Kissinger encouraged Israeli counteroffensives. When that military pressure helped persuade the Egyptians and the Soviets to accept his cease-fire conditions, he demanded that Israel stop its assault. In particular, he prevented the Israel Defense Forces from destroying the Egyptian Third Army, which it had surrounded at the end of the war. That enabled Sadat to enter peace negotiations with his regime—and his dignity—intact.

Kissinger then seized on the plasticity of the moment to launch his peace process with the aim of keeping Egypt—the largest and militarily most powerful Arab state—from joining any future Arab war coalition. That would render another war between the Jewish state and the Arab countries impossible. An unmistakable parallel exists between Kissinger's approach to Egypt and the way that Metternich and Castlereagh handled France after Napoleon's defeat, incorporating it into the new order rather than punishing it—and thereby converting it from a revolutionary, revisionist state into a status quo power.

Today, Kissinger would likely use a similar blueprint in dealing with Iran, the country that most clearly threatens what is left of his U.S.-led Middle Eastern order. He does not advocate the overthrow of the regime. Rather, he would seek to persuade Iran to abandon its quest to export its revolution and instead return to more state-like behavior. In the meantime, Washington should pursue a new equilibrium in which Iran's revolutionary impulses are contained and balanced by an alliance of Sunni states cooperating with Israel and the United States. Once Iran decides to play by the rules, however, Kissinger believes the United States needs to act as the balancer, positioning itself closer to all the contending Middle Eastern powers than they are to one another. "Pursuing its own strategic objectives," Kissinger says, "the United States can be a crucial factor—perhaps the crucial factor—in determining whether Iran pursues the path of revolutionary Islam or that of a great nation legitimately and importantly lodged in the Westphalian system of states."

Kissinger's peace process was designed to buy time rather than peace.

BEWARE OF AIMING TOO HIGH

Because he was operating in an environment of retrenchment, Kissinger was deeply aware of the dangers of overreach. But as he notes in *A World Restored*, "It is not balance which inspires men but universality, not secu-

rity but immortality.” And as he detailed in his monumental book *Diplomacy*, published in 1994, American statesmen rarely understand or respect the rules of the game that his conception of international order requires. Their idealism is often driven by a sense of divine providence, especially when it comes to the Middle East. They imagine that pursuing peace and nation building are not only desirable but achievable and that the only problem is coming up with the right formula. Herein lies the dilemma at the heart of U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East. As Kissinger understood, the maintenance of order requires a credible effort to resolve the region’s conflicts, but the scale of the statesman’s ambition can end up destabilizing that order.

Consider how Nixon’s first instinct was to work with the Soviet Union to impose peace on their recalcitrant Middle Eastern clients. In the middle of the Yom Kippur War, Kissinger flew off to Moscow to negotiate the terms of a cease-fire with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. En route, he received explicit instructions from Nixon to “go all out” to achieve a just settlement “now” and to work with Brezhnev to “bring the necessary pressure on our respective friends.” This threatened to upend Kissinger’s more modest strategy for a cease-fire followed by direct Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. Furious, he ignored the president’s instructions. He was able to do so because Nixon sent this message just as he was ordering the firing of Archibald Cox, the Watergate special prosecutor. The ensuing “Saturday Night Massacre”—in which two top officials from the Justice Department resigned rather than carry out Nixon’s order—led congressional leaders to initiate the impeachment of the president. With all attention on U.S. domestic politics, Kissinger was able to pursue his own priorities in the Middle East.

He managed a similar feat under Nixon’s successor, Ford. When negotiations between Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin broke down in February 1975, Ford wanted to convene a conference in Geneva with the Soviet Union to impose a comprehensive peace settlement on Israel and its Arab neighbors. Kissinger headed that initiative off in favor of a return to his shuttle diplomacy, which brought Egypt and Israel closer to their eventual peace deal.

U.S. presidents who came after Nixon and Ford also tended to pursue their idealistic objectives for the Middle East with insufficient concern for maintaining the regional order that Kissinger had established. President Jimmy Carter resurrected the idea of working with

the Soviet Union in reconvening the Geneva Conference to impose a comprehensive peace. This time it was Sadat who headed off the American president, with his trip to Jerusalem in November 1977. At Camp David a year later, a chastened Carter pursued a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace deal rather than a comprehensive settlement that would have included a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

More than two decades later, however, Clinton acceded to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's insistence on an attempt to reach a deal to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Camp David in July 2000, abandoning the Kissingerian step-by-step process that Rabin had introduced in the Oslo accords. The Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat understood that Barak and Clinton intended to impose a final resolution on the Palestinians, and he refused to go along. It was a short step from there to the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada and the ensuing Israeli crackdown, a violent conflagration that lasted for five years, led to the deaths of thousands, and destroyed all trust between the two parties. Nevertheless, U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump would later both try and fail to produce conflict-ending agreements.

Bush resisted the siren song of comprehensive peacemaking but succumbed to the urge for what Kissinger had long ago dubbed "immortality." After toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, he announced a "freedom agenda" in the Middle East, declaring that promoting democracy across the region "must be a focus of American policy for decades to come." The result was a disaster, serving mostly to pave the way for an Iranian bid for dominance in Iraq and across the region. Bush also shifted the U.S. objective in Afghanistan from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency and nation building. That decision, too, produced failure and humiliation. Twenty years later, it was left to the nonagenarian Kissinger to point out that "the military objectives [had] been too absolute and unattainable and the political ones too abstract and elusive."

THE DANGER OF AIMING TOO LOW

Unlike the American policymakers who came after him, Kissinger was determined to avoid overreaching in the Middle East. But there were several instances when his caution and skepticism led him to underreach. That is the danger that President Joe Biden also faces in the Middle East now that he has ended the war in Afghanistan.

For Kissinger, the first instance of aiming too low came in July 1972, when Sadat suddenly announced the expulsion of 20,000 Soviet military advisers from Egypt. That was something Kissinger had called for two years earlier. But when it happened, Kissinger felt no need to respond.

Sadat was disappointed. Five days before he announced the expulsion, he had sent a message to Kissinger expressing his desire to dispatch a special envoy to Washington. It would take seven months for Kissinger to arrange a meeting with Hafez Ismail, Sadat's national security adviser. Ismail's presentation captured Kissinger's interest. The Egyptian envoy explained that his country was ready to move quickly, ahead of the other Arab states, and would even countenance an Israeli security presence remaining in Sinai provided that Israel recognized Egyptian sovereignty in the area.

Yet when Kissinger briefed Rabin, who was then Meir's ambassador in Washington, the Israeli dismissed Ismail's offer as "nothing new." Meir also rejected it, and Kissinger quietly dropped the idea. Ismail met Kissinger again in May but came away from the meeting believing that only a crisis would change Kissinger's calculus. Four months later, Sadat launched the Yom Kippur War.

Whether a more active response from Kissinger would have headed off the war is unknowable. What is clear is that he underreached because of his mistaken confidence in the stability of the equilibrium that he had established. He had overlooked in practice something he had recognized in theory: the stability of any international system depended "on the degree to which its components feel secure and the extent to which they agree on the 'justice' and 'fairness' of existing arrangements." That is why, after the war, he resolved to address the justice deficit by launching direct negotiations to produce Israeli withdrawals from Arab territory.

Justice for the Palestinians, however, was not on Kissinger's agenda, because they were represented by the PLO, which was then an irredentist nonstate actor deploying terrorist tactics in an effort to overthrow the Hashemite Kingdom in Jordan and replace the Jewish state. He preferred to leave the Palestinian problem to Israel and Jordan. In this case, his caution led him to miss an opportunity that arose in 1974 to promote Jordan's role in addressing Palestinian claims. That was the last moment when the Palestinian problem might have been tackled in a state-to-state negotiation between Israel and Jordan.

At the time, Jordan had a special relationship with the West Bank Palestinians, who were its citizens. Thanks in part to the British, the

Hashemite Kingdom also had functioning government institutions, including a reliable army and an effective intelligence organization. Unlike the PLO, which entered the peace process in 1993 with no government institutions, Jordan could have ensured the implementation of any agreement reached with Israel, as it has done with its own peace treaty obligations. And from there, a confederation between a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Hashemite Kingdom on the East Bank could have evolved.

To achieve that, Kissinger would have had to pursue a disengagement agreement between Israel and Jordan after he concluded the agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria. King Hussein was eager to regain a foothold in the West Bank, and the Israelis were willing to engage and even show some flexibility. But Kissinger repeatedly avoided involvement in the effort. He encouraged Hussein to deal directly with the Israelis, which the king did. Kissinger warned the Israelis that if they didn't respond, they would end up having to deal with the PLO—a prescient prediction. But then, he repeatedly insisted that there would be no pressure from him and “no reason for [the United States] to be an intermediary.”

Without American engagement, the Israelis and the Jordanians were unable to reach an agreement. And in October 1974, at its summit in Rabat, Morocco, the Arab League declared the PLO “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” thereby putting an end to the chance of resolving the Palestinian problem in a Jordanian context. Subsequently, Kissinger candidly admitted he had made “a big mistake.”

He had his reasons. Although he liked the king, he didn't view Jordan as a major player in the Middle East, and he thought that meant he did not need to make diplomatic exertions on its behalf. Instead, he devoted himself to a second Egyptian-Israeli agreement, because removing Egypt from the conflict with Israel was his overriding strategic objective. Pursuing a Jordanian option would have interfered with that endeavor, would have possibly provoked conflict between Jordan and the PLO, and would have brought up the question of who would control Jerusalem, an extremely contentious issue that he sought to avoid at all costs. Kissinger's belief in a hierarchy of power helped him establish priorities, but it also meant that he paid too lit-

Kissinger was determined to avoid overreaching in the Middle East.

tle attention to the way less powerful states and even nonstate actors could disrupt his hard-won order if the system he helped coax into place could not provide them with at least a modicum of justice.

WARNING SIGNS AHEAD

Kissinger's missteps and achievements can provide valuable lessons for Biden as he deals with the Middle East in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. As Biden shifts his attention to more pressing priorities elsewhere, the goal of his Middle East diplomacy should be to shape an American-supported regional order in which the United States is no longer the dominant player, even as it remains the most influential. At its core, that order will need a balance of power maintained through U.S. support for its regional allies, namely Israel and the Sunni Arab states.

But Biden will also need to work with actors willing to play constructive roles in stabilizing the Middle Eastern order. That will make for some strange and uncomfortable bedfellows, as it will involve cooperating with Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Gaza, with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Syria, with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Gulf, and with all of them to contain Iran's hegemonic ambitions and advancing nuclear program.

Few of these allies and partners will comport themselves according to U.S. values. Nevertheless, as Kissinger's experience in the Middle East demonstrates, the United States will need to promote a sufficient sense of justice and fairness to legitimize the emerging order. Across the region, people are crying out for accountable governments. The United States cannot hope to meet those demands. That would be to overreach again. But it cannot ignore them, either.

Similarly, promoting a peace process that ameliorates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be important in addressing the region's grievances. That is far down on Biden's list of priorities. In 2014, as vice president, he witnessed firsthand the unwillingness of Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike to take reasonable risks for peace, and he does not imagine that he will find immortality by trying to force them to do so. He accepts Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's argument that Israel's left-right coalition government could not survive a peace process requiring the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Like Kissinger in 1973, Biden assumes that the status quo is stable.

And like Kissinger in 1974, he sees the Palestinian problem as Israel's to deal with and will tend to brush aside any pressure to try to resolve it.

But the warning signs are there. The Palestinian Authority is near collapse: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has lost all credibility among the Palestinian people, whereas Hamas—with its doctrine of violent resistance—is gaining popularity. The Taliban victory in Afghanistan will boost Hamas's argument that its strategy is the only way to liberate Palestinian territory. Moreover, Palestinian deaths from confrontations with the Israeli army are rising at an alarming rate, and for the first time, the Israeli government is permitting Jewish prayer on what is known as the Temple Mount to Jews and Haram al-Sharif to Muslims—a highly inflammatory move. The tinder is so dry that even a simple jailbreak by six Palestinian prisoners in September risked sparking another uprising.

For years, American policymakers have warned that the Israeli-Palestinian status quo is unsustainable—and yet it seems to sustain itself. Experts cautioned against moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, but when Trump did it, nothing happened. It feels just like the 1970s, when, for years, Sadat threatened war, and nothing happened—until one day it did. To minimize the potential for an explosion of violence, Biden will need to encourage an incremental Israeli-Palestinian peace process to rebuild trust and promote practical coexistence, just as Kissinger did in his efforts to remove Egypt from the conflict with Israel. Bennett has proposed economic changes, such as permitting more Palestinians to work in Israel, as an initial step. Moves such as that alone, however, will be insufficient to give credibility to a process that has been so denigrated by past failures. The effort requires a political process, too, albeit a modest and realistic one that could include a long-term cease-fire in Gaza and the transfer of some more territory in stages to full Palestinian control in the West Bank.

In the aftermath of the pullout from Afghanistan, Biden is unlikely to overreach in the Middle East. But as Kissinger could tell him, it would also be a mistake for him to turn his back on it. 🌐

The International Order Isn't Ready for the Climate Crisis

The Case for a New Planetary Politics

Stewart M. Patrick

The planet is in the throes of an environmental emergency. Humanity's continued addiction to fossil fuels and its voracious appetite for natural resources have led to runaway climate change, degraded vital ecosystems, and ushered in the slow death of the world's oceans. Earth's biosphere is breaking down. Our depredation of the planet has jeopardized our own survival.

Given these risks, it is shocking that the multilateral system has failed to respond more forcefully and has instead merely tinkered at the margins. Although the United States and the European Union have adopted measures to slow the pace of global warming—by setting more aggressive greenhouse gas reduction targets, for example—nothing guarantees that they will adhere to those pledges, and such steps do little to encourage decarbonization in China, India, and other major emitters. These efforts also fail to address other facets of the looming catastrophe, not least collapsing biodiversity.

The natural world obeys no sovereign boundaries, and neither does the worsening ecological crisis. It is time to take bold steps to overcome the disconnect between an international system divided into 195 independent countries, each operating according to its own imperatives, and a global calamity that cannot be resolved in a piecemeal fashion. It is time to govern the world as if the earth mattered. What the world needs is a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy and international relations—a shift that is rooted in ecological realism and that

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moves cooperation on shared environmental threats to center stage. Call this new worldview “planetary politics.” All governments, starting with Washington, must designate the survival of the biosphere as a core national interest and a central objective of national and international security—and organize and invest accordingly.

A shift to planetary politics will require a new, shared understanding of the duties of sovereign states, serious commitments to sustainable development and investment, and innovative international institutions. World leaders will need to adopt a new ethic of environmental stewardship and expand their conceptions of sovereign obligations to include a responsibility to protect the global commons. Governments, businesses, and communities will need to value and account for the earth’s natural capital rather than taking it for granted and exploiting it to depletion. Finally, national governments will need to overhaul and strengthen the institutional and legal foundations for international environmental cooperation. The United States is in a position to lead this charge—indeed, any such effort will fall short unless Washington is in the vanguard.

IN OUR BEST INTEREST

The devastating environmental impact of human activity is hardly a secret. A parade of recent reports from groups such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the World Wide Fund for Nature document the scope of our assault on the planet and portend a future of searing heat, raging wildfires, acidifying oceans, violent storms, rising seas, and mass migration. Meanwhile, human activity has imperiled biodiversity as people despoil lands and waters, introduce invasive species, and harvest natural resources unsustainably. The figures are sobering: since 1970, wild vertebrate populations have declined by over 60 percent, and insect populations have declined by 45 percent. And the damage is not confined to fauna alone. Extractive industries, such as agriculture, ranching, logging, and mining, have scarred the surface of the planet, in some places irreparably. Every year, the world loses an area of tropical forest the size of Costa Rica. Today, some one million plant and animal species face near-term extinction.

Our own species is suffering, too. Hundreds of millions of people around the world face mounting food insecurity and a lack of reliable water supplies. And as humans and domesticated animals increasingly encroach on and disrupt biodiverse ecosystems and encounter once iso-

lated species, we are exposed to dangerous new viruses: in recent decades, scientists have documented more than 200 zoonotic pathogens that have leaped from wild animals to people, including the Ebola virus, the virus that causes SARS, and likely the virus that causes COVID-19.

Things are poised to get worse. Despite a declining fertility rate, the human population will not plateau until at least 2060, and the rise of aspiring middle classes around the world will add to the ecological strains. As we plunder the planet, we risk rendering it uninhabitable—a crisis that cries out for global solidarity and collective action. Yet most countries continue to treat ecological challenges as second-tier foreign policy priorities distinct from presumably weightier matters, such as geopolitical competition, arms control, and international trade. The results are predictable: what passes for global environmental governance is a patchwork of weak, sector-specific agreements overseen by underpowered bodies that are unable to enforce compliance. The fate of the planet largely depends on a hodgepodge of uncoordinated national pledges driven by short-term domestic political and economic considerations.

The global environmental crisis requires a new statecraft built around the proposition that every other state concern—from national security to economic growth—depends on a healthy, stable biosphere. This revitalized framework would not jettison the core concept of national interest but broaden it to include environmental security and conservation. Foreign policy traditionalists may recoil at such a reframing, worried about distracting diplomats and defense officials from the threats that have directly affected the survival of states throughout most of history. But the ecological crisis has changed the nature of those threats.

U.S. President Joe Biden seems to grasp this truth. In a historic executive order issued one week after his inauguration, Biden declared climate change to be a top-tier threat to the United States and directed U.S. federal agencies to lead an unprecedented, whole-of-government response to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to global warming. Three months later, Avril Haines, the U.S. director of national intelligence, told world leaders assembled at a virtual climate conference that climate change “must be at the center of a country’s national security and foreign policy.”

Rhetoric is easy, of course. The Biden administration must now inculcate this new approach across the entire executive branch and work with Congress to revise a gargantuan U.S. national security



We did start the fire: fighting the Caldor blaze, Grizzly Flats, California, August 2021

budget that is still overwhelmingly oriented toward countering traditional geopolitical and military threats. It must simultaneously collaborate with foreign partners on a multilateral response to slow and reverse environmental collapse.

WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS

If the United States is serious about spearheading the global response to the planet's ecological emergency, it should start by working with other countries to remold traditional concepts of sovereignty. Washington can begin this process by explicitly endorsing the idea that countries have a responsibility to protect the earth, obliging them to refrain from any activity that might fundamentally alter or damage environmental systems.

No such consensus exists today, as demonstrated by the row that erupted between Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, as tens of thousands of fires engulfed the Amazon rainforest. Macron accused Bolsonaro of "ecocide": by allowing the world's largest forest to be exploited by rapacious loggers, ranchers, farmers, and miners, Macron argued, Bolsonaro was committing a crime against the planet. The enraged

Brazilian leader blasted his French counterpart and charged him with treating Brazil as if it were “a colony or a no man’s land.”

Two rival conceptions of sovereignty underpinned this clash. According to Bolsonaro, Brazil has an absolute right to develop the Amazon as it sees fit. “Our sovereignty is nonnegotiable,” his spokesperson declared. Macron retorted that all of humanity has a stake in the rainforest’s survival. The world is a stakeholder, not a bystander, and cannot remain silent as Brazil despoils this indispensable carbon sink, irreplaceable oxygen source, and precious repository of plant and animal life. The core debate, as Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has pointed out, is whether Brazil should be considered the rainforest’s “owner” or merely its “custodian.” More leaders and societies must come to accept Macron’s view and reject that of Bolsonaro. Territorial sovereignty should not constitute a blank check to plunder collective resources.

WHAT IS THE EARTH WORTH?

Such a shift in thinking is entirely conceivable. Understandings of sovereignty have never been fixed or absolute: they are continually being contested, negotiated, and adapted, and the belief that sovereignty entails obligations as well as privileges is now widely accepted. As all the member states of the United Nations agreed at the World Summit in 2005, for instance, governments have a responsibility to protect their inhabitants from mass atrocities. If they fail to do so, they may forfeit the right to avoid foreign intervention.

The twin crises of climate change and collapsing biodiversity warrant a similar adjustment. Under an existing international principle known as “the no-harm rule,” sovereign states already have a general obligation not to damage the environment in areas beyond their jurisdiction. But this law has proved difficult to enforce: there is little consensus on what exactly constitutes transnational environmental damage, what state obligations should look like, or when they should kick in. These questions are becoming trickier as potential sources of damage become more complex. As the planet’s ecological emergency deepens, countries must expand the definition of the global commons—shared resources managed as part of humanity’s common heritage—to include all critical ecosystems and natural cycles. They must agree to forswear all activities that threaten the integrity of the biosphere, open themselves up to external scrutiny,

allow others to monitor and verify their compliance, and face sanctions and other penalties should they violate this commitment.

Protecting this expanded commons will require putting a price on nature. For too long, humans have readily invested in produced capital (buildings, roads, machines, software) and human capital (education, health care) while running down the natural capital that sustains life and provides the foundation for all prosperity. We have taken the natural world for granted and assumed that technological innovation and market incentives would free us from the resource constraints of a finite planet. Such attitudes are no longer tenable. According to the UN Environment Program, the planet's total stock of natural capital has declined by 40 percent on a per capita basis since 1992. Reversing this trend will require reworking the current understanding of wealth to include the value of the world's natural assets and the myriad benefits they provide. In January 2020, the World Economic Forum estimated that over half of global output—\$44 trillion per year—is highly or moderately dependent on benefits from nature that are increasingly in jeopardy. Another study, published in 2014, has placed the total annual value of the planet's ecosystem services—water filtration, nutrient cycling, pollination, carbon sequestration, and so on—at between \$125 trillion and \$145 trillion.

Most environmentalists, however, resist placing a monetary value on nature, citing its intrinsic worth. But failing to do so encourages firms and individuals to take ecosystem services for granted and to exploit them to exhaustion. The result is market failure in the form of environmental costs borne not by the participants in any specific exchange but by society as a whole (what economists call “negative externalities”).

A related problem is the fact that GDP, the conventional measure of wealth and progress, does not account for natural capital, making it a poor indicator of well-being and long-term productive capacity. The international community must work to develop metrics that can account for environmental assets. Approximately 89 countries, including all the members of the EU, have released natural capital accounts to keep track of such assets and to promote transparency regarding their use. The United States should do the same.

The natural world obeys no sovereign boundaries, and neither does the worsening ecological crisis.

Governments must also adopt regulations and create incentives for firms to assume the ecological costs of their market behavior, rather than passing them along to society. The economist Partha Dasgupta has estimated that the annual global cost of all environmentally damaging subsidies (including for agriculture, fisheries, fuel, and water) is somewhere between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion. By contrast, governments devote only \$68 billion annually to global conservation and sustainability—about what their citizens spend every year on ice cream. National authorities can also use taxes and fees to ensure that the prices of goods and services accurately capture the social value of the natural assets involved in their production, and they can employ sector-specific market mechanisms to encourage environmental conservation. For example, measures such as catch share schemes, whereby communities have a secure right to harvest a capped number of fish in a specific area, can effectively combat overfishing.

A robust framework for natural capital accounting could also help justify compensating developing countries that are rich in biodiversity, such as Bolivia and Indonesia, to protect or restore local ecosystems and their services. There are small-scale precedents for this kind of investment—when authorities pay landowners to preserve watersheds or give tax breaks to farmers who plant carbon-sequestering cover crops. But more significant international efforts are underway: the Biden administration, for instance, is working to negotiate a multibillion-dollar deal with Brazil to preserve a portion of the Amazon rainforest.

The global financial system must also play a bigger role in environmental stewardship. Some national financial regulators, including the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, are moving toward mandating corporate disclosures of exposure to climate risks so that investors are aware of the vulnerability of firms to the environmental shocks of a warming planet. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank now encourage partner governments to inventory their natural capital assets and adopt policies and laws to protect them. A sea change is also underway in the private sector: BlackRock, Goldman Sachs, and other major players have pledged to integrate sustainability into their investment decisions. The practical challenge, of course, is to distinguish between credible corporate responses and greenwashing campaigns, which are merely intended to burnish a company's public image. Environmental advocacy organizations, such as Greenpeace

and the Natural Resources Defense Council, can help hold companies accountable by exposing hollow commitments and raising the specter of consumer boycotts and other forms of civic activism to persuade them that harming nature is a threat to their bottom lines.

THE PATH FORWARD

Planetary politics cannot succeed without multilateral institutions and global governance that can foster the unprecedented international cooperation demanded by the intertwined climate and biodiversity crises. The most pressing near-term priority is to close the yawning gap between the desultory negotiating process hosted by the UN and the stark reality outlined by the organization's own Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which envisions catastrophic warming unless the world takes immediate, dramatic steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is no conceivable way for the world to meet the emission targets established by the UN's 2015 Paris climate accord, however, without massive investments in terrestrial and marine ecosystems capable of serving as carbon storehouses. Accordingly, governments should make expanding such carbon sinks a centerpiece of their contributions to the Paris goals.

Trade is another area in which global governance must adapt. One path forward would be to reform global trade rules to allow countries committed to decarbonization to discriminate against countries that insist on conducting business as usual, without running afoul of the World Trade Organization. The most effective solution would be for WTO members to adopt a blanket climate waiver that permits so-called border adjustments for carbon in the form of taxes on imports and rebates on exports. This would permit EU countries, for instance, to penalize imports of carbon-intensive cement from Russia and Turkey and reward other trading partners that use greener production methods. Such an arrangement would encourage the formation of "climate clubs," made up of countries committed to reducing emissions and thus eligible for nondiscriminatory treatment.

Development models will also need to shift. Poor countries need the backing of international partners to come up with policies and incentive structures that will encourage private actors and communities to conserve nature. Extractive industries, such as timber and mining, often damage the ecosystems of developing nations that rely on the export of primary goods and have weak environmental regulations.

The global ecological emergency is the greatest collective-action challenge we have ever faced.

The harm is usually suffered by the local inhabitants rather than by the companies or consumers. The World Bank and other donors can provide technical assistance to give governments in developing countries an accurate picture of the full costs of such environmental degradation so that they can begin to hold corporate perpetrators to account and force them to shoulder the burden of these costs. Finally, the United States and other rich countries can encourage nature-friendly development by devoting a greater share of bilateral and multilateral aid to global conservation efforts and, more generally, conditioning their assistance on sustainable environmental policies—much as the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation makes access to its financial resources contingent on good governance.

Simultaneously, countries should strengthen the international legal framework for biodiversity conservation, particularly the Convention on Biological Diversity. Although that treaty has failed to slow the loss of ecosystems and species, some hope is on the horizon. In late 2020, Costa Rica and France established an intergovernmental group known as the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, which seeks to permanently protect 30 percent of the planet's terrestrial and marine surface by 2030. Scores of governments have since committed to the so-called 30x30 target, which is slated for approval at the CBD's conference in the spring of 2022. The Biden administration has already embraced 30x30 as a domestic goal; there is no reason why it should not join the global campaign. It should also end the United States' outlier status as the only country in the world that has refused to ratify the CBD by submitting it to the U.S. Senate for its advice and consent.

The Biden administration should also work to engineer the successful conclusion of a UN high seas biodiversity convention, which is currently in the final stages of negotiation. The agreement would establish a framework to conserve and sustainably manage the living marine resources and ecosystems lying beyond national jurisdictions—a vast global commons that accounts for 43 percent of the planet's surface. The high seas are a remarkable source of biodiversity and protect humanity from the worst effects of climate change by absorbing enormous amounts of heat and carbon dioxide. But their health is declining

dramatically, as new technologies permit their unprecedented exploitation and a patchwork of regulations fail to protect them. The prolonged negotiations and lingering disputes over the details of this convention highlight the challenges of international collaboration. But Washington is well placed to broker agreements on new rules to govern marine protected areas, environmental impact assessments, and the sharing of benefits from marine genetic resources.

Finally, the United States should throw its support behind the Global Pact for the Environment, which has been the subject of UN discussions since 2018 and would help bring coherence to the fragmented legal order of environmental protections. In contrast to the global trading system, which grants the WTO pride of place as a rule setter and adjudicator, there is no overarching international legal framework or organization governing global environmental matters. Instead, hundreds of overlapping and conflicting multilateral treaties promote cooperation on specific issues, such as endangered species and hazardous waste, as if environmental concerns could be effectively tackled one at a time. The Global Pact would codify a sovereign obligation to ensure that state and private actions do not harm other countries or the global commons and establish a fundamental human right to a clean and healthy environment. The pact would elevate prevention and provide a measure of restorative justice by endorsing the principle that polluters should pay for environmental degradation. To hold governments accountable, the convention would include provisions for periodic reporting, establish rules for liability, and provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of transboundary environmental disputes.

Despite overwhelming international support, multilateral negotiations on the pact collapsed in the spring of 2019, thanks in part to opposition from the Trump administration. The Biden administration should explicitly disavow its predecessor's position and join ongoing efforts within the UN Environment Assembly to negotiate a nonbinding political declaration on the global environment as a prelude to an eventual global pact. The example of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which inspired a dozen-odd treaties, shows that even informal declarations can lay important groundwork for more formal international conventions.

One should have no illusions, of course, about the enormous legislative obstacles standing in the way of U.S. ratification of the CBD, a high seas convention, or the Global Pact. The United States has often opted

out of treaties—even those it spearheaded and drafted—and today’s intense partisan ideological divisions may encourage this tendency. Nevertheless, the experience of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the United States championed and now mostly treats as customary international law (despite never having ratified it), suggests that the Biden administration should seize this moment to help shape the evolving legal framework of international environmental cooperation.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The global ecological emergency is the greatest collective-action challenge we have ever faced. Bringing humanity back into balance with the biosphere will require a fundamental shift in how the politics and purposes of foreign policy are conceived. It will require reimagining our place on the earth.

Consider the atlases we use to depict our planet. They usually open with two distinct maps. The first map, a geophysical one, captures the world in its natural state, revealing a startling array of biomes and ecosystems—rainforests and savannas, steppes and taigas, mountains and glaciers, river valleys and deserts, icecaps and tundras, remote atolls and barrier reefs, continental shelves and deep-sea trenches—shading into and overlapping with one another. The second map, a geopolitical one, depicts the earth’s terrestrial surface carved into independent territorial units indicated by precise lines, each colored distinctly from its neighbors.

The first map is an accurate representation of the planet. The second map, with its artificially imposed borders, is akin to a work of fiction—and yet people tend to treat it as more important. The crisis of the biosphere has forced a collision of those two maps, exposing the tension between an integrated natural world and a divided global polity and demanding that we reconcile the two.

National sovereignty is not going anywhere, but a new international approach could help close the distance between the political and the natural world. If a crisis of this magnitude cannot reshape how countries formulate their national interests, definitions of international security, or approaches to the global economy, perhaps nothing will. But this predicament does not call for resignation. It cries out, instead, for a commitment to our role as stewards of the only planet we have. It cries out for planetary politics. 🌍

REVIEWS & RESPONSES

The small-government, low-tax economy that Milton Friedman and others imagined and brought into being is finally slipping from power.
— Felicia Wong



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Market Prophets

The Path to a New Economics

Felicia Wong

Samuelson Friedman: The Battle Over the Free Market

BY NICHOLAS WAPSHOTT. Norton, 2021, 384 pp.

After taking office in the depths of the Great Depression, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt quickly upended the relationship between the government and the economy. With the New Deal, Washington took the unprecedented step of creating new industries and millions of jobs. This spending rescued countless Americans from poverty and ultimately fueled the remarkable postwar economic boom. By the 1980s, however, a new bipartisan consensus had taken hold, one that saw small government and low taxes as the key to economic prosperity. In 1941, Roosevelt declared that every American deserved “freedom from want” and that it was the government’s responsibility to lead the way. But by 1996, President Bill Clinton was promising that “the era of big government is over.” What changed?

Nicholas Wapshott’s new book, *Samuelson Friedman*, tells that story—the victory of 1980s free-market libertarianism over the midcentury welfare state—as a battle between two economic titans, Paul Samuelson and

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Milton Friedman. Samuelson was a Keynesian, best known for his work on the so-called neoclassical synthesis, which advocated a measure of government intervention in the economy. Friedman, by contrast, was a one-time New Dealer who by the 1950s had become perhaps the most pugilistic and passionate libertarian of his day.

Amid a global pandemic, there is much to learn from the Samuelson-Friedman saga. Today, as in the 1960s and 1970s, the assumptions of a previous era are falling away. The small-government, low-tax economy that Friedman and others imagined and brought into being is finally slipping from power. Not only is the American public questioning old beliefs—that markets are best when they are free and governments are best when they are small—but experts from across the political spectrum are also increasingly admitting that these assumptions have proved false. COVID-19 has put into sharp relief something the economic data have long suggested: a laissez-faire system produces rising inequality rather than shared prosperity. With these deeply held convictions under assault, leaders have a crucial opportunity to design a more equitable economy.

GREAT MEN

Wapshott begins his book in the mid-1960s, with the story of the *Newsweek* editor Osborn Elliott’s quest for new columnists who could outshine the magazine’s stodgy rival, Henry Luce’s *Time*. Perhaps great economists commenting on the news of the day would appeal to his younger audience.

Elliott felt lucky to secure Samuelson, the greatest theoretical economist

of his time. He was also the author of what has become the best-selling economics textbook of all time, first published in 1948 and titled simply *Economics*. Samuelson, who had been made a full professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the age of 32, needed neither the headache nor the income that writing a magazine column could bring, but he was seduced by the idea of reaching *Newsweek's* 14 million weekly readers. Elliott also tried to sign up Friedman, a conservative libertarian at the University of Chicago who was an outsider to the Keynesianism that dominated midcentury economic thinking in the United States. Friedman initially refused Elliott, saying he was too busy. But Friedman's wife, Rose, pressed the case. "The task of explaining the relationship between political freedom, for example, and a free-market economy . . . has not been performed very well," she wrote in a 1976 article for *The Oriental Economist*. (Wapshott's storytelling could have used more from Rose Friedman. A distinguished economist in her own right and a co-author of much of Milton Friedman's work, she was responsible for turning a collection of speeches into her husband's most influential popular text, *Capitalism and Freedom*.)

Samuelson and Friedman joined *Newsweek* in 1966 and wrote for the magazine until the early 1980s. Throughout their tenure, both thinkers covered the central economic debates of the time, including the appropriate level of taxation and the role of the Federal Reserve. As Wapshott documents, however, the two fundamentally disagreed over central elements of economic theory—specifically, whether

a market system could regulate itself without external intervention. Friedman believed that his unfettered version of capitalism, free from nearly all forms of government interference, was synonymous with both economic and political freedom. Samuelson, by contrast, maintained until the end of his life that "there can be no solution without government."

Samuelson Friedman subscribes to the great man theory (gender intentional) of intellectual history. In Wapshott's narrative, the two economists represent almost the entirety of the debate between Keynesianism, a shorthand for active government management of the economy through fiscal policy, and libertarian-inflected monetarism, by which central banks and the money supply take center stage. The intellectual networks to which Samuelson and Friedman belonged get short shrift. This is a fundamental omission. Friedman, for instance, was a founder, along with Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, and others, of the Mont Pelerin Society—an influential group that originally developed and propagated the idea of neoliberalism. Such networks provide vital intellectual, social, and political support to their members, helping their ideas gain acceptance and legitimacy. Wapshott pays a little more attention to the power of select academic institutions—such as MIT, the University of Chicago, and the University of Virginia—that educated generations of students, both Keynesians and neoliberals. But these institutions still take a back seat to Samuelson and Friedman themselves.

The larger problem is that Wapshott fails to give readers a sense of the times.

The 1960s and 1970s were turbulent: the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and the civil rights movement upended the United States' old social, racial, and economic orders. Although these changes were often liberating, the accompanying chaos led many middle-class white Americans, including suburban housewives in the Sunbelt and business leaders in the South, to reject Samuelson's vision of federal government intervention in favor of Friedman's simple and well-ordered system of free enterprise.

Much of the anxiety stemming from the changes crystallized in 1964, when the Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater ran on an anticommunist, economically conservative platform, opposing both the welfare state and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Goldwater cast federal civil rights laws as yet another instance of unjust state interference in private affairs and, in so doing, directly linked Friedman's small-government ideas to white southern opposition to desegregation. By the end of the 1960s, the civil rights movement itself had also begun to explicitly link race and economics, but in the opposite direction. Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed in 1967 that "the problems of racial injustice and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power." The economic fight had become an explicitly racial one.

The 1960s and 1970s thus pitted Samuelson's New Deal-era vision of government against Friedman's business-, profit-, and shareholder-focused worldview during an era of intense social upheaval. For many white Americans, Friedman's supposedly politics-free

version of economics proved to be the most compelling. According to that version, the right political, moral, and economic answer was wherever supply met demand. The theory's monetarism—the policy of using the money supply to influence the whole economy instead of relying on complicated legislative decisions around taxing and spending—was similarly elegant and apolitical. Friedman's economic and political arguments were one and the same. Freedom meant limited government. This was the triumph of neoliberalism.

STAGFLATION NATION

The duel between Samuelson and Friedman was perhaps most pointed and pivotal when it came to questions about inflation: what caused it and how governments could tame it. The inflation of the 1970s remains a cautionary tale that still animates American politics. The conventional wisdom holds that the inability of Keynesianism to explain so-called stagflation, a period of paradoxically low growth and high inflation, was the major reason for Samuelson's fall and Friedman's rise. Stagflation presented a puzzle to which Keynesians had no answer. Inflation, which averaged about seven percent annually throughout the decade, was not supposed to be possible if unemployment was high and growth sluggish. Friedman's characteristically simple answer to the problem was for the Federal Reserve to arrange "a 3 to 5 percent increase in the stock of money." Otherwise, too much money would chase after too few goods, causing prices to rise even more.

Wapshott's narrative is strongest here, revealing just how complicated

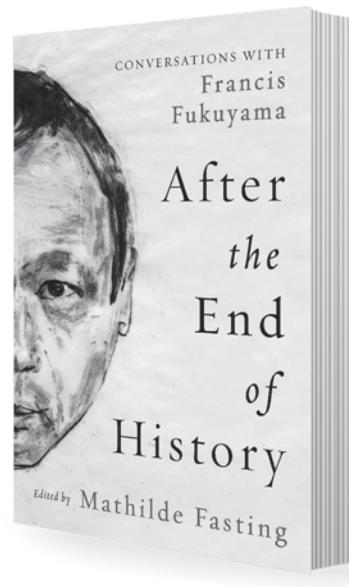
and long running the inflation debates of the 1970s were. Over many years, Samuelson and Friedman argued about whether stagflation was caused by persistently high wages propped up by union contracts, the costs of the ongoing Vietnam War, or shocks to the global supply of oil. Even today, the causes of the inflation of the 1970s remain the subject of fierce debate.

The solution that Samuelson eventually proposed was to raise taxes and maintain high levels of public spending—remarkable for contemporary economists accustomed to thinking of increased interest rates as the only inflation cure. Friedman, for his part, continued to advocate a combination of lower public spending and careful control over the money supply. By the early 1980s, Samuelson’s argument for greater spending had lost. Sharply higher interest rates and a focus on inflation rather than employment became the order of the day. Ronald Reagan won the presidency, having built his political career on a Friedman-inspired promise to cut taxes and a false, racially coded campaign against so-called welfare queens—a stereotype of Black single mothers raking in government checks. Once in office, he cut taxes on the wealthy (while raising them for working people) and fought against trade unions—famously firing striking air traffic controllers. The postwar Keynesian welfare state was dead, at least in the United States. Although the economy was in deep recession, the paradigm had shifted.

For Friedman, however, even this outcome was no victory. Wapshott’s description of Friedman’s anguish as Paul Volcker, then chair of the Federal Reserve, implemented sharp interest



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After the End of History

Conversations with
Francis Fukuyama

Edited by Mathilde Fasting
With Francis Fukuyama

Intimate access to the mind of Francis Fukuyama and his reflections on world politics, his life and career, and the evolution of his thought

“An engaging intellectual journey in which Fukuyama reflects on the global crises and transformations that have unfolded in the three decades since his famous essay on ‘the end of history.’” —*Foreign Affairs*

“Students of geopolitics and world history will find Fukuyama’s thoughts both provocative and inspiring.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“...Fukuyama provides an interesting counterpoint to the current pessimism about the future of democracy.” —*MoneyWeek*

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rate hikes in the fall of 1979 contains some of the book's most powerful insights. Friedman, who called Volcker's 20 percent rate increase "monetarism lite," had long advocated steady and algorithmically determined changes in the money supply, with no discretion left to the Federal Reserve chair or other political actors. But simple theories, where simplicity itself is the virtue and the appeal, are rarely easy to implement. Even the highest of economic priests bitterly disagree, constrained by their own prior assumptions.

FRIEDMAN'S LAST DAYS

Americans can learn much from the 1970s. Although it is easy to reduce to a simple clash of economic titans the rupture that broke Keynesianism and brought Reaganomics to power, that change took more than a decade. The transformation was rooted not in individual personalities but in how economic theories filter through complex political realities.

Today's economic paradigm shift has also taken place over time, having begun long before the emergence of COVID-19, as Wapshott documents. Understanding the current upheaval means examining the policy failures that led to the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent recession. Americans' veneration of private capital faltered with the collapse of the financial giants Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers. Everyday people quickly came to believe that these institutions no longer had their best interests at heart. According to Gallup polling, public confidence in the banking system dropped from 53 percent in 2004 to 22 percent in 2009 and has never recovered.

Now, more than a decade after the crisis, something very new is emerging at the highest levels of government: Brian Deese, the director of the Biden administration's National Economic Council, has made it clear that the current government's COVID-19 economic recovery plan is "quite different" from previous ones. The American Rescue Plan, the stimulus package passed by Congress in March, prioritizes providing funds directly to unemployed Americans and struggling states and cities. Austerity, that watchword of decades past, is finished. President Joe Biden himself has argued for a new economic paradigm. "We can't go back to the old, failed thinking," he proclaimed in July.

This new paradigm is notably more complicated than Friedman's monetarism. Most mainstream economists, in fact, now reject the latter for its relentless focus on the amount of money in circulation. Instead, the emerging framework is about encouraging the federal government to play various roles meant to promote the health of the U.S. economy and society. Public institutions, its advocates argue, should make and enforce strict rules to prevent corporate monopolies, invest in green energy, and spend much more on such public goods as health care, child-care, and education. Government should also deliberately seek to close racial gaps in wages, wealth, housing, education, health, and other areas.

Parts of this new vision are already coming to life. The \$4 trillion allocated for the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan—both immediate responses to the pandemic—includes an unprecedented amount of government support for low-income and working-

class Americans, parents with young children, and small and medium-sized businesses. Although the relief is temporary, it kept the worst effects of the recent economic downturn at bay in ways that were unthinkable only a few years ago. Federal rescue funds have also driven wage increases, and—absent new COVID-19-related shutdowns—the current recovery is on pace to be five times as fast as the recovery from the Great Recession: two years, not ten.

But although the pandemic may be the final nail in Friedmanomics's coffin, a durable world of higher taxes and government management of the economy—one that Samuelson might have recognized and even embraced—has yet to fully emerge. Whether this new paradigm takes root the way Keynesianism did in the 1940s and Friedmanesque market fundamentalism did in the 1980s will depend on many factors. “The culture wars”—a go-to euphemism for the backlash against racial and gender equality—could pull the United States away from acting on truly inclusive policies. A small but powerful group of climate-denying politicians might continue to bury their heads in the sand about the immediate need to cut carbon emissions. The government's talent pipeline and institutional resilience might not be sufficient to implement the ambitious programs currently under consideration. The government itself might be unable to regain the trust of Americans who, for a host of reasons, may be suspicious and distrustful of federal action.

But if U.S. leaders persevere, this model will open up vast new social and political possibilities. International economic cooperation might aspire to solve genuine public problems, such as

international tax evasion or the lack of pandemic preparedness, rather than merely lower trade barriers for multinational corporations. More working-class Americans might finally have access to economic security rather than living paycheck to paycheck. Washington could incentivize a transition to a low-carbon economy in time to stave off the worst effects of climate change. And perhaps most important, the United States might become a country whose idea of freedom is not primarily based on market transactions but instead built on the promise of a more egalitarian and democratic future. 🌍

How Apartheid Endures

The Betrayal of South Africa

Sisonke Msimang

Prisoners of the Past: South African Democracy and the Legacy of Minority Rule

BY STEVEN FRIEDMAN. Wits University Press, 2021, 232 pp.

In July, two of South Africa's largest cities—Johannesburg and Durban—descended into civil unrest and mass looting. In the deadliest week of political turmoil since the end of apartheid in 1994, 337 people were killed, and millions of dollars' worth of infrastructure and property was destroyed.

For almost five days, I worried about my family as I watched television and social media footage of people breaking into shops and raiding them for food and other basic items. I live in Australia, but my relatives are split between the areas hardest hit by the unrest. Even in places that were unaffected by the violence, panic buying caused food shortages, and news of the looting set off class anxieties. When you live in a society as unequal as South Africa, the sense that the country might explode at any minute is always palpable.

In the midst of the chaos, a short video of a tiny boy, aged eight or nine, rail thin, and wearing faded clothes,

made the rounds on social media. He had been stopped by two women—both strangers expressing motherly concern—as he walked out of a shop that had just been looted. The women asked the boy what he had taken, and he held up a small plastic bag for their inspection. Inside were a few pairs of underwear, new shoes, and a few T-shirts. He had been heartbreakingly frugal, taking only what his conscience would allow. Visibly moved, the women sent him on his way, his little frame disappearing into the darkness.

The scene spoke volumes about the crisis gripping South Africa. Driven by the sudden availability of items that are unaffordable for most people, the turmoil reflected the stark inequality that has long divided the country, and it laid bare the economic precariousness that characterizes most people's lives. People took what they could as quickly as they could, sometimes trampling others in the process. But they did not act out spontaneously: a faction of the ruling African National Congress (ANC)—mainly supporters of the jailed former president Jacob Zuma—appears to have instigated the unrest in a bid to destabilize the government. The attempt at insurrection failed. Instead of a revolution, the week turned into a large-scale grab for goods. There were no marches or demands, no manifestoes, and no calls for the president to step down or the ruling party to vacate office.

It was easy to see these events as a metaphor for the rampant corruption that has come to define South African politics. The country's democracy is not on the brink of failure, as some Western commentators have opined. South Africa has regular free and fair elec-

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tions, a noisy public sphere, an independent judiciary (indeed, too independent in the eyes of some in the ruling party), and sophisticated media—all of which remain intact. Yet the ANC has failed to meaningfully improve the lives of most South Africans, even as many within its ranks have grown rich. And so decades after attaining political freedom, many South Africans have been left to wonder when—or if—they will ever get economic justice.

This paradox is the subject of Steven Friedman's new book, *Prisoners of the Past*, which asks why South Africa's multiracial, left-wing government, which has been elected again and again with an overwhelming majority and a strong mandate for change, has failed to transform the apartheid economy. A well-known South African columnist and academic, Friedman writes with the nuance and insight of an insider. His answer is that the post-apartheid order established in 1994 suffers from many of the same problems as the old order it sought to replace.

The political theorist Antonio Gramsci once wrote of Italy during the chaotic interwar period, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." The strength of *Prisoners of the Past* is its insistence that even though South Africa is exhibiting many morbid symptoms, the country's real problem is that the old is not dying. Friedman examines the resilience of apartheid South Africa, showing how the old order has repeatedly prevented the new one from delivering on its promises of racial justice.

THE OLD ORDER LIVES ON

Soon after the antiapartheid activist Nelson Mandela emerged from prison in 1990, people began to refer to his brand of charm as "Madiba magic," an affectionate nod to his clan name. As South Africa hurtled toward the end of apartheid, the phrase reflected a collective belief that Mandela could conjure the nation's freedom out of thin air.

National and global adulation helped shape the narrative of South Africa as a place where something otherworldly had happened: peace had settled on the land not because of compromises and negotiations but because of goodwill and Madiba magic. Today, as people debate how much or how little has changed, it is easy to forget the immense effort that ANC leaders made to present the transition to Black South Africans as a real break with the past while reassuring white South Africans that the changes would not affect their pocketbooks or their lifestyles.

To a large extent, the ANC has kept its promises to white South Africans even as it has broken many of its pledges to the country's Black people. By protecting the rights of white property holders, the transition to democracy ushered in what the legal scholar Mogobe Ramose has called the "constitutionalisation of injustice"—that is, a constitutional order that "reflects the conqueror's view that injustices which occurred a long time ago should not be rectified."

This was partly by necessity. South Africa could have easily descended into civil war, and it very nearly did in 1993, when Chris Hani, one of the ANC's most popular leaders, was assassinated in his driveway in view of his 15-year-old

daughter. But Mandela calmed the nation, urging restless Black youths not to retaliate against white people. After the tumult of the 1980s, when the apartheid government kidnapped and murdered activists and segregated Black communities exploded in violence, neither the ANC nor the white National Party, led by President F. W. de Klerk, had an appetite for continued bloodshed. The ANC was focused on the transition: on writing a constitution, extending the franchise to all citizens, and holding free and fair elections. And so the political settlement its leaders negotiated with de Klerk's government prioritized moving on—which at the time seemed like a prerequisite for peace.

But in Ramose's view, the decision to wipe the slate clean conflicted with the tenets of African philosophy and, in particular, with the notion of *molato ga o bole*, a Sotho proverb that holds that debts do not expire with the passage of time and can be resolved only through redress and restoration. Another leading South African academic, Joel Modiri, has described South Africa's post-apartheid constitution as "a form of reiterative violence in the sense that the fundamental injustice of the old order was preserved in the making of the new order."

Friedman rejects these views, which root the current crisis in legal strictures, arguing that the fault lies neither with the constitution nor with the negotiations that produced it. Instead, he contends that the old order has lived on because of "path dependence"—a phenomenon famously described by the economic historian Douglass North as "the powerful influence of the past on the present and future." Throughout his book, Friedman draws on North's ideas

to argue that economic policies in South Africa were "created to serve the interests of those with the bargaining power to create new rules"—who, since the end of apartheid, have been a new and tiny multiracial elite. In other words, Friedman shows that the country's economic institutions are primarily "the product of who holds power; they may survive even if they are inefficient, as long as they serve the interests of power holders."

ENDURING ECONOMIC ELITES

Friedman spends considerable time examining how elites have guided South Africa's economic trajectory. In the 1990s, he recounts, the white political elite maintained its grip on the economy even as it lost political power by accommodating a small number of new Black businesspeople. Predictably, these new Black economic elites were closely aligned with the ANC. And when the ANC passed new affirmative action laws mandating that all large financial transactions include partnerships with Black-owned firms, its leaders stood ready to benefit, being the only Black people with whom white elites had had previous professional interactions.

Among the biggest beneficiaries was Cyril Ramaphosa, who acted as the ANC's chief negotiator during the transition to democracy, led the team that drafted the new constitution, and now serves as South Africa's president. Ramaphosa worked closely with members of the old white guard in the early 1990s and was able to convert his political networks into lucrative financial relationships within a few years of entering the private sector in 1996. *Forbes* has estimated that by 2015, his net worth had soared to \$450 million.



Desperate times: fleeing tear gas at a protest in Johannesburg, South Africa, July 2021

Ramaphosa's path to riches has been well trodden by other members of the ANC, but it says as much about South Africa's past as it does about its present. As Friedman points out, although the current president cannot be compared with the rapacious European settlers who arrived in the Cape of Good Hope in the mid-seventeenth century, his stratospheric ascent was enabled by the same patronage and corruption that elevated the previous era's elites. Jan van Riebeeck, the founding father of South Africa's Afrikaner community, was sent to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 after being found guilty of abusing his position at the company to pursue private interests. More than two centuries later, the mining magnate Cecil Rhodes was forced to resign as prime minister of the Cape Colony over allegations that he gave a government catering contract to a friend.

By the 1980s, Friedman explains, the apartheid regime had effectively elevated corruption to state policy. It came as little surprise then that when the ANC took office, members of the white economic elite sought to cultivate personal bonds of criminality with the new political leaders. In mapping this lineage of elite corruption, Friedman charts the continuities between the old order and the new, illustrating the powerful ways in which path dependence has warped the country's economy.

At times, Friedman depicts path dependence as an inevitable and seemingly unwitting process, the outcome of the march of history rather than of deliberate contestation. Yet there was nothing accidental about the economic approach taken by the ANC. Beginning with Mandela's release in 1990, the

white-dominated business sector was vocal about its jitters. The ANC had many internal debates about how best to manage these fears, but political and market realities ultimately backed the party into a corner: had it threatened to redistribute land and seize bank accounts in order to pay reparations, the economy would have crashed, and the apartheid generals would never have agreed to stand down.

At other times, Friedman overstates the nefarious intentions of Black elites. For example, he claims that there was an “unspoken consensus” between Black and white elites “to leave things largely as they were, not because the new political elite feared a backlash if it sought to change them, but because it wanted to leave them intact.” Elites may have converged on a similar set of objectives over time, but the notion that the new Black leaders simply weren’t interested in changing the status quo is an oversimplification. In order to escape apartheid, Black South Africans had to promise not to seek full compensation and redress. White economic impunity was the price of Black political freedom.

“THE ANGRIST GROUP”

Once the ANC assumed power, many of its leaders believed that in due course, they would be able to work around the white elite. Their aim was to build a strong Black middle class that would drive economic growth. But partly because of the path dependence Friedman describes, this goal was never realized.

Instead, the middle class grew painfully slowly—and eventually, it stopped growing altogether. Estimates of the size of the Black middle class vary, but most studies put it at less than

a quarter of the Black population. And even this modest share may be in jeopardy: a 2020 report by the University of Cape Town’s Liberty Institute of Strategic Marketing showed that the number of middle-class South Africans fell by more than half between 2017 and 2020—from 6.1 million to 2.7 million.

As overall economic growth has stagnated and unemployment has remained stubbornly high in recent years, the new middle class has grown restless. Friedman calls the Black middle class “the angriest group in the society.” As he points out, “they enjoy qualifications and opportunities which their parents and grandparents were denied but they experience many of the same racial attitudes as previous generations endured.” As a result, their anger is often directed at racial injustice, even when they seem to be protesting other issues: whether the immediate concerns are about land, higher education, or anything else, racism is almost always the underlying concern of the Black middle class.

Poor South Africans, who constitute a much greater share of the population, seldom articulate their demands in purely racial terms. But middle-class narratives of racial injustice continue to dominate because of South Africa’s history. As Friedman explains, “Racial bias, even when it is subtle, is noticed quickly by those at whom it is aimed because Black political actors (and some whites sensitive to racism) are attuned to the many varieties of racial domination.” By the same token, however, “antennae which might detect threats to the poor may not work at all because their interests have always taken a back seat to the central problem, racial domination.” As a result, the vast

majority of South Africans often end up as “spectators to bitter ideological battles about them which never include them.”

Poor South Africans fare even worse in the country’s economic battles. Friedman shows how whereas the middle class and the elite have a stake in the economy, the lower classes—and especially the unemployed—are excluded from the formal economy altogether. Over the last few decades, the share of people living below the \$2-per-day poverty line has remained stubbornly high, and inequality has increased: South Africa is only slightly more racially integrated than it was before the end of apartheid, and it is even more economically unequal.

In the early 1900s, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the problem of the twentieth century would be the color line. He was right, of course: in South Africa, as in so many other parts of the world, race was the predominant justification for the oppression of Black people. More than a century later, South Africans have begun to understand that while the color line still matters, the poverty line has become more salient as the country has been dominated by a new multiracial group of economic insiders. As the Trinidadian writer C. L. R. James, whom Friedman aptly quotes near the end of his book, put it in 1938, “To neglect the racial factor as incidental is an error only slightly less grave than to make it fundamental.”

The way forward, in Friedman’s view, is to look backward: South Africans must once again sit across the table from one another to negotiate a new deal—not a political deal, as they negotiated in the 1990s, but an economic one, to ensure the country’s

riches are shared more evenly among its poorest citizens.

Under the present circumstances, there is reason for skepticism about how such an arrangement might be negotiated: the economic insiders have so much power, and the outsiders (most of them poor and Black) have so little. Still, cynicism has no place in South Africa’s future; its people simply cannot afford it. Friedman’s call for a new economic pact might feel distant, but for the excluded majority, it is a tantalizing possibility. 🌍

Liars in High Places

Who's to Blame for Misinformation?

Jameel Jaffer

Liars: Falsehoods and Free Speech in an Age of Deception

BY CASS SUNSTEIN. Oxford University Press, 2021, 192 pp.

Americans lie on their résumés, in their dating profiles, in campaign ads, in their memoirs, and, perhaps most of all, on social media. Thanks to the First Amendment, they can mostly do so with impunity—or, at any rate, without fearing that the government will punish them for it. In most contexts, the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting speech because of its message. It makes it difficult for public figures to win defamation suits. It precludes the government from criminalizing falsehoods that don't cause serious harm. As a result, Americans enjoy broad freedom to say things that aren't true.

From one perspective, this freedom is a wonderful thing, or at least a necessary byproduct of the United States' founda-

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tional commitment to popular government, individual autonomy, and free trade in ideas. But in an era in which misinformation is often described as a scourge, this freedom takes on a darker hue. What previously seemed like a feature of the country's constitutional system can begin to seem like a bug.

Is the First Amendment preventing the U.S. government from curtailing harmful lies online? More broadly, is a blind commitment to free speech impeding public and private institutions from responding as they should to the problem of misinformation? These are the questions that Cass Sunstein—a Harvard professor, a former regulatory czar in the Obama administration, and the most cited legal scholar in the country—takes up in *Liars*.

The book is both succinct and far-ranging. In a brisk nearly 200 pages, Sunstein looks at lies through the lenses of ethics, political theory, and constitutional doctrine. In attributing the current informational crisis to a proliferation of lies, however, the book largely overlooks the role that governments, the media, and technology companies are playing as agents and amplifiers of misinformation. Sunstein's account lets the most powerful actors off the hook.

REGULATING SPEECH

Sunstein argues that the United States should regulate lies more aggressively than it does, even as he acknowledges that in most contexts, it is better to allow false speech to be corrected in the marketplace of ideas. It is usually better to trust the marketplace, he says, because even a government operating in good faith will not always be able to separate truth from fiction and because some

governments will use the authority to police speech to suppress dissent instead. (The “fake news” laws being adopted around the world, including in Brazil, Hungary, and Russia, are a reminder that this threat is real.) There is also a risk that falsehoods that are suppressed—rather than confronted head-on—will fester and become more dangerous.

But these arguments are not always convincing, Sunstein says. Some falsehoods threaten serious harms that are not likely to be corrected organically in public discourse. With respect to these falsehoods, policymakers must consider regulatory responses. The U.S. Constitution is not always an obstacle to regulatory intervention, Sunstein observes. The First Amendment permits defamation suits, although it does place some limits on them. It allows the government to ban false advertising. It doesn’t preclude the government from prosecuting someone for committing perjury or impersonating a government officer. In all these spheres, the First Amendment allows the government to punish people who lie.

The First Amendment should be understood to permit the regulation of lies in other spheres, too, Sunstein says. For example, the government should be able to regulate misinformation that threatens public health. It should be able to regulate doctored videos, even if they aren’t defamatory. These kinds of lies, Sunstein writes, cause serious harms that cannot always be prevented or remedied by responsive speech. People may rely on false claims about public health before the claims can be exposed as false. A video may change the public’s perception of a public figure even if it is later shown to have

been doctored. The government should be able to respond to this kind of falsity—if not by prohibiting certain kinds of speech, then at least by labeling the lies as such or by requiring social media platforms to do so.

First Amendment doctrine, Sunstein argues, too narrowly limits the government’s ability to tackle harmful falsehoods. One of the cases he takes aim at is *New York Times v. Sullivan*, from 1964, in which the Supreme Court held that a public official who sues a critic for defamation must demonstrate that the critic knew his or her statement was false or acted with “reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.” Many reporters, editors, and media lawyers regard the decision in this case as synonymous with press freedom, but Sunstein is not so enthusiastic. In an age in which anyone can disseminate misinformation across the world with the click of a button, he says, the case “looks increasingly anachronistic.” It makes it too difficult to hold people accountable for lies that do real damage, he argues.

He also takes issue with the Supreme Court’s more recent decision in *United States v. Alvarez*. That case, from 2012, invalidated the 2005 Stolen Valor Act, a federal statute that criminalized lies about receiving military decorations or medals. (The defendant in the case was an inveterate liar who had falsely claimed to have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.) The Court’s decision was based in large part on the concern that imposing penalties for false speech might chill true speech, a concern Sunstein shares to an extent. But he thinks that the Court’s decision in *United States v. Alvarez* was wrong, “even preposterous.”



Misinformation nation: at a Trump rally in Avoca, Pennsylvania, November 2020

He questions whether any socially useful speech was really chilled by the Stolen Valor Act. In the name of defending the truth, he suggests, the Court merely ceded more ground to falsehoods.

AN AGE OF DECEPTION

Sunstein says Americans are living in “an age of deception,” an era in which lies have become ubiquitous. He is especially concerned about what he sees as the proliferation of defamatory lies about public officials, public institutions, and public figures. He mentions the “sustained attacks” on Hillary Clinton in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, unjustified attacks on the integrity of the media, and news stories that carried “false statements about Taylor Swift, Christian Bale, and Julia Roberts.” Lies about public officials and institutions undermine faith in

government. Lies about other public figures—musicians, actors, and athletes, for example—can ruin people’s lives. “Many people are now being subjected to ‘cancellation’ on the basis of lies,” Sunstein says, although he does not offer specific examples. His concern extends beyond defamatory statements. He argues that false statements falling short of libel are harming individuals and society. He does not supply evidence that lying is more common today than it used to be. Still, he writes, “the problem is serious and pervasive, and it seems to be mounting.”

Sunstein is especially concerned about all of this because social media allows liars to disseminate their lies more quickly and broadly. But he is principally worried about the liars, not the social media companies, and in fact he casts the companies more as heroes

than as villains. “To their credit, some of them are doing a great deal already” to combat misinformation, he says, and “their creativity offers a host of lessons for public officials.” (Sunstein discloses upfront that he has been a consultant to Facebook, including on some of the issues discussed in the book.) The companies, in his view, are doing “excellent work”—even if they should do more, such as fact-check political ads, strengthen their prohibitions against misinformation relating to public health, and suppress a broader range of doctored videos.

Sunstein has a similarly rosy view of the government’s relationship to lies. He does briefly mention that U.S. President Donald Trump pushed misinformation about the 2020 presidential election. But the lies of government officials are mostly beyond the scope of his inquiry. There’s no mention here, for example, of the false claims—all made by senior government officials at one point or another—that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction, that Muslims in New Jersey cheered the 9/11 attacks, that the CIA did not use torture, that drone strikes have not resulted in civilian casualties, or that wearing masks won’t help against COVID-19. Sunstein says he’s especially focused on falsehoods that undermine the democratic process, but it is difficult to understand why a tabloid’s lies about a celebrity imperil democracy, whereas the official lies that misled the country into war do not.

Social media companies, too, bear a great deal more responsibility for the age of deception than Sunstein acknowledges. Their ranking algorithms can privilege sensational or extreme

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speech and channel users into echo chambers where conspiracy theories flourish. Their decisions about which kinds of interactions to allow on their platforms can have similar effects. And their policies relating to ad targeting can determine how broadly misinformation spreads and whether the misinformation can be corrected by others. Social media companies—like governments—undoubtedly have important roles to play in addressing the problem of misinformation. But Sunstein is wrong to conceive of them only as firefighters and not also as arsonists.

LIAR, LIAR, DEMOCRACY ON FIRE

Still, Sunstein's policy proposals are worth considering. His prescriptions concerning content moderation are modest but reasonable. His analysis of the Supreme Court's case law relating to false speech usefully pulls apart the various factors that courts should weigh in deciding whether regulating misinformation in any given context would be consistent with the First Amendment. (The factors include the speaker's intent, the magnitude of the harm that could result from the false speech, and how soon that harm would occur.) He is plainly right that loosening current doctrinal standards would create space for regulation—including of false speech that does not rise to the level of defamation.

But he largely glosses over the ways in which new regulations could be abused. Even today, under a speech-protective doctrinal framework, state legislatures are fighting supposed misinformation by, for example, restricting public schools' ability to teach students about systemic racism. And despite the Supreme Court cases that

Sunstein criticizes, it is disturbingly easy for powerful people to use defamation lawsuits, or the threat of them, to suppress important stories. Devin Nunes, a Republican member of Congress from California, has filed a slew of lawsuits against journalists and ordinary citizens who have criticized, mocked, or reported on him, even suing the anonymous users behind two obviously satirical Twitter accounts, @DevinNunesMom and @DevinCow. And the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein was able to use the threat of defamation litigation to stave off, for years, the news reports that justifiably ended his career.

Sunstein isn't oblivious to these concerns. At one point, he suggests capping damage awards to mitigate the chilling effect of defamation suits. But his analysis focuses on the costs of the current doctrinal framework and mostly skips over the benefits. It leaves the impression that Sunstein has not fully accounted for the possibility—the certainty, some would say—that making it easier for public figures to sue critics for false speech would make it easier for them to suppress true speech, as well.

At its best, Sunstein's book offers a host of useful ideas about how First Amendment doctrine and content moderation policies might be adjusted to encourage governments and technology companies to address lies. But Sunstein gives the most powerful actors a free pass. A more convincing account of the age of deception, and a more compelling policy agenda, would place less emphasis on the mendaciousness of ordinary citizens and more on the governments that spread falsehoods—and on the media organizations and technology companies that amplify them. 🌐

The Imperial Presidency's Enablers

Why Executive Power Grows Unchecked

Stephen I. Vladeck

Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic: The Deep State and the Unitary Executive
BY STEPHEN SKOWRONEK, JOHN A. DEARBORN, AND DESMOND KING.
Oxford University Press, 2021, 304 pp.

In 1866, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in *Ex parte Milligan*, which barred the federal government from trying civilians in ad hoc military tribunals when civilian courts were available. Writing for the majority, Justice David Davis spent several pages explaining the dangers of an unchecked executive. The United States, he said, “has no right to expect that it will always have wise and humane rulers, sincerely attached to the principles of the Constitution.” Instead, “wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law, may fill the place once occupied by Washington and Lincoln.” That is why the United States has a written constitution, he concluded, and independent judges to

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enforce it—even, as in the case of *Milligan*, against President Abraham Lincoln himself.

Yet the executive branch has fared quite well in the courts in the years since Davis made his dire warning about unchecked presidential power—including during Donald Trump’s presidency. Of Trump’s various abuses of authority, few were exposed, confirmed, or punished by the courts, which did little to stymie his power grabs. True, the Trump administration lost some high-profile legal challenges to several of its more controversial policies, including its clumsy effort to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (also known as DACA) and its even clumsier effort to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 census. And Trump himself effectively lost a pair of major disputes over subpoenas from Congress and a Manhattan district attorney for his financial records. But any objective accounting of the power of the executive branch would have to concede that President Joe Biden had more constitutional authority on his first day in office than President Barack Obama had on his last.

In their powerful and succinct monograph *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic*, the political scientists Stephen Skowronek, John Dearborn, and Desmond King evaluate the long-standing tension between two competing theories of executive power—one that locates power in the person of the president and another that finds it in the administrative state—and argue that this tug of war has itself historically served as a check on presidential prerogatives. That vital tension, however, is disappearing quickly, and not

because of policies pursued or abuses committed by Trump, Obama, or any other modern president. It is disappearing because of the Supreme Court.

The central thesis of *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic* is that the modern federal government is characterized by two irreconcilable ideas: on the one hand, that presidents supervise governance and should therefore be able to control it as they see fit and, on the other hand, that an expertise-driven bureaucracy should have authority over functions that are generally considered to be nonpartisan, everything from tax collection to national security planning.

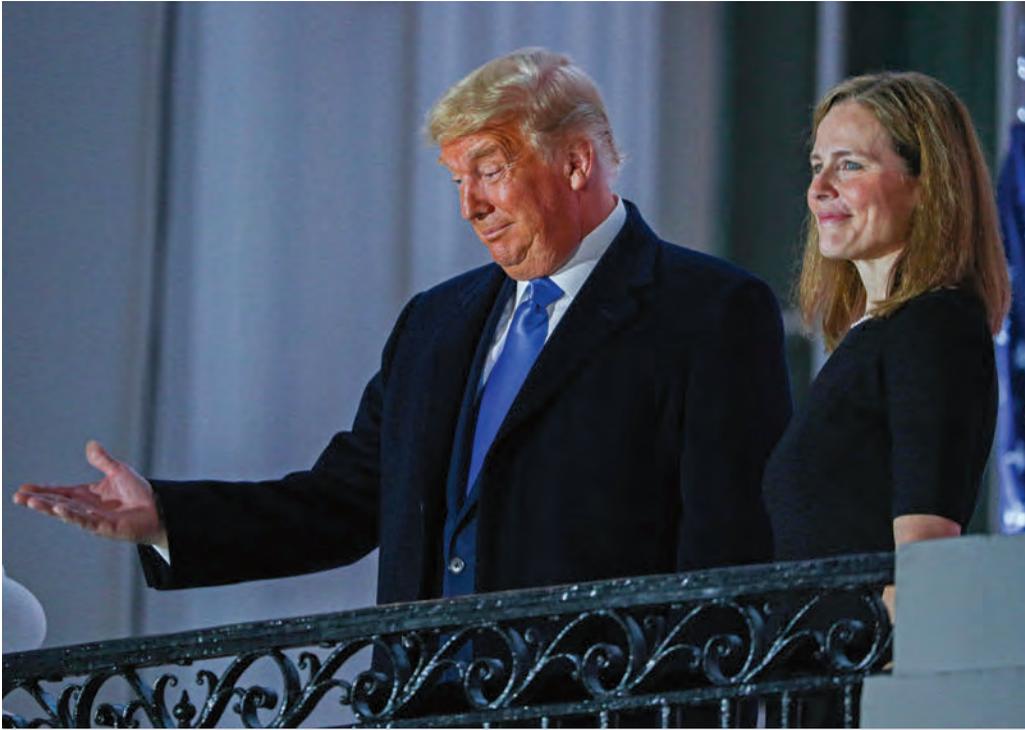
Some degree of tension between these two competing visions is inevitable. Absent a consensus on what is appropriately partisan, an all-powerful White House and an immovable federal bureaucracy will view each other with suspicion. The authors devote most of the first half of the book to documenting how and when that antagonism began to fully manifest. They pay close attention to the rise of personal presidential leadership during and after the Civil War and to the two great expansions in the size and function of the federal government: first around the time of the New Deal and then again in the 1960s and 1970s. “By any historical reckoning,” they explain, “the expansion of national administrative capacities has been a boon for America’s chief executive” and has “turned American government into a presidency-centered government.” After all, the new powers and responsibilities of the executive branch as a whole inserted the federal government into ordinary Americans’ lives to a greater degree than ever before, with state involvement in everything from meat inspection and

vehicle safety to environmental protection and government benefits. A bureaucracy was needed to administer these functions, and successive presidents, as the heads of this bureaucracy, were increasingly associated with these sprawling federal programs. But despite this symbiosis, the more powers and responsibilities the executive branch had, the more the chief executive and the administrative state vied for authority over those government functions.

These two concepts of the executive branch have been on a collision course for a long time. But what is new is not just a president more willing to push the envelope than any of his predecessors; it is also a Supreme Court dedicated to putting its thumb on the scale. Unlike during most of the twentieth century, when the Court simply helped maintain an equilibrium between the Oval Office and the administrative state, more recently, the Court has intervened in support of the office of the president, to the point that it can be blamed for enabling Trump’s war against his own bureaucracy.

HANGING IN THE BALANCE

Although much has already been written on the dovetailing of the growth of presidential power and the expansion of the federal government, one of the delights of *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic* is the facility with which the authors recount both relevant history and leading scholarship. The first part of the book is an engaging account of the evolution of the federal government in general, and in particular what the Supreme Court justice Elena Kagan has described as “presidential administration,” or a federal government that is regularly



Check and balance? Trump and Amy Coney Barrett in Washington, D.C., October 2020

and thoroughly supervised not only by individual agency heads but also by the White House. But the larger the federal bureaucracy grew and the more responsibilities it took on, the more complex and opaque its hierarchy turned, the more insulated from electoral accountability its officials became, and the more independence from the Oval Office it gained—in some cases simply by circumstance and in others because Congress expressly provided for such independence. What might be called, meant nonpejoratively, “the deep state” reflects the desire of a growing expert administrative apparatus—and, at various points, Congress—to shield more of the government’s decision-making authority from shifting partisan winds and from personal patronage and the incompetence that accompanies it.

While the federal bureaucracy was accreting independent administrative

authority, however, conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s were embracing a rival interpretation of the constitutional separation of powers known as the unitary executive theory. This theory found fertile ground up and down Pennsylvania Avenue, particularly as Republican presidents were in office for 20 of the 24 years between 1969 and 1993, and it had powerful advocates in two executive-branch lawyers appointed to the Supreme Court by Republican presidents during this time, William Rehnquist and Antonin Scalia. The Constitution says that “the executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States,” and the theory’s central idea is that, as Scalia once put it, “this does not mean *some* of the executive power, but *all* of the executive power.” In other words, executive power lies with the president and the president alone.

According to this line of thinking, any independence within the executive-branch bureaucracy is constitutionally forbidden, regardless of its value. Presidents, therefore, exercise unimpeded control over the administrative state and can dismiss whomever they please, whenever they please. This theory was trotted out to resist some of Congress's most aggressive post-Watergate reforms, many of which were intended to strengthen the bureaucracy at the expense of presidential power—particularly in the areas of war powers and foreign affairs, where the arguments for executive primacy are the strongest.

The relationship between these two concepts—the deep state and the unitary executive—animates all of *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic*. “Together the two propositions construct a politics all their own,” the authors write. “They draw each other out and tear at one another.” If anything, the authors undersell the point: the tension between these two propositions itself has significant value. James Madison was referring to the relationship between the three branches of government when he argued in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 51, that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition,” but the same holds within the branches of government. So long as neither force dominates the other, they maintain a healthy equilibrium whereby presidents exercise broad control over the bureaucracy of the executive branch but use relative restraint, lest they provoke pushback from within.

TIPPING THE SCALES

Scalia wrote those pithy words about executive power at the end of his second term on the Supreme Court, in

1988, in a solo dissent to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Morrison v. Olson*. That decision upheld the independent-counsel provisions of the 1978 Ethics in Government Act, which empowered the U.S. attorney general and a special division of the D.C. federal appeals court to appoint an independent counsel to investigate senior government officials, who, the reasoning went, the president's handpicked attorney general might be unwilling or unable to investigate himself. Crucially, the act protected the independent counsel from being fired except for “good cause.” In Scalia's view, this last part was the true offense, for if the president could not fire a lawyer vested with the power to enforce the laws of the United States, then he did not, in fact, have *the* executive power.

One of *Morrison's* most important holdings was that Congress could protect “inferior” executive-branch officers—in this case, the independent counsel—from being dismissed by the president without cause. “Principal” officers, including cabinet officials and ambassadors, have no such protection, or independence: these officers are appointed by the president and must be subject to removal at will. Thus, in the contest between the deep state and the unitary executive, *Morrison* tipped the scales in favor of the former.

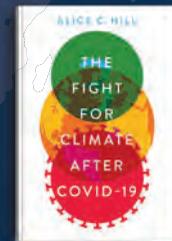
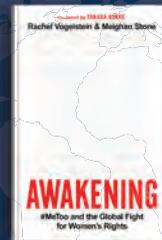
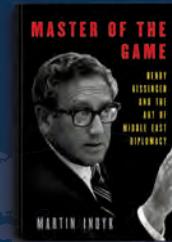
Morrison remains on the books today, but barely. Its wrongness has become an article of faith among contemporary conservatives, and as the Supreme Court has turned further to the right, its efforts to gut it have accelerated. In 2010, for instance, Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for a 5–4 majority, effectively neutered the Public Company Account-

ing Oversight Board, which was created in the aftermath of the Enron and WorldCom accounting scandals to oversee the audits of public companies. A provision that protected members of the board from removal except for good cause, the Court argued, interfered with the president's constitutional authority, because, unlike in *Morrison*, these officers could be removed only by other executive officers whose removal also required good cause, meaning that the president's capacity to dismiss them was further limited. The Court explained this ruling by arguing that one level of independence is constitutional but two, as in the case of the PCAOB, is not.

But the brakes have truly come off with the confirmation of the Court's two newest justices. Brett Kavanaugh provided the fifth and decisive vote in the June 2020 ruling in *Seila Law v. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau*, which held that inferior officers otherwise covered by *Morrison* are not protected from removal without cause if they are the singular head of an independent agency, versus one of a number of commissioners in charge of an agency. In the abstract, the argument appeared plausible: the president should be able to hire and fire agency heads at will. But if the whole point of independent agencies is their independence, the ruling took a healthy bite out of Congress's power to provide for such independence.

Earlier this year, Amy Coney Barrett cast the decisive vote in *United States v. Arthrex*, which handed proponents of executive power an even more significant victory by dramatically narrowing the circumstances in which executive officers are considered "inferior" and are thus insulated from direct presidential con-

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trol. At issue in *Arthrex* were the 200 or so patent judges within the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office who hear challenges to the validity of patents granted by the federal government. With Clarence Thomas joining the three Democratic appointees in dissent, the 5-4 majority held that even these minor executive-branch adjudicators are in fact “principal” officers under the Constitution because their decisions are not supervised by an executive-branch officer. In one fell swoop, the Court significantly winnowed the ranks of bureaucrats protected from presidential removal by *Morrison* and substantially increased the president’s direct control over administrative judges within the executive branch—a class of officials whose independence is central to their job.

And *Arthrex* is no outlier. The clear takeaway from a handful of recent decisions is that the Supreme Court is now as committed to the idea of the unitary executive as it has been at any point in its history. This development would be significant at any point in time, but it is especially glaring given that it transpired during Trump’s presidency.

Trump would have already loomed large in this Court-sponsored expansion of presidential prerogative simply by virtue of having appointed Kavanaugh and Barrett (and Neil Gorsuch, who has also supported this drive). But what *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic* does so effectively is to demonstrate the opportunity presented by Trump, who made no secret of his desire to amass presidential power, for longtime proponents of the unitary executive. These supporters of presidential authority eagerly got onboard with Trump’s efforts to rid himself of administrative con-

straints and of executive officers who refused to do his bidding. What had been a primarily judicial and academic movement, cloaked in dense legal jargon and technicalities, quickly became a public spectacle, as Trump sought to bend the executive branch to his will. Trump and his supporters, the authors write, “pitted the chief executive against the executive branch, and they deployed the Constitution to dislodge anything within the president’s domain that limited his authority or conditioned responsiveness to his directives.” The president portrayed the deep state as part of an antidemocratic conspiracy, and when the state pushed back—by leaking damaging information to Congress and the press, publishing anonymous op-eds excoriating the president, and filing whistleblower complaints, for instance—the result was, well, a spectacle. The authors drive the point home in a particularly incisive passage:

The president’s insistence that he alone held the executive power of the American state drew out these forms of resistance. Tit for tat, he and the officers of the executive branch turned the Deep State conspiracy into something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. . . . [The resistance] turned on the value of depth, on the wisdom of stripping administration of its own integrity and operating the executive branch as a strong arm of presidential will. The clear-eyed choice is not between the Deep State and the unitary executive. It is whether we value what depth has to offer or not.

The merits of the two sides of this debate aside, the authors’ point is that for those who supported Trump’s expan-

sion of the power of the chief executive, the unitary executive theory “is, if nothing else, an elaboration of newfound skepticism of the value of depth.” Proponents of the theory are unconvinced by expertise, mistrustful of nonpartisanship, and suspicious of everything that cannot be directly controlled by the chief executive. Fully applied, the theory therefore eliminates one of the critical checks that exist to prevent presidents from pushing the envelope too far. With the administrative state rendered an arm of the Oval Office, and other checks on presidential power, such as the courts and Congress, also not stepping up to the plate, the president ends up being accountable to virtually no one.

BOTH SIDES NOW

Skowronek, Dearborn, and King don't ignore the Supreme Court's role in adjudicating on executive and administrative power, but they don't feature it in the way that it merits, either. Trump is hardly the first president to push idiosyncratic theories of executive power. President George W. Bush, for instance, embraced what some scholars dubbed “the commander-in-chief override”—the idea that any statutory limits on the president's national security powers were unconstitutional to the degree that they interfered with the president's ill-defined authority as, in the Constitution's words, “Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” The Supreme Court of that era implicitly rejected this theory in one especially high-profile dispute over the use of military commissions to try Guantánamo detainees. Today's Supreme Court, by contrast, has reconfigured constitutional authority such that

the president will have much more power going forward. Trump may doubt that the Court was on his side because it didn't hand him the 2020 election, but it was, and is, very much on the side of the presidency as an institution.

As the authors note, the unitary executive theory “is a license to presidents to vent their instinctive hostility to depth, and we should expect that future presidents will use it as such.” Indeed, Biden already has. Shortly after the Supreme Court's decision in June in *Collins v. Yellen*, which reinforced the 2020 ruling in *Seila Law*, Biden fired the Trump-appointed commissioner of the Social Security Administration without cause—even though the person in that position is protected from removal except in the event of neglect of duty or malfeasance in office. By way of explanation, the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, which is headed by progressives who, before joining the Biden administration, had been longtime academic critics of the unitary executive, released a memo arguing that the protection from being removed without cause was no longer constitutional after *Seila Law* and *Collins*. Apparently, if the unitary executive truly is ascendant, even Democrats want to reap the benefits.

That is the trap against which *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic* ultimately rails. Embracing the unitary executive at the expense of the remaining checks within the executive branch “beckons us toward a strong state, hierarchically controlled by the president.” The authors explain that defenders of expansive presidential power reassure the wary “that this is how it was meant to be, that the framers envisioned

a plebiscitary democracy in which every incumbent cuts deep, each truly an administration unto himself.” But as Davis warned 155 years ago in *Ex parte Milligan*, surveying a polarized political landscape strewn with the wreckage of the Civil War, therein lies the problem.

The question then becomes how to restore the balance that characterized both the executive branch and the separation of powers throughout the century after Davis’s ruling. It seems unlikely that Congress will reassert itself, whether because one party is reluctant to check the power of its own president or because legislation that does try to bolster existing checks will be vetoed by presidents who have no incentive to give away their own power. With the separation of parties taking the place of the separation of powers, interbranch checks on presidential power have increasingly fallen away—leaving only intrabranched checks. It is also hard to be optimistic, given the polarized state of U.S. politics, that voters will simply eliminate the problem by electing presidents who decline to expand their own authority. That is why, by the end of *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic*, the Court appears equal parts culpable for the current state of affairs and the best hope for reform—not changes of the like currently being floated by progressives, who want to add seats to the Supreme Court, take away its power to decide certain cases, and so on, but reform that maintains a healthy balance between the chief executive and the administrative state, such as treating fewer officials as “principal” officers, who must be subject to the president’s absolute control, and expanding Congress’s power to insulate “inferior”

officers from the Oval Office. As one of the Court’s most influential justices, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said, the key is to accept that “certainty generally is illusion, and repose is not the destiny of man.” In other words, the hard line of the unitary executive theory, comforting as it may be to those who seek certainty in knowing where federal power lies, does not make it the wiser choice: rather, the United States is better off with tension between the Oval Office and its bureaucracy.

Trump laid bare the risks of the unitary executive, wielding expansive presidential power for personal gain with relative impunity. The Supreme Court has so far reacted as if what happened was because of who Trump was and is, not because of the powers of the office that he held—powers that exist and that he was able to benefit from thanks in part to the Court itself. The United States may simply have to hope that the Court will respond differently in the future, in defense of checks on presidential authority, if the country elects another Trump, because the alternative—a president unbounded by either external or internal checks—would be worse. 🌐

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. John Ikenberry

The War of Words: A Glossary of Globalization

BY HAROLD JAMES. Yale University Press, 2021, 368 pp.

In this masterful exercise in “intellectual decluttering,” James cuts through the tangled terminological and conceptual jungle of modern globalist discourse. All the major ideas make an appearance: capitalism, socialism, democracy, populism, nationalism, technocracy, and so on. The book takes the form of a glossary: each of those concepts gets its own chapter, organized around fascinating discussions of the origins and meanings of the words used to describe them. Many of the terms have gone through a sort of conceptual life cycle: emerging and gaining currency in a particular historical moment, often during a global crisis or a rapid transformation in the world economy; being deployed in discursive battles between advocates and critics; and over time slowly losing their precise meaning as more and more connotations and ideological usages undermine the original idea. The book can also be read as a history of the modern global system, in which the terms stand in as markers for upheavals, innovations, and transformations in markets and politics. Particularly revealing chapters on the terms “neoliberalism” and “globaliza-

tion” show the complex ways in which scholarly ideas have been weaponized for political struggle. James argues that successfully navigating today’s technological revolutions and upheavals in global capitalism will require the invention of new concepts.

The Rule of Laws: A 4,000-Year Quest to Order the World

BY FERNANDA PIRIE. Basic Books, 2021, 576 pp.

In this panoramic history, Pirie tells the story of the rise and fall of systems of law across the civilizations, empires, and societies of the ancient and modern world. The kings of ancient Mesopotamia wrapped their laws in grand statements of social justice and the dictates of the gods. Chinese emperors claimed that the laws on which their authority rested were manifestations of the order of the cosmos. The world religions promulgated laws that were guides for living and a pathway to the afterlife, entangling church and state and setting the stage for struggles in medieval Europe to build secular systems of law. The age of Western empire brought with it ambitious efforts by European states to organize and legitimate their imperial conquests in a system of international law. Pirie shows that laws protect against the abuse of power but also serve as instruments of social control. Laws can be used as both swords and shields in the struggle for power and order. Pirie argues that if the history of law has a common theme, it is that laws are not simply rules: they have a more overarching function in providing societies with shared identities and moral visions.

Making the World Safe for Dictatorship
BY ALEXANDER DUKALSKIS.
Oxford University Press, 2021, 264 pp.

All states engage in public diplomacy to burnish their images abroad. But today's authoritarian states, operating in a global system that has elevated norms of democracy and human rights, have extra incentives to engage in image promotion. As Dukalskis shows in this intriguing book, authoritarian states protect and enhance their legitimacy and standing with a range of practices, from standard advertising campaigns to high-risk extraterritorial operations to apprehend and silence critics. Regimes such as Kazakhstan's routinely employ Western public relations firms in campaigns to promote the country's achievements. Russia engages in more systematic efforts to censor, obscure, and refute unfavorable information, using its infamous Internet "troll farms" to distract and discredit critics. China has sought to persuade foreign elites to view the state favorably through junkets for journalists and policymakers, and its state-owned media outlets offer positive accounts of the Chinese regime. North Korea, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have all reportedly assassinated dissidents living abroad. Dukalskis argues that the best way to counter authoritarian propaganda is to promote transparency, protect information flows, and stand up for democratic values.

Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon

EDITED BY PATRICIA OWENS,
KATHARINA RIETZLER, KIMBERLY
HUTCHINGS, AND SARAH C.
DUNSTAN. Cambridge University
Press, 2021, 600 pp.

In most histories of the academic field of international relations, very few women make an appearance. The "greats" in the scholarly canon are overwhelmingly Anglo-American men. In this groundbreaking book, a distinguished group of scholars engages in what the historian Glenda Sluga calls "recovery history," reconstructing the forgotten and marginalized ideas of 18 female thinkers, including several African American women, who played formative roles in defining and launching the field beginning in the late nineteenth century. The goal of the book is not to simply add women to the traditional story of international relations scholarship but to expand and complicate the theories and debates within the field, bringing questions such as gender, race, and empire into the mainstream. The editors note that the first use of the term "international thought" can be traced to Florence Melian Stawell's 1929 book, *The Growth of International Thought*, a work that has received hardly any scholarly attention. One chapter of the volume considers the contributions of Eslanda Robeson, a Black activist and intellectual whose internationalist thought focused on the struggles of women for participation in world politics. There are also chapters on the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg and the philosopher Simone Weil, who concentrated on problems of class and colonialism. Another chapter provides an

interesting portrait of Vera Micheles Dean, who as director of research for the Foreign Policy Association in the mid-twentieth century formulated a brand of liberal internationalism that emphasized cosmopolitanism and democratic solidarity. Together, the essays lay the foundation for interdisciplinary debates and new histories of the field.

A World After Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right

BY MATTHEW ROSE. Yale University Press, 2021, 208 pp.

Across the Western world, right-wing activists and movements have grown louder in recent years. As Rose argues in this fascinating book, today's various nationalists, populists, religious traditionalists, and racial supremacists form the vanguard of a "conservative revolution" with deep roots in the twentieth century, and they are now charting a path to a postliberal future. To illuminate the origins of this century's postliberal wave, Rose profiles major intellectual figures of the radical right prominent in the last century. The German historian Oswald Spengler developed an account of world history as a series of cultural struggles rooted in unbridgeable divides of blood, soil, language, and tradition. Alain de Benoist was a prophet of the French far right in his heyday, developing a theory of "folk democracy" in which all peoples had the right to protect their customs, cultures, and ethnic identities from the effects of liberalism. Francis Parker Yockey was the preeminent American theorist of authoritarianism, envisioning an alliance between a postliberal America and a post-Soviet Russia. To these thinkers,

liberal democracy and its hallowed principles represented antiquarian relics of an Enlightenment age that threatened Western culture and identity. They may seem obscure to many readers, but they are well known and well regarded by the adherents of political movements that pose a serious threat to liberalism around the world today.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

Barry Eichengreen

Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is, and What It Should Be

BY DIANA COYLE. Princeton University Press, 2021, 272 pp.

Although the practice of economics is widely criticized, too many critics oversimplify what economists do or fail to appreciate how the discipline is changing. With her background in government, consulting, and academia, Coyle offers a better-informed critique. Economists, she shows, understand the limitations of their models; a growing amount of their research is devoted to analyzing big data as opposed to abstract theory; and they increasingly interact with those in other disciplines. Too often, however, economists forget that they are part of the system they are analyzing and that their work can affect its operation—as, for example, academic work on finance has affected the organization of financial markets, and not always for the better. Economists also ignore the tendency for their findings to

be oversimplified when applied to policy, sometimes with counterproductive consequences. They sometimes fail to ask whether their familiar statistical and conceptual categories still apply in today's digital world. And they have a diversity problem: the profession lacks not just intellectual range but also the ethnic, racial, and gender balance that would enrich the field.

Making Social Spending Work

BY PETER H. LINDERT. Cambridge University Press, 2021, 434 pp.

Lindert has produced a worthy successor to his landmark book *Growing Public*, which used historical evidence to describe the rise of the welfare state. Whereas that earlier book focused on the North Atlantic economies, this one paints on a global canvas. Lindert again debunks the view that government spending on social services tends to slow economic growth. He shows that social programs help equalize incomes, even in countries such as the United States, where their scope is relatively limited. But he also points to worrisome trends: too many countries invest too little in high-return social programs, such as education for the young, and spend too much on pensions for the politically influential elderly. The author concludes by exploring whether immigration tensions will further fray social safety nets and whether increases in life expectancy will threaten the solvency of public pensions or crowd out other valuable forms of social spending—and, if so, how social programs might be redesigned to meet these risks.

How We Give Now: A Philanthropic Guide for the Rest of Us

BY LUCY BERNHOLZ. MIT Press, 2021, 240 pp.

In this thought-provoking meditation on philanthropy in the United States, Bernholz argues that such giving is an admirable American tradition but also a response to citizens' deep and abiding skepticism about the role of government and the consequent inadequacy of public programs. The author highlights new questions for philanthropy in the digital age: For example, should individuals donate their genetic data in the name of medical research, despite privacy concerns, and should they favor nonprofits over commercial gene-sequencing companies? Economists will search in vain for data on who provides charitable donations and for what kinds of activities. But they will not search in vain for novel ideas; the book does not lack for them.

Emerging Powers and the World Trading System: The Past and Future of International Economic Law

BY GREGORY SHAFFER. Cambridge University Press, 2021, 250 pp.

The post–World War II global trading system was largely designed by the United States and was heavily criticized by developing countries, including Brazil, India, and (later) China, for placing unfair restraints on their economic development policies. Yet now, paradoxically, the United States has become a leading critic of the World Trade Organization, and emerging powers have become its chief defenders. As Shaffer explains, once emerging mar-

kets became major exporters, they developed an interest in maintaining and even strengthening the rules-based system. For its part, the United States, possessing a limited social safety net, resorted to import restrictions to protect workers and turned away from the WTO when it ruled against Washington. Importantly, emerging markets developed the legal capacity—the cadres of attorneys and negotiators with trade law expertise—needed to use global trade rules and procedures to their advantage. Shaffer argues for reinvigorating the WTO as a primary interface between the United States and China but also for revising WTO rules to provide more space for Beijing to pursue state capitalism and for Washington to intervene to protect workers from import shocks.

The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century

BY GIULIANO GARAVINI. Oxford University Press, 2019, 448 pp.

Garavini's rich history starts with the emergence of petroleum-producing countries in the 1920s and covers the establishment of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries in the 1960s, the oil shocks of the 1970s, and OPEC's declining ability to control prices in the 1980s and 1990s. Garavini, a diplomatic historian, focuses on the interaction of so-called petrostates with the U.S. government, with their oil companies, and with one another. He details OPEC's internal machinations using the minutes of the organization's conferences, a primary source not available to previous investigators. Although Garavini's account ends at the

turn of the twenty-first century, many of the themes he sounds are strikingly contemporary: tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, dysfunction in Venezuela, and the need for oil-producing and oil-consuming countries to think about the coming transition to a global economy that no longer relies on fossil fuels.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

Lawrence D. Freedman

Bitskrieg: The New Challenge of Cyberwarfare

BY JOHN ARQUILLA. Polity, 2021, 240 pp.

Arquilla was one of the first analysts to appreciate how digital technologies were transforming the nature of conflict, and he remains one of the most perceptive. His latest book pulls together the strands of his three decades of studying this issue. A constant theme is frustration at the failure of policymakers to adjust their thinking, despite his own efforts to advise and inform them. It took too long for them to appreciate the vulnerability of computer networks to crooks and hostile political actors. Companies and governments placed too much emphasis on firewalls and anti-virus software when encryption and cloud computing offered better defenses. In addition, because military planners were reluctant to abandon the legacy systems of industrial age warfare, such

as tanks, they failed to notice the potential of tactics involving numerous small units, in constant communication with one another, overwhelming targets in swarms—a form of warfare that Arquilla dubs “bitskrieg.” One distinctive feature of his approach is his belief in arms control agreements to ensure that civilians and critical infrastructure are spared harmful attacks. Sadly, despite some occasional high-level interest, there have been no serious negotiations on that issue among the major powers.

I, Warbot: The Dawn of Artificially Intelligent Conflict

BY KENNETH PAYNE. Oxford University Press, 2021, 336 pp.

Payne has produced an engaging and accessible guide to the development of artificial intelligence (AI) as applied to war. He shows how an initial push stalled in the 1970s; what made the difference later was the remarkable increase in computing power, the amount of data being generated on the Internet, and the way engineers came to appreciate how machines can learn. Warbots are AI-enabled platforms that can make their own decisions: in principle, they can identify targets, as well as maneuver and fire, independently. From Payne’s analysis, three main conclusions emerge. First, profound ethical issues arise once machines can decide which humans to kill, but the technology is now too varied and too far advanced to be banned. Second, AI favors the offense, owing mainly to the ability of AI-enabled weapons to swarm. Third, and perhaps most important, if AI receives a lot of data and a narrow goal, it will be tacti-

cally brilliant in ways that human commanders could never match—but AI will never be a true strategist.

Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare
BY SETH JONES. Norton, 2021, 288 pp.

Jones takes an unusual and helpful approach to the security challenges facing the United States by exploring how three men shaped the strategies of some of the country’s most troublesome rivals. They are General Valery Gerasimov, chief of Russia’s general staff; the late Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani, who was blown up on U.S. President Donald Trump’s order in early 2020; and General Zhang Youxia, vice chair of China’s Central Military Commission. Using Russian, Farsi, and Mandarin materials, Jones shows how they all turned to irregular forms of warfare, including information campaigns on social media, as well as espionage and special operations, to weaken the United States. All three assumed a constant struggle with the West. Whereas Soleimani had a certain swagger, Gerasimov and Zhang appear as somewhat two-dimensional characters: competent, professional, and loyal to their countries’ presidents. Jones does not quite make clear whether or how these men created policy, as opposed to just articulating and implementing it. Still, he shows how menacing and disruptive their efforts can be and proposes ways to fight back. He is less convincing in arguing that these efforts are more important than building up conventional forces, at least for China and Russia.



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Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence

BY AMY B. ZEGART. Princeton University Press, 2022, 416 pp.

The inspiration for Zegart's guide to the U.S. intelligence community and the challenges it faces appears to have been her discovery that Americans are poorly informed about how the community works—and what they think they know has been heavily influenced by intelligence-themed pop culture (“spytainment”). To correct the misperceptions this has produced, she uses a wealth of examples from the annals of spycraft, from Washington's failure to anticipate China's entry into the Korean War to its successful search for Osama bin Laden. The digital revolution is changing the practice of intelligence as information becomes more plentiful and accessible but also more manipulable. This raises for Zegart a number of interesting questions, such as whether artificial intelligence can correct some of the cognitive biases that lead to analytic failures and how analysts can verify the authenticity of information when the Internet makes fakery so easy. She also discusses the importance of nonstate actors, including technology giants such as Google and even private individuals tracking illicit nuclear activities.

Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know

BY ERICA CHENOWETH. Oxford University Press, 2021, 256 pp.

This is a work of advocacy as well as analysis. Civil resistance is a form of collective action in which unarmed people coordinate a variety of measures, such as

work stoppages, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and boycotts. Chenoweth believes that when it comes to inspiring social change, such means are both more ethical and more effective than violence. When nonviolent activists topple a regime, for example, what follows is usually more stable and inclusive than the aftermath of a violent insurrection. She uses an impressive range of examples to address some of the more obvious objections to civil resistance as a method: that nonviolence is equivalent to passivity, that such movements can be easily suppressed with violence, that they often contain violent elements, and that they work only against democratic governments. Chenoweth sees civil resistance as a form of pressure building up from below against illegitimate and unjust practices and regimes. She identifies a close link between the tactics of civil resistance and progressive political change, implying that those who use these methods are invariably in the right. But as she acknowledges, sectarian and regressive movements can also employ civil resistance, and they frequently do.

The United States

Jessica T. Mathews

An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination

BY SHEERA FRANKEL AND
CECILIA KANG. Harper, 2021, 352 pp.

With an impeccably sourced, highly readable volume based on interviews with hundreds of current and former Facebook employees, investors, and advisers, as well as more than 100 lawmakers, regulators, academics, and consumer advocates, and on access to previously undisclosed documents from inside the company, two *New York Times* reporters have produced an important addition to the voluminous literature on Facebook that should be read widely by policymakers and the public alike. The title comes from a 2016 memo to Facebook employees in which an executive in the CEO Mark Zuckerberg's inner circle explains: "The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is de facto good." If someone uses the platform for evil, the memo says, that's unfortunate, but "still, we connect people." What this has meant in practice is that Facebook has prioritized revenue growth above all else. The company's conversion of users into unwitting sales agents by tracking their shopping activity off the site, Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election partly through use of the site, Facebook's development of algorithms that privilege fake news and

result in news feeds that lead users down rabbit holes of misinformation—these scandals and more follow an infuriating pattern. First come efforts to suppress the bad news internally. When that fails, Facebook offers a weak public apology, which is followed by an ineffectual response from Congress or the Federal Trade Commission and then a rise in the stock price. Even a record \$5 billion fine went unnoticed by the market. Facebook's sheer size, its huge cash reserves, its aggressive legal, public relations, and lobbying teams, and regulators' lack of understanding of what happens "behind the platform" have so far prevented effective action to rein in the company's damaging impacts on personal privacy and the integrity of democratic societies. The authors aren't hopeful this will come soon, but this book could help.

Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution

BY GORDON S. WOOD. Oxford University Press, 2021, 240 pp.

Many historians view Wood as the greatest living scholar of the American Revolution. This book distills the core insights of a long career into a single small volume that grabs the reader's interest from the first page and never lets go. He explores the debates that shaped the United States' future governance, the invention of the radical concept of popular sovereignty, and the forming of the country's founding documents. Lacking a common ancestry, Wood writes, "Americans have had to create their sense of nationhood out of the[se] documents." The book covers power, liberty, concepts of representation and rights, slavery, and

the emergence of a judicial branch with arguably more power to shape lives than any other judiciary in the world. It is no discussion of abstract principles. Wood shows how the Revolution “released pent-up social forces in the North that turned northern society into a middle-class world,” thereby pushing the nation toward modernity. Tiny Rhode Island’s success in using paper money led to such an explosion in its use that by the time the federal government began to regulate the money supply, there were, incredibly, “more than ten thousand different kinds of notes circulating in the United States.” The relevance of the founding documents to today’s disputes is evident throughout.

His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, a Life
BY JONATHAN ALTER. Simon & Schuster, 2020, 800 pp.

The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter
BY KAI BIRD. Crown, 2021, 784 pp.

Four decades after Jimmy Carter’s presidency, two talented biographers have reached identical conclusions in deeply researched biographies issued within a few months of each other. In both foreign and domestic policy, they agree, the years of Carter’s single term were far more accomplished than they seemed at the time or have seemed since.

The generally accepted view—that Carter was a weak or failed president and a much better ex-president—is simply wrong. He avoided war in Latin America with the fiercely contested Panama Canal treaties and initiated a human rights policy that played a role in the later fall of the Soviet Union and the dramatic global rise in democracies.

He achieved full diplomatic relations with China, concluded the SALT II arms control agreement, and, through his extraordinary personal engagement, brought Israel and Egypt together in the Camp David accords, arguably the most successful peace treaty since the end of World War II. His administration (in which I served) produced the nation’s first full-scale energy policy, pushed through significant legislation on the environment and government ethics, carried out the first civil service reform in a century, created cabinet departments of energy and education, pursued sweeping economic deregulation, and transformed the federal bench by appointing more women (including Ruth Bader Ginsburg) and Black jurists than all of his predecessors combined. His appointment of Paul Volcker to chair the Federal Reserve broke the back of inflation—but with sky-high interest rates, which played a major part in Carter’s defeat at the polls. There were failures: on health care and tax reform and especially in the administration’s bungled response to the Iranian Revolution and Carter’s fateful decision (made against his own inclination under intense pressure from his advisers) to allow the deposed shah into the United States for medical treatment, which triggered the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran.

The books differ in two respects. Alter offers insightful judgments far more often than Bird, who lets the story tell itself and treats far more extensively Carter’s life before his election in 1976, which profoundly shaped his presidency, especially as regards race relations and civil rights. Both volumes probe the contradictory aspects of Carter’s personality. Notwith-

standing his patented grin and down-home style, he was often cold and hard to know. The intensely focused, hard-working engineer and the deeply faithful born-again Christian coexisted, sometimes uneasily. Although devoted to doing right in the job of president, he lacked the warmth and ease in communicating that would have made him a successful leader. He was, writes Alter, an “all-business president who seemed sometimes to prefer humanity to human beings.”

First Friends: The Powerful, Unsung (and Unelected) People Who Shaped Our Presidents

BY GARY GINSBERG. Twelve, 2021, 304 pp.

It is hard to believe that there is any aspect of the American presidency that hasn't been fully explored, from first ladies to first pets. Ginsberg noticed that there was one obvious, potentially powerful set of actors who had largely been ignored: presidents' closest friends. These are the men and women who can relieve the loneliness a president lives with, help him think through what to do about a major problem, and say things to him that no one else can. The resulting book is an entertaining, sometimes thought-provoking read. It opens with the well-known, highly political 50-year friendship between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, during which they exchanged around 1,250 letters. There is Abraham Lincoln's friendship with Joshua Speed, who may have saved Lincoln's life from severe depression and probably did save his career. At another extreme are those friends whose main role was to listen: Daisy Suckley to Franklin Roosevelt and Bebe Rebozo to

Richard Nixon. The latter two ate, drank, and relaxed together, “rarely if ever talked politics, . . . and often spent large chunks of time in silence”—but Rebozo proved there was nothing he wouldn't do for Nixon. John F. Kennedy had already shared a close friendship with the British diplomat David Ormsby-Gore for 25 years when he momentarily called on Ormsby-Gore to help figure out what to do at the peak of the Cuban missile crisis.

Western Europe

Andrew Moravcsik

Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate

BY M. E. SAROTTE. Yale University Press, 2021, 568 pp.

A distinguished historian of transatlantic relations revisits Western relations with Russia during the 1990s. This critical decade set the tone for geopolitics in the post-Cold War period, above all though the expansion of NATO. Sarotte weaves together the most engaging and carefully documented account of this period in East-West diplomacy currently available. She deepens the conventional wisdom among most historians, namely that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many Western leaders gave informal assurances that NATO would not expand—not just to the territory of the former East Germany but also across central and eastern Europe. Since Moscow failed to secure any formal guarantee, however, Western leaders later went ahead anyway, downplaying or denying

any contradiction. She argues more speculatively that this perceived betrayal was a major factor in the subsequent collapse of democracy in Russia and the further deterioration of relations between the West and Russia under President Vladimir Putin. But most of the book's evidence actually leans in the opposite direction and suggests that U.S. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton and their top diplomats slowed NATO expansion to try to stabilize the government of Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the short term and held off as long as he still looked viable. It was only when Yeltsin's fall became imminent, and a hardening of East-West relations started to seem inevitable, that the United States moved to expand the alliance.

The Ambassadors: Thinking About Diplomacy From Machiavelli to Modern Times

BY ROBERT COOPER. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021, 563 pp.

For many years, Cooper, a British diplomat, was the European Union's unofficial foreign policy guru, and from 2002 to 2010, he served as the union's director general for external and politico-military affairs. EU insiders see him as a tough and thoughtful analyst. This sweeping reflection on 500 years of transatlantic statecraft focuses on a small number of individuals who, in his view, combined sophisticated thinking with effective diplomatic action: Machiavelli, Talleyrand, Konrad Adenauer, Jean Monnet, Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Henry Kissinger. Cooper draws three main conclusions. The first is that diplomatic success requires extreme inconsistency and immorality. To get important

things done, diplomats must often mislead or mistreat the public and, often, their political masters; many will surely find it troubling that he hails Talleyrand and Kissinger as models. At the same time, Cooper portrays most foreign-policy making as little more than a desperate, often futile effort to navigate in the face of deep uncertainty, "black swan" events, and unintended consequences. And he traces a centuries-long spread of liberal values, democratic institutions, multilateral cooperation, and the use of diplomacy instead of military force—preconditions for the peaceful and prosperous world one finds within the EU. These three conclusions remain in considerable, and perhaps irreconcilable, tension with one another.

European Language Matters: English in Its European Context

BY PETER TRUDGILL. Cambridge University Press, 2021, 275 pp.

Because of the global reach of first the United Kingdom and later the United States, the world language today is imperfect English, spoken by well over a billion people. The majority learn it as a second language—and according to some (generally British) native speakers, other (generally American) native speakers do not speak it properly. Meanwhile, English has become the de facto European language, although among the EU member states, only two embrace it as one of their official languages: Ireland and Malta. One could not wish for a more qualified guide to the resulting chaos than Trudgill, a linguist who writes a popular column for *The New European*. He revels in English's massive and diverse vocabulary, with its finely shaded differentiations among near synonyms, a result of histori-

cal interactions with other languages and dialects. He delights in each tidbit of knowledge: the word “metaphor,” for example, has a figurative meaning in English but is found on delivery trucks in Athens that “transfer things from place to place.” Trudgill rues the way that many English words lose their power and precision when employed indiscriminately, as with the superlative “awesome.” For anyone, native speaker or not, this book offers a pleasurable and humorous voyage of discovery.

The Norwegian Exception? Norway's Liberal Democracy Since 1814

BY MATHILDE FASTING AND OYSTEIN SORENSEN. Hurst, 2021, 280 pp.

Norwegians enjoy a well-functioning liberal democracy, a productive free-market economy, stable social relations, and—even more so than other Scandinavian countries—a generous and popular social welfare state. In global rankings of equality, gender balance, happiness, life expectancy, and the rule of law, Norway invariably appears near the top. In this book, two historians seek to explain why the country is so successful. They enthusiastically recount the country's history, yet they fail to answer the question. Much of Norway's edge seems to reflect dumb luck: the country benefits from abundant energy resources, peaceful neighbors, and a strong sense of national identity. Elsewhere, however, these things have led to conflict and collapse. The magic ingredient, the authors argue, is trust: Norwegians trust one another and trust their government, which can thus effectively promote the common good. Yet are they trusting simply

because their system has always worked, or does their system work because they are more trusting? If the latter, why? In the end, it is unclear what foreigners can learn from Norway's success.

The Greeks: A Global History

BY RODERICK BEATON. Basic Books, 2021, 608 pp.

When people think of Greece, they generally think of the present-day nation-state, which they imagine as roughly coterminous with a narrowly bounded ancient society that had Athens and a few neighboring cities at its center. In this magisterial yet readable introduction to Greek history—one of the best of its kind, whether for academic or popular audiences—Beaton reveals the far more complicated reality. Greece has always been a broadly settled civilization: Greeks have long lived in parts of present-day Bulgaria, Cyprus, Italy, Russia, Turkey, and countries of the Middle East. In 1830, modern Greece gained its independence not via a popular ethnic revolution: most of its inhabitants spoke Albanian, and three times as many Greeks lived outside the country's borders as did inside. Instead, Greek independence resulted from the work of warlords, outside powers, and generic Orthodox Christian opposition to Ottoman rule. The new state had to impose a sanitized version of the Greek language and a sense of national identity within its territory. Many of contemporary Greece's problems with its neighbors are rooted in past wars waged by the Greeks to assert that identity; others spring from its status as a small country subject to many indignities, only one of which is its financial tutelage under the European Union.

Powers and Thrones: A New History of the Middle Ages

BY DAN JONES. Viking, 2021, 656 pp.

Jones is best known for writing popular histories and producing television series such as *Secrets of Great British Castles* and *Britain's Bloodiest Dynasty*; perhaps unsurprisingly, his history of Europe between the fall of Rome and the Protestant Reformation is neither deep nor authoritative. But it certainly is entertaining. In an old-school manner, Jones weaves together brief biographical sketches of colorful people, from Attila the Hun to Martin Luther, with engaging yarns about the critical events in which they took part. He nods to historiographic fashion just long enough to inquire about the impact of climate change and to ask why European countries rose to global preeminence in this period. But in the end, his question-begging answer is simply that they had grown stronger and richer, and he tells that tale without much criticism of its more brutal aspects. Still, the resulting account of the Middle Ages is as engaging a read as any.

Western Hemisphere

Richard Feinberg

Amazônia

BY SEBASTIÃO SALGADO. Taschen, 2021, 528 pp.

Salgado, a famed Paris-based Brazilian documentary photographer, takes his camera deep into the Amazon rainforest. To tackle this vast territory, larger than the European Union and inhabited, Salgado estimates, by some

370,00 indigenous people (compared with an estimated five million prior to European conquest in the sixteenth century) belonging to nearly 200 tribes, Salgado, accompanied by anthropologists and linguists, spent weeks on end with each of a dozen remote communities. The hospitable tribes, scattered in tiny communities, subsist in bucolic harmony with an abundant, generous natural world yet are dwarfed by the natural immensity of the rainforest. The voluminous book's brief texts add informative context, but Salgado mainly allows the captivating black-and-white photos to speak for themselves. The rainforest's startling beauty and majesty are overwhelming; amazing aerial photography captures breathtaking cloud formations that offer an ever-changing visual spectacle. But the greatest contribution of *Amazônia* is its intimate, sensitive portraits of everyday life among the indigenous tribes: their warm family ties, their hunting and fishing skills, their dazzling facial and body paintings, and their ritual dances. Salgado neither patronizes nor sensationalizes. He honors his subjects by capturing both their communal and their individual selves: avoiding a flaw found in some documentary work depicting indigenous people, he accompanies every photograph of a person with the subject's full name.

Civilizations: A Novel

BY LAURENT BINET. TRANSLATED BY SAM TAYLOR. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021, 320 pp.

Binet playfully imagines a counterfactual history in which the Aztecs and the Incas conquer western Europe. His entertaining style blends biting satire of

late medieval European follies with postmodern irony. Seen through the eyes of the pragmatic Incan emperor Atahualpa, sixteenth-century Christendom is plagued by perpetual dynastic and religious wars, ridiculous superstitions, and shocking social injustice. Just as the Spanish conquistadors did in reality, Binet's fictional Incas form alliances with conquered, restive populations. But unlike the Europeans, the Incas impose a progressive social order. Meanwhile, the brilliant Cuban princess Higuénamota intimidates European courts with her brown-skinned nakedness; Michelangelo is commissioned to make a sculpture of her. In passing, Binet lampoons Christopher Columbus, Martin Luther, and Thomas More and has great fun transporting the Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes and the artist El Greco to an idyllic island in the Caribbean. As a redemptive fantasy rescuing history from the horrific tragedy of the European destruction of the precolonial Americas, *Civilizations* is a most satisfying read.

The Transparency of Time: A Novel

BY LEONARDO PADURA.
TRANSLATED BY ANNA KUSHNER.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021, 416 pp.

In this erudite crime thriller, Padura, Cuba's leading man of letters, pilots his melancholic, irreverent detective, Mario Conde, toward his 60th birthday. The plot, revolving around a stolen wooden statue of the Black Virgin, of medieval origin, is a vehicle for the author's trenchant commentaries on contemporary Cuba and his existential ruminations on the human condition. Situated in 2014, before U.S. President Donald Trump's intensified economic sanctions and

COVID-19's disruption of tourism, the book describes a Cuba already suffering from poverty and postrevolutionary inequalities; readers visit the sumptuous private restaurants and homes of the elites (new and old), as well as peripheral shantytowns populated by darker-skinned migrants (popularly labeled "Palestinians") from the eastern provinces. In a parallel narrative located during the murderous, chaotic medieval Crusades, Padura ponders whether ideologies and religions merely disguise the human drive for power and wealth; he also asks whether revolutionaries elevate or immiserate their populations—questions echoed by Cuba's contemporary fate. Surrounded by his country's material and moral decay, the mature Conde finds solace in an enduring love relationship and in his steadfast circle of lifelong drinking buddies.

Two Spies in Caracas: A Novel

BY MOISÉS NAÍM. TRANSLATED BY DANIEL HAHN. Amazon Crossing, 2021, 348 pp.

Naím, who left his native Venezuela many years ago, turns to historical fiction to pen this sharp, effective indictment of Hugo Chávez and the late tyrant's brand of authoritarian populism. Readers of political thrillers may intuit early on the resolution of the deadly duel between two opposing spies—a gorgeous female CIA operative and an irresistibly charming male officer in Cuba's Intelligence Directorate. Operating in worlds populated by corruption and deception, they are among the few characters with any moral fiber; the fast-paced plot turns on

the alliance between a money-laundering American evangelist preacher and a Venezuelan criminal who masterminds his illicit syndicates from prison with impunity. This nasty world is not so unlike those Naím has uncovered in his award-winning nonfiction, in which legitimate leaders and private business executives, interlaced with violent Mafias, engage in intricate power struggles and some civil society leaders can be as hypocritical as the politicians they decry. In his acknowledgments, Naím reasserts his faith that his “wonderful country” will recover. But from the deep abyss depicted in his novel, it is difficult to perceive the green shoots of a reborn Venezuela.

Nuestra América: My Family in the Vertigo of Translation

BY CLAUDIO LOMNITZ. Other Press, 2021, 464 pp.

Lomnitz, a cultural historian, adds to the burgeoning literature on immigration, ethnic identity, and racial hatred with this introspective memoir tracing the odyssey of his Ashkenazi Jewish ancestors from Nazi-infested Europe to South America, Israel, California, and Mexico City. Although mid-twentieth-century Latin America offered a safe haven from European barbarisms, the conservative Roman Catholic societies of the region were hardly free from anti-Semitism. Still, Lomnitz’s well-networked, intelligent, and hard-working family survived and even prospered. Yet they remained haunted by the unspeakable traumas of the Holocaust, even as parents sought to shield their children from truths too

awful to recite. Based on his meticulous research, Lomnitz speculates that his great-grandfather, a successful businessman in Mannheim, Germany, was assassinated in his office by young Nazis—envious neighbors of his—as early as 1922. In more hopeful passages, he recounts how his relatives brushed shoulders with such luminaries as the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui and the Chilean folk composer Violeta Parra. Hanging over this poignant history is a disturbing question: Might today’s resurgence of identity politics and conspiracy theories, similarly rooted in historical revanchism and social envy, lead to yet another round of violent nightmares?

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

Maria Lipman

Russian Energy Chains: The Remaking of Technopolitics From Siberia to Ukraine to the European Union

BY MARGARITA M. BALMACEDA. Columbia University Press, 2021, 440 pp.

Balmaceda criticizes the conventional understanding of Russian energy power that reduces it to a mere state-held weapon used by Moscow against the former Soviet states. Her own analysis is focused on value chains—the separate paths taken by Russian natural gas, oil, and coal from their production in Siberia, through Ukraine, and to consumers in

the European Union. In the countries through which they pass, these value chains deeply permeate politics and business. For some important players, their country's energy dependence on Russia may turn out to be an opportunity rather than a constraint.

Ukraine's major energy oligarchs are a striking example. Dmytro Firtash, Ihor Kolomoisky, and Rinat Akhmetov were able to build tremendous fortunes by extracting rents in the natural gas, oil, and coal sectors, respectively, and turn their wealth into political power. Meanwhile, Ukraine's industrial capacity continued to decline, and its role as a transit country weakened. All three oligarchs remain powerful today, even as Russia has moved to drastically reduce Ukraine's transit role by launching the Nord Stream project, which will bypass Ukraine and bring Russian gas directly to Germany through a pipeline under the Baltic Sea.

Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis

BY SERHII PLOKHY. Norton, 2021, 464 pp.

Ploky discovered a few previously unknown documents relating to the Cuban missile crisis, and although his research does not essentially change the story, his outstanding talent for weaving a narrative from myriad sources makes his new book hard to put down. Readers witness tense debates in the White House as President John F. Kennedy's aides reject his idea of a compromise with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev; listen in as Robert Kennedy reports to

his brother on the result of his super-secret mission to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin; and peek into the room next door, where the president's young lover is sleeping. Ploky also shares Soviet soldiers' recollections of unbearable heat, poisonous plants, and worm-infested food during their time in Cuba and relates the anxiety of the Soviet envoy Anastas Mikoyan as he failed to placate the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who was furious at what he saw as Khrushchev's betrayal. Ploky focuses on the many mistakes made by both major and minor participants during the crisis. In his answer to the perennial question of who blinked first, he emphasizes that both sides were operating in "a dark room of deception and mutual suspicion," so "when one side blinked, it took the other side more than a day to realize what had happened."

A Full-Value Ruble: The Promise of Prosperity in the Postwar Soviet Union

BY KRISTY IRONSIDE. Harvard University Press, 2021, 320 pp.

In her study of Soviet economic policies from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, Ironside contests the view that money had limited value in the Soviet system. She demonstrates that Soviet postwar governments were very concerned with increasing the ruble's purchasing power as a means to economic growth and eventual abundance. This goal, however, remained unfulfilled. By examining political leaders' beliefs, economic experts' debates, and citizens' complaints to the authorities, Ironside shows how a variety of economic policies introduced in the decades after

World War II repeatedly led to the accumulation of unspendable money in the hands of the people. The Soviet leader Joseph Stalin slashed consumer prices, but amid an acute food shortage, there was little for people to buy. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, opted instead to raise pensions and the wages of low-paid workers and to eliminate certain taxes, but that led to wage overspending—and without a rise in productivity, the demand for goods still exceeded the supply. The resulting surplus of cash further undermined the ruble. The government tried various means, such as compulsory mass-subscription bonds, lotteries, and savings deposits, to absorb the excess cash, but these instruments steadily increased the government's debt to its own citizens—which remained unpaid through the end of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region

BY SCOTT RADNITZ. Oxford University Press, 2021, 264 pp.

Russia Today and Conspiracy Theories: People, Power, and Politics on RT

BY ILYA YABLOKOV AND PRECIOUS N. CHATTERJE-DOODY. Routledge, 2021, 116 pp.

In democracies and autocracies alike, declining trust in politics and politicians has allowed conspiracy theories to move from the margins of society to the center of politics. The study of this phenomenon is a growing field, but so far, it focuses mostly on Western countries—the United States, in particular, provides a striking example of what is happening. The way it

is playing out in the post-Soviet world, however, remains largely unexplored.

Radnitz applies political science methods to an extensive comparative study of the political use of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet states (excluding the Baltics). He points out that the resort to “conspiracism” cannot be fully explained by either historical patterns or the character of the political regime. Incumbent politicians’ propensity for making conspiracy claims changes over time and may rise in response to political developments. Drawing on a database of conspiracy claims originating in post-Soviet countries from 1995 to 2014, Radnitz identifies the immediate circumstances—domestic political competition or destabilizing events such as terrorist attacks, protests, riots, or assassinations—that tend to motivate leaders to rely on the rhetoric of conspiracism. Of the countries examined, the increasingly authoritarian Russia stands out for its volume of conspiracy claims, mostly involving American or Western interventions, many of them centered on the disruptive events in Ukraine during the 2004–5 Orange Revolution and the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests. Ukraine itself, with its competitive and turbulent politics, is second to Russia in the overall volume of conspiracy claims. Using surveys and focus groups, Radnitz concludes that even among people who are generally receptive to conspiracy theories, the essential cynicism of those theories tends to deepen public suspicion of the very officials who endorse them.

Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody limit their study to one purveyor of conspiracy theories: the English-language service of the Russian state-owned television network RT. They trace its transformation

from a source for stories about Russia to an aggressive “ministry of information defense” waging war on Western mainstream media, with conspiracy theories as its primary weapon. The authors describe RT’s methods based on an episode-by-episode examination of several RT shows, including one hosted by Jesse Ventura, a retired wrestler and former governor of Minnesota with a long track record as a conspiracy theorist. RT generally refrains from producing its own outlandish allegations and opts instead for planting doubts about mainstream reports and interpretations, whether by unashamedly taking one side or by participating in the “booming conspiracy culture in the United States.” The authors acknowledge, however, that when it comes to RT’s attempts to counter grave allegations of Russia’s wrongdoings, such as the government’s involvement in the poisoning of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the channel’s tactics are not necessarily effective with foreign audiences.

Middle East

Lisa Anderson

Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia

BY ROSIE BSHEER. Stanford University Press, 2020, 416 pp.

This book is an intelligent, subtle, and learned treatment of the efforts by the Saudi Arabian monarchy to construct and disseminate a historical narrative that will legitimize its rule. Bsheer precisely and elegantly

describes the regime’s attempts, across the reigns of several kings, to both collect and suppress documentation about the country’s past. But the book is about more than archives. Ever since the Saudi royal family faced damaging criticism for its cooperation with non-Muslim powers in the 1990–91 Gulf War, the monarchy has systematically pivoted away from reliance on the Wahhabi religious establishment, which had been its staunchest ally, and has constructed a secular nationalist narrative placing itself at the center of the story. Doing so, Bsheer reveals, has involved a variety of revisionist steps, from trying to obliterate evidence of the lively and varied political debates of the late Ottoman era to seizing property and destroying old neighborhoods in order to transform Mecca and Medina from pilgrimage sites into tourist destinations. Much of the work of this “historic preservation”—consolidating national archives, creating national museums, developing the historic birthplace of the Saud family, north of Riyadh, as a heritage site—was overseen by the current king, Salman, during his decades as the governor of Riyadh, and it has been embraced and accelerated under the current crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

You Can Crush the Flowers: A Visual Memoir of the Egyptian Revolution

BY BAHIA SHEHAB. Gingko Library, 2021, 144 pp.

By her own account, Shehab, one of the Arab world’s most inventive graphic artists, was not a political rebel until the Egyptian uprising of 2011. A Lebanese Egyptian, she’d spent most of her life in

Lebanon, moving to Egypt only in 2004. When the revolution broke out, she was teaching at the American University in Cairo and was the mother of young children and an artist with a budding international career. (At the time, I was serving as president of the university.) Already well regarded for her work on Arabic calligraphy, she had started a project called “A Thousand Times NO,” in which she explored the various ways the word “no” has been written in Arabic over the centuries. As the upheaval unfolded, she was inspired, as were many previously politically inactive Egyptians. She took to the streets, contributing to a remarkable flowering of public art as a graffiti artist, stenciling variations of works from “A Thousand Times NO” across Cairo. It was a period of extraordinary artistic creativity, and Shehab’s memoir recounts the emotional intensity and artistic inspiration of the period—and, better yet, illuminates it on page after page with her vivid photographs of both her own work and that of other graffiti artists working in Cairo at the time. The book’s title comes from a line of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s that was scrawled across the walls of Cairo: “You can crush the flowers, but you can’t stop the spring.” The memoir is evocative and moving; the illustrations an important piece of the historical record.

Turkish Kaleidoscope: Fractured Lives in a Time of Violence

BY JENNY WHITE AND ERGUN GUNDUZ. Princeton University Press, 2021, 115 pp.

A graphic novel based on the civil unrest that seized Turkey in the 1970s and led to the military coup of 1980, this book endeavors to capture the excitement, confusion, and, it appears, ultimate futility of the political activism of that era. White, an American anthropologist who was a student in Turkey at the time, and Gunduz, a Turkish artist and illustrator, collaborated to follow the political careers of four fictional student activists—two rightists and two leftists—as they clash over issues and causes they seem to understand poorly. As their battles spiral into factionalism and violence, they sacrifice family harmony, long-standing friendships, and promising professional careers. White correctly argues that the format of the graphic novel avoids the flattened abstractions of conventional academic analysis, but the book begs for an epilogue that would draw more universal conclusions and go beyond the wistful reminiscences decades later of now middle-aged protagonists. After all, the groups to which these young people pledged allegiance, whatever their putative ideologies, are all portrayed as being led by intolerant autocrats. In a different format, White and Gunduz might have shared their own speculation about what may or may not have changed in Turkey in the intervening decades.

The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty

BY RAY TAKEYH. Yale University Press, 2021, 336 pp.

With this addition to an already crowded field of books on the question “Who lost Iran?” Takeyh sets out to provide a sober, fair-minded assessment, enabled by perspectives afforded by both the passage of time and increasingly accessible archives. There is little surprising in his version of this still sorry story: the shah was an indecisive autocrat; his American enablers were often distracted and ill informed; most of the monarchy’s officials were politically naive, and many were simply corrupt sycophants. Takeyh has a soft spot for the old aristocracy, arguing that, however elitist it may have been, it had a far more sensitive finger on the pulse of the countryside than the clueless technocrats who implemented the shah’s U.S.-sponsored programs of land reform and educational development. Whether the landed nobility would have been able to understand and respond to frustrations among peasants and students—complaints that the revolutionary Islamists exploited effectively—remains an open question. What is striking, however, is the number of senior figures in the regime who, rather than stand their ground, simply decamped to Europe or the United States as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s revolution gathered steam, abandoning not just the shah but also the country they had enabled him to rule.

Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring

EDITED BY RITA STEPHAN AND MOUNIRA M. CHARRAD. New York University Press, 2020, 432 pp.

Women in the Middle East and North Africa are typically portrayed as victims—of patriarchy and poverty, war and violence, Orientalism and imperialism. This book suggests, very convincingly, that they are victimized just as much by the antiquated platitudes, stereotypes, and distortions with which they are portrayed. In a collection of 40 short pieces by scholars and activists, the editors showcase a stunning variety of domains in which women are operating on their own behalf and in the service of others. Graffiti artists, journalists, filmmakers, teachers, bloggers, government ministers, community organizers, and political activists are debating constitutional reform in Tunisia, advocating feminism in Islam in Syria, supporting independence in southern Yemen, developing gender studies in Morocco, calling for restorative justice in Libya, demanding an end to sexual harassment in Egypt, advancing gay rights in Lebanon. Although the seeds of this activism were planted as early as the 1920s, Stephan and Charrad argue compellingly that the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 emboldened a generation of women who are now more active, more visible, and more influential in the politics and social life of the region than ever before. Despite all appearances, the editors suggest, there has been a subtle democratization of politics, as bottom-up pressure is forcing greater accountability on often reluctant regimes. The Arab Spring left important traces, visible today in the growing prominence and authority of women.

Asia and Pacific

Andrew J. Nathan

China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia

BY DANIEL S. MARKEY. Oxford University Press, 2020, 336 pp.

Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy

BY ANDREA GHISELLI. Oxford University Press, 2021, 304 pp.

These deeply informed books challenge the view that China's growing economic influence around the world will inevitably lead to Chinese political and military domination. Markey demonstrates that in Iran, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan, China seeks energy resources, more secure transport routes, and deference to its repression of the Uyghurs. But Beijing shows little interest in intervening in other countries' domestic problems or in solving its partner states' conflicts with their neighbors. To be sure, the Chinese presence reduces U.S. influence and buttresses authoritarian regimes with diplomatic support and new surveillance technology. But the partner governments themselves—and neighboring regional powers, such as India, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—are keen to set limits on Chinese influence. So China's rising presence in continental Eurasia is unlikely to lead to anything resembling hegemony.

Ghiselli focuses on the Middle East and North Africa, where Chinese state-owned enterprises have invested heavily

without fully understanding the political risks. In places such as Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, Beijing eventually had to provide protection when insurgents threatened Chinese personnel and assets. But so far, China has limited itself to "military operations other than war," such as participation in UN peacekeeping missions and multilateral antipiracy patrols, the deployment of private security contractors, and crisis-driven evacuations. The policy debate at home suggests that Beijing remains committed to the principle of intervening only under UN mandates and with the permission of local governments. Instead of pushing for permanent bases in many places abroad, the Chinese military prioritizes challenges closer to home, such as Taiwan. If China were nonetheless to try to expand its military footprint globally as its interests and capabilities increase, these books show that the process would not be easy.

Kashmir at the Crossroads: Inside a Twenty-First-Century Conflict

BY SUMANTRA BOSE. Yale University Press, 2021, 352 pp.

Over three-quarters of a century, the contested territory of Kashmir has been the locus of four wars between India and Pakistan, frequent firing and shelling incidents across the so-called Line of Control, Pakistani-sponsored terrorist incursions into the Indian-occupied sector called Jammu and Kashmir, conflict between the Muslim majority and the Hindu minority, a protracted insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and an abusive Indian counterinsurgency, and, to the east, clashes between Chinese and Indian forces over the Chinese-occupied sector called Aksai Chin. More recently, Pakistani security agencies

have disrupted peace talks by dispatching terrorist proxies to attack Indian interests, and Jammu and Kashmir has been swept by renewed waves of resistance; and in 2019, the Hindu nationalist government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed direct central government control over the sector in what is bound to be a futile attempt to crush all opposition. Meanwhile, China increased its military pressure in Aksai Chin. Bose traces these events in intimate detail. His analysis suggests that peace is more remote than ever.

The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War

BY DAVID CHENG CHANG. Stanford University Press, 2020, 496 pp.

After U.S.-led UN forces battled Chinese and North Korean forces to a stalemate on the Korean Peninsula in July 1951, the two sides began to negotiate an armistice. The negotiations dragged on for two years because the United States insisted on the “voluntary repatriation” of Chinese prisoners of war. This ostensibly humanitarian concept was unacceptable to the Chinese side (although Beijing eventually yielded), violated the newly signed Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs, and, as the war continued, cost tragically large losses of life among soldiers and POWs on both sides and among North Korean civilians. Chang shows that the true reason for the U.S. policy was the desire for a propaganda victory over China. Most of the 14,000 Chinese POWs who ultimately decided to go to Taiwan did so as a result of an American “reindoctrination/exploitation” program in the camps that was violently reinforced by a core group of

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anticommunist prisoners and Chinese Nationalist agents. Chang's exceptionally vivid prisoner's-eye account, based on camp archives and interviews with ex-POWs, leads him to condemn the key U.S. policymakers, including President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, for their "arrogance, ignorance, and negligence."

The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam

BY CHRISTOPHER GOSCHA.
Princeton University Press, 2022,
568 pp.

Goscha's zestfully granular history of the Vietminh war against the French, which lasted from 1946 to 1954, challenges the myth that Ho Chi Minh's forces bested the professional French army simply because they were fighting for national liberation. He focuses on a less understood and more practical factor: Ho's creation of a party-controlled governing apparatus with the capacity to recruit, finance, arm, coordinate, and deploy armed forces. Even from its early days as what Goscha calls an "archipelago state," Ho's regime administered a network of territories, drafted soldiers, kept records, conducted police work, issued currency, taxed commerce, and carried on international trade. With Chinese support, Ho then expanded his organizational machine into a Leninist-style "wartime state," able to field the well-equipped conventional army that besieged and overran the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The Vietminh was a modern Asian example of the late sociologist Charles Tilly's insight, drawn from the history of early modern Europe, that "war made the state, and

the state made war"—in this case, however, with the help of organizational techniques, weapons, and training from a powerful neighbor.

The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms
EDITED BY TAKEO HOSHI AND
PHILLIP Y. LIPSCY. Cambridge
University Press, 2021, 500 pp.

The 25 expert contributors to this book analyze how Shinzo Abe managed not only to stay in office for eight years, from 2012 to 2020—the longest term of any Japanese prime minister—but to carry out a series of major institutional reforms and stimulate the economy. Having learned the lessons of his failed first term as prime minister (2006–7), Abe actively managed public opinion, used strategically timed elections to discipline factions in his ruling party, and increased staffing in the Cabinet Secretariat and the prime minister's office to control the bureaucracy. His economic policies, known as "Abenomics," accelerated existing programs to promote innovation, upgrade working conditions, boost female workforce participation, and reduce the power of the national association of agricultural cooperatives over farmers' business decisions, among other gains. But several chapters puzzle over why monetary easing and fiscal stimulus under Abe drove smaller-than-desired increases in inflation and economic growth. Many chapters are technical, but the book's core leader-centered analysis gains credibility from the fact that Abe's successor, Yoshihide Suga, had the

same tools as Abe but was less successful. Abe would doubtless pick up his agenda again if he were to return to office for a third term.

China and the International Human Rights Regime, 1982–2017

BY RANA SIU INBODEN. Cambridge University Press, 2021, 320 pp.

China in the post-Mao period has not tried to deny or destroy the international human rights regime, but it has worked to shape the regime in its favor, usually in ways that weaken it. Inboden's revealing behind-the-scenes case studies show how China's human rights diplomacy has become increasingly sophisticated. When the UN Convention Against Torture was drafted, in the early 1980s, China was relatively passive. But during negotiations over the convention's optional protocol, in the 1990s, it worked (along with the United States and others) to weaken the ability of an independent anti-torture subcommittee to inspect places of detention in signatory states. In the following decade, when the UN's new Human Rights Council was writing its rules of operation, China worked with others to block proposals that would have made the council more effective, such as a human rights good-behavior requirement for states to join the council. The book's third case study tracks China's use of the compliance-monitoring committee of the International Labor Organization as a venue to trade favors with like-minded regimes that want to avoid scrutiny. With well-staffed missions in Geneva and New York, China is a player wherever human rights norms are shaped and applied.

Africa

Nicolas van de Walle

Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa

BY STEVEN PRESS. Harvard University Press, 2021, 352 pp.

Press has written an excellent history of Germany's colony German South West Africa, a place that eventually gained independence as the country of Namibia in 1990. The book looks at the story through the prism of diamonds, the colony's main source of revenue and exports. This is a smart choice, as it allows Press to range widely, from the day-to-day activities in the diamond fields, to business intrigue in Berlin, to the shady politics of the international diamond trade in Antwerp, Johannesburg, and London. German South West Africa was founded in the 1880s to further the imperial ambitions of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and Press's account shows that the colony well deserved its reputation for brutal violence. His careful economic history makes clear the importance of diamonds to the survival of the colony and to Germany's economic reach at the time, as South West African diamonds came to dominate the huge retail market for gems in the United States. As in almost every colony, this natural resource wealth mostly benefited the imperial rulers back home, especially a small number of German banks and businessmen. The colony's infrastructure remained rudimentary, most of the small German settler population lived in

poverty, and the indigenous African labor force toiled to mine alluvial diamonds under horrendous conditions.

Insurgency and War in Nigeria: Regional Fracture and the Fight Against Boko Haram

BY AKALI OMENI. I.B. Tauris, 2020, 288 pp.

Most academic studies of Boko Haram have focused on the Islamist militant group's sociological roots and religious antecedents. Aside from two short chapters on the organization's formative years and its turn to violence, Omeni's highly original study focuses instead on trying to explain the group's success over the last few decades as a fighting force. He analyzes its ability to benefit from the rugged environment in which it operates, in northeastern Nigeria, on the borders with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. He then turns to its military tactics. Many analyses of the group emphasize its use of seemingly indiscriminate violence against civilians, including kidnappings and suicide bombings. Omeni argues, however, that Boko Haram has sometimes operated as a more traditional insurgency and has exhibited both organizational resilience and a good deal of strategic savvy in its choice of targets and its ability to surprise the Nigerian army with changing tactics. The book also includes a useful discussion of the group's relationship with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), which ultimately led Boko Haram to fragment into two rival factions in 2016. Unfortunately, the book does not discuss the implications of the recent death of Abubakar Shekau, who had led the organization since 2009.

The War That Doesn't Say Its Name: The Unending Conflict in the Congo

BY JASON K. STEARNS. Princeton University Press, 2021, 328 pp.

In 2003, an internationally brokered peace deal formally ended the murderous Second Congo War and created a transitional national government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But the fighting never stopped. Stearns's book seeks to explain why, despite major UN peacekeeping missions and substantial foreign aid, the last two decades have been marked by regular outbreaks of violence in the eastern and northeastern regions of the country. Stearns details the emergence of warlords with ambiguous motivations, the repeated interventions by Rwanda and Uganda, and the role of the incompetent and rapacious national army. An old Congo hand who appears to have interviewed all the key players, Stearns does not offer a linear history of the conflict, instead moving back and forth across the two decades to develop his arguments. But he makes a convincing case that the violence has been sustained by a "military bourgeoisie" that benefits from instability by plundering natural resources and foreign aid. The government has made things worse by shelling out "fighting bonuses" to military personnel that dwarf their peacetime salaries. The violence has created a small but influential ruling class that has little motivation to end the bloodshed.

Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia

BY GREGG MITMAN. New Press, 2021, 336 pp.

In 1926, the fledgling Firestone Tire and Rubber Company was looking for a way to reduce its dependence on British suppliers from Southeast Asia, as it tried to keep up with an explosion in the American appetite for car tires. That is how the company came to invest in a rubber plantation in Liberia. Over time, and with help from accommodating governments in the United States and Liberia, the company came to dominate the country's economy and policymaking to a remarkable extent. Mitman peppers this history with a wealth of fascinating details and interesting characters. Most readers will be surprised to learn, for instance, that one of the early boosters of the venture was the American civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois, who would soon regret having believed that Firestone could hasten the emergence of an independent African bourgeoisie. Instead, as Mitman demonstrates, Firestone and its supporters in the U.S. government brought to relations with Liberia the attitudes and practices of Jim Crow—even long after World War II. A long succession of Liberian heads of state were willing to play along not least because, with the help of Firestone, they invested in very profitable rubber plantations of their own.

The Wealth of Refugees: How Displaced People Can Build Economies

BY ALEXANDER BETTS. Oxford University Press, 2021, 448 pp.

Today, there are more than 25 million people who have left their countries of origin because of some combination of economic, environmental, and political crises. Such refugees often feature in Western media as a burden on the rich countries of the developed world. In fact, the overwhelming majority remain in the region of their homeland, as Betts makes clear in this informative account of contemporary refugee policy. The three East African countries that provide the main case studies for the book—Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda—alone account for some three million refugees today. Betts's central argument is that even in low-income hosting countries, the right mix of policies can ensure that refugees not merely survive in misery but can instead thrive and generate wealth for themselves, their communities, and the host country. In particular, his analysis suggests that providing refugees with civil and economic rights, allowing them to work, and integrating them more completely in the receiving communities can lead to much better outcomes. 🌍

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Letters to the Editor

POWER TO THE PEOPLE?

To the Editor:

We appreciated Pippa Norris's generous review of our book *Backsliding* ("Voters Against Democracy," May/June 2021). Unfortunately, however, it misses not only important aspects of our argument but also key dimensions of the very concept of backsliding.

Norris argues that we focus primarily on elites and thus miss larger changes in electorates and the failure of democratic institutions to deliver the goods. As she puts it, "Haggard and Kaufman treat demand-side factors, the forces that allow illiberal leaders to rise, as secondary. They assume a limited role for the public: voters provide a market for illiberal political appeals, sending illiberal leaders into office, but then are seen as passively accepting the consequences." She even goes so far as to claim that we have a "'great man' theory of history."

Nothing could be further from the truth. We do define backsliding as purposeful institutional change led by would-be autocrats, but precisely in contexts in which they have gained office in free and fair elections. The electorate is baked into the very concept of backsliding. As Norris notes, it is ultimately voters who acquiesce to majoritarian and even authoritarian appeals.

Moreover, the starting point in our causal story is polarization, and among publics as well as elites. Autocrats may

stoke polarization, but the tinder has to be in place for the fire to start. It is precisely such polarization that contributes to the government dysfunction that Norris claims we ignore. Yet in our book, we made our storyline clear: polarization operates through stalemated institutions, growing public disaffection with democratic procedures, and voters' support for autocrats who offer supposed solutions that cut through procedural niceties.

Norris also chastises us for our narrow and highly heterogeneous sample of 16 cases, but our selection was self-conscious. Backsliding is an incremental deterioration of democratic institutions and norms in countries that have attained a modicum of democracy to begin with. Not all forms of democratic regression fit this definition. What is striking is precisely that the diverse countries in our sample show common patterns: histories of polarization, a crucial role for legislative acquiescence—a key component of our argument that Norris ignores—and strategies of stealth and incrementalism. There is much more to be said on backsliding, including about its invidious foreign policy consequences. But Norris's objections cover ground that is fully addressed in *Backsliding*.

STEPHAN HAGGARD

*Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of
Korea-Pacific Studies, University of
California, San Diego*

ROBERT R. KAUFMAN

*Distinguished Professor of Political
Science, Rutgers University*

Norris replies:

As my review noted, Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman's book makes an invaluable contribution to the debate

over the deterioration of democratic institutions, norms, and practices. But as their letter suggests, *Backsliding* emphasizes top-down explanations focused on the role of autocrats (or would-be autocrats), who are seen to stoke polarization, and on the importance of “stalemated institutions.” They write, “We do define backsliding as purposeful institutional change led by would-be autocrats.” Right. In this view, the electorate is a facilitator of executive power but not a primary driver of it; voters “acquiesce,” but they are not the reason democracy is eroding. The public is treated as the Greek chorus in the wings—not the principal lead. This is a common view in the media.

That was the key point of my review. As the political scientist Ronald Inglehart and I demonstrate in our book *Cultural*

Backlash, it is structural and cultural changes in mass society that are the primary long-term drivers of backsliding—resulting in consequences for institutions and opportunities for strategic elites.

There is clearly room for supply-side, demand-side, and institutional accounts in the literature on democratic regression. Analysts do not and should not have to artificially pick one or another in any comprehensive understanding. But there are profound differences in those accounts in theoretical emphasis and empirical evidence. 🌐

FOR THE RECORD

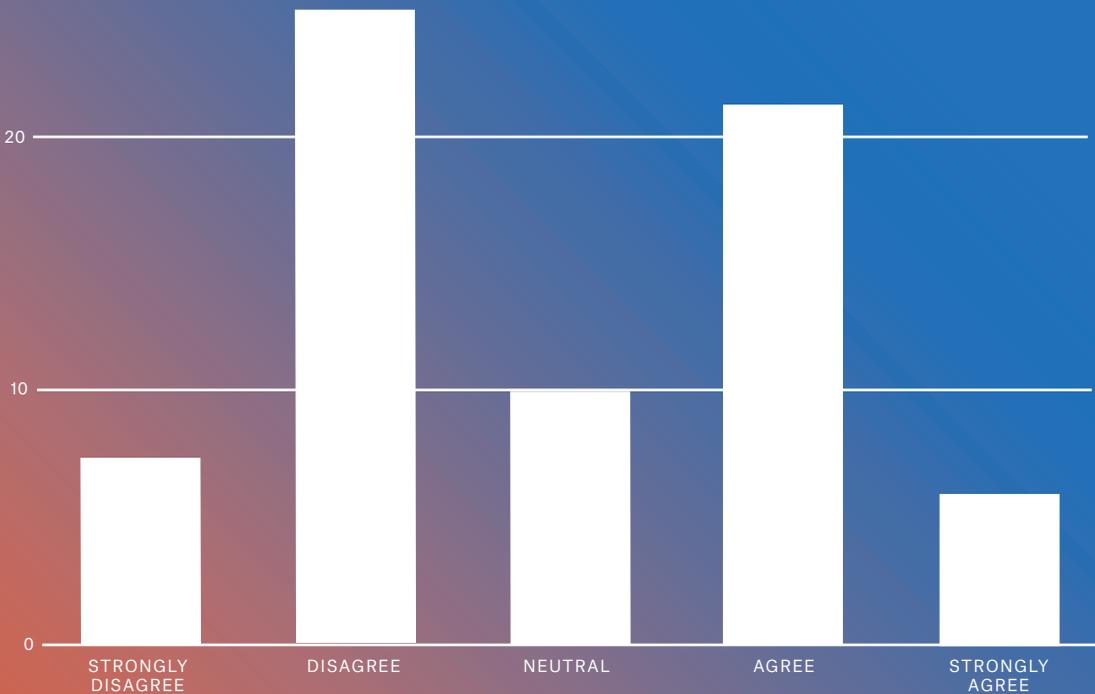
A review of *Policing Iraq* (September/October 2021) incorrectly described the city of Sulaymaniyah as the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq. The region’s capital is Erbil.

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Too Hostile to China?

Foreign Affairs Brain Trust

We asked dozens of experts whether they agreed or disagreed that U.S. foreign policy has become too hostile to China. The results are below.



DISAGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 8

Oriana Skylar Mastro

Center Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, and Senior Nonresident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

“While it’s true that the United States has decided to push back against some nefarious Chinese activities, the U.S. approach is still relatively measured. For better or for worse, Washington has at its disposal far more ‘hostile’ options that it has yet to exercise.”



STRONGLY AGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 10

J. Stapleton Roy

Former U.S. Ambassador to China, Indonesia, and Singapore and former Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research

“By overreacting to China, the United States is misplaying a strong hand and lessening Asian countries’ confidence that Washington can manage its relationship with China in a manner consistent with their interests.

We can do much better.”

→ See the full responses at ForeignAffairs.com/USChina

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