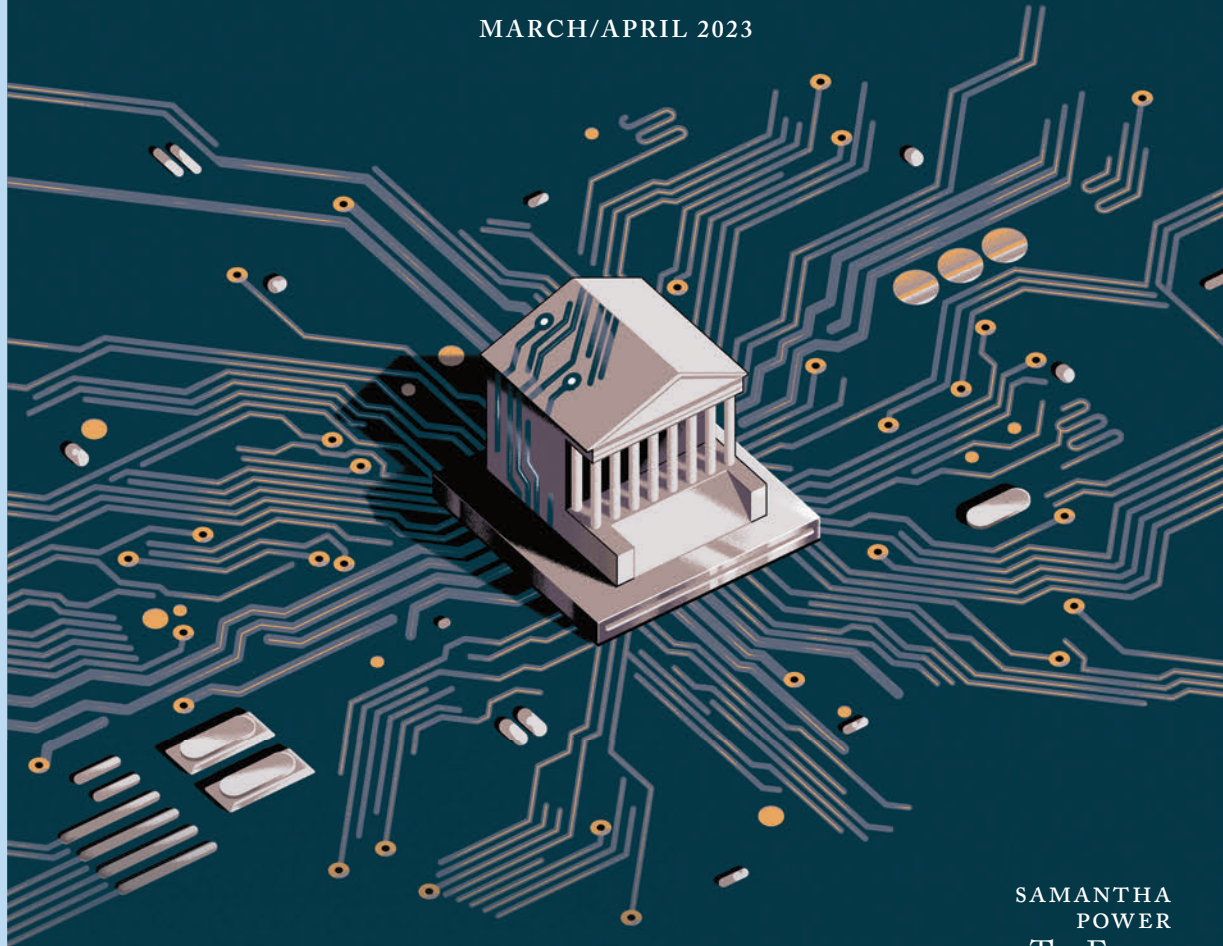


# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2023



## Innovation Power

How Technology Will Reshape Geopolitics

ERIC SCHMIDT · LANT PRITCHETT · DAN WANG

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*Volume 102, Number 2*

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Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

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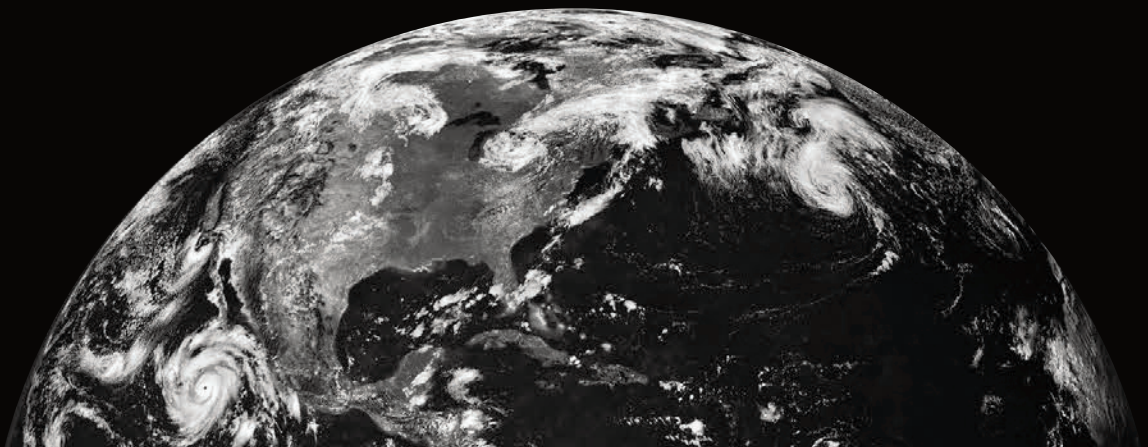
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# The Reckoning That Wasn't

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## Why America Remains Trapped by False Dreams of Hegemony

ANDREW J. BACEVICH

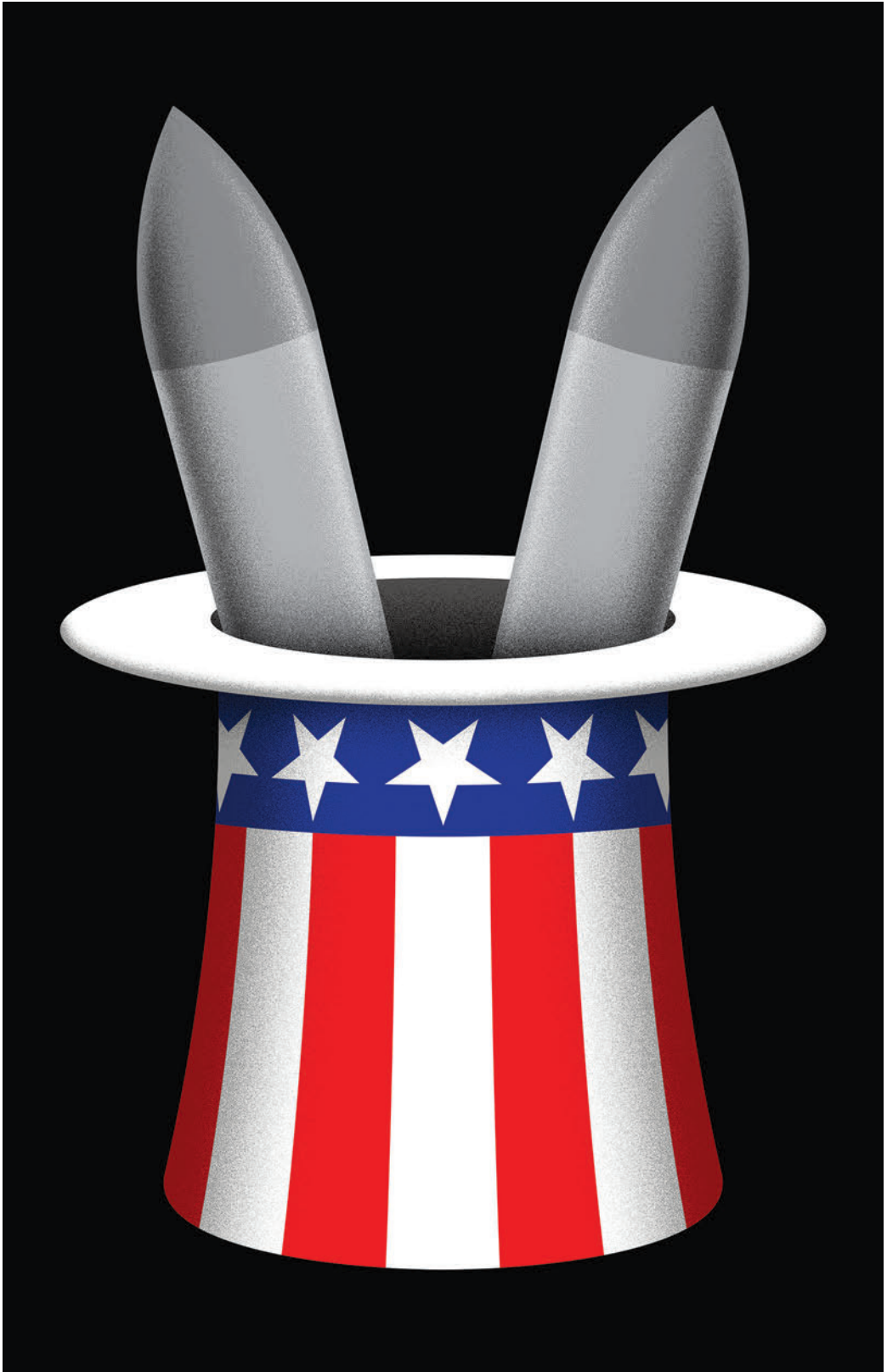
Over the course of many evenings in 1952 and 1953, when I was a kindergartner, my family gathered around a hand-me-down TV in the Chicago housing project where we lived to watch *Victory at Sea*. With stirring music and solemn narration, this 26-part documentary produced by NBC offered an inspiring account of World War II as a righteous conflict in which freedom had triumphed over evil, in large part thanks to the exertions of the United States. The country had waged a people's war, fought by millions of ordinary citizens who had answered the call of duty. The war's outcome testified to the strength of American democracy.

Here was history in all its seductive and terrible magnificence. Here, too, was truth: immediate, relevant, and compelling, albeit from a strictly American point of view. If the series had an overarching message, it was

---

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this: the outcome of this appalling conflict had inaugurated a new age in which the United States was destined to reign supreme.

The series had a profound effect on me, reinforced by the fact that both of my parents had served in the war. For them and for others of their generation, the great crusade against Germany and Japan was to remain the defining event of their lives and seemed destined to define the lives of future generations, as well.

Yet *Victory at Sea* hinted at difficulties ahead. The concluding episode was titled “Design for Peace” but offered nothing of the sort. Instead, it conveyed something more akin to a warning. “One bomb from one plane and 78,000 human beings perish,” the narrator intoned, as a camera panned across images of a devastated Hiroshima. “Two bombs, and World War II is over.” Grainy footage of liberated concentration camps and scenes of homeward-bound troops flickered across the screen. Then, with a cryptic reference to “the free world on its march to tomorrow” and a quote from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill extolling the importance of resolution, defiance, magnanimity, and goodwill, the series simply ended. To discern what the most devastating conflict of all time signified politically or morally, viewers would have to look elsewhere.

The abrupt ending made a certain amount of sense. After all, by the time *Victory at Sea* aired, certain wartime U.S. allies had become bitter adversaries, a race was underway to build nuclear weapons even more lethal than those the United States had dropped on Japan, and American troops were once more engaged in combat, this time in Korea, in a conflict that would not end in even the approximation of victory. If anyone had a design for peace, it had been shelved. This much appeared certain: American global supremacy would not be uncontested.

Even so, for most Americans, World War II remained the authoritative source of relevant memory, with the Cold War a sequel of sorts. Just as U.S. leadership in World War II had defeated the Third Reich and imperial Japan, so, too, would Washington turn back the Soviet threat and ensure the survival of freedom. As the two events merged in the country’s collective imagination, they yielded a canonical lesson: U.S. global leadership backed by superior military power had become a categorical imperative.

In fact, the hard-won victory of 1945 would turn out to be neither validation nor harbinger. It proved instead to be a source of illusions. In the 1960s, the costly and divisive war in Vietnam seemed to demolish those illusions; the collapse of communism at the end of the 1980s

momentarily revived them. The post-9/11 misadventures Washington undertook in pursuing its global “war on terror” once again exposed the claims of U.S. military supremacy as specious.

The disappointing outcomes of the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq should have sounded a wake-up call akin to the one experienced by the United Kingdom in 1956, after the British government orchestrated an intervention to reassert its control of the Suez Canal and, more broadly, put Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in his place. The ensuing debacle resulted in a singular humiliation that cost British Prime Minister Anthony Eden his job. Eden’s rival, British Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell, described the Suez operation as “an act of disastrous folly” that did “irreparable harm to the prestige and reputation of our country.” Few observers disputed that judgment. The crisis obliged the British to acknowledge that their imperial project had reached a dead end. The old way of doing things—whipping weaker peoples into line—was no longer going to work.

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The Iraq war represents the acme of American military folly.

The past two decades might have functioned as an extended “Suez moment” for the United States. But the U.S. foreign policy establishment has refused to move on, clinging to the myth that what the world needs is more American military power. The failure in Iraq did not prevent Washington from doubling down on its “good war” in Afghanistan—an act of rashness that culminated in a chaotic, humiliating withdrawal in 2021.

That spectacle could have served as an occasion to declare an end to the era defined by World War II, the Cold War, and the aspirations to which they gave rise. But thanks in no small part to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the moment soon passed. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has revived the postwar tradition of American muscle flexing. The Afghan war, the longest in U.S. history, has all but vanished from memory, as has the disastrous war of choice that Washington launched 20 years ago in Iraq. Partly as a result, the country seems poised to continue making the same mistakes that led to those debacles, all justified by the ostensible obligations of global leadership.

The war in Ukraine might offer one last chance for Washington to learn a Suez-style lesson—and without even suffering a defeat. So far, U.S. policy on Ukraine has been pragmatic and arguably restrained. But President Joe Biden and his team routinely talk about the war in

ways that suggest an outmoded, moralistic, and recklessly grandiose vision of American power. Aligning his administration's rhetorical posture with a sober assessment of the true stakes involved in Ukraine might allow Biden to wean the establishment from its obsession with hegemony. Demonstrating that Americans do not need their country's role in the world explained to them in the style of a children's bedtime story would be a bonus.

The danger is that the opposite could happen: Biden's framing of Ukraine as a crucible for a new era of military-backed American dominance might lock him in, and his administration's carefully calibrated policy could come to more closely resemble his soaring, ill-considered rhetoric. That, in turn, would lead to an altogether different and more disastrous reckoning.

#### WITH US OR AGAINST US

The most authoritative expression of the postwar worldview—the Rosetta stone of American statecraft in the Cold War—is NSC-68, a highly classified document drafted in 1950 by the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff, led at the time by Paul Nitze. Testifying to “the marvelous diversity, the deep tolerance, the lawfulness of the free society,” this ideologically charged document established the parameters of U.S. policy throughout the Cold War. Juxtaposed against that free society was “the slave society” of the Soviet Union, which demanded “total power over all men within the Soviet state without a single exception” along with “total power over all Communist Parties and all states under Soviet domination.”

With compelling clarity, NSC-68 made a case for American hegemony. It drew bright lines and erased ambiguities. “In a shrinking world,” the document asserted, “the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable.” This fact imposed on the United States “the responsibility of world leadership” along with an obligation “to bring about order and justice by means consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy.” Merely containing the Soviet threat would not suffice. Nor would feeding the world's hungry or succoring the afflicted. What the United States needed was the capacity and willingness to coerce. With that in mind, Washington committed itself to establishing a dominant military configured as a global police force. Statecraft became an adjunct of military might.

Undiminished by the passage of time, the Manichaean outlook woven into NSC-68 persists today, decades after the Cold War that





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inspired it. Biden's frequent insistence that the fate of humankind hinges on the outcome of a cosmic struggle between democracy and autocracy updates Nitze's central theme. The necessity of U.S. military supremacy—whether measured by Pentagon spending, the number of bases abroad, or a propensity to use force—has become an article of faith. As the world continues to “shrink” thanks to globalization and technological progress (and also to expand into space and cyberspace), the reach of U.S. military forces grows accordingly, a process that stirs little controversy.

But if the aim of U.S. hegemony has been to establish global order and justice through the prudent use of hard power, the results have been mixed at best. Since 1950, people in the English-speaking world and those living in some proximity to Paris and Tokyo have fared relatively well. By comparison, the benefits accruing to the billions living in the global South have been spotty; only occasionally has the opportunity to live longer and healthier lives translated into personal freedom and security. Government respect for individual rights and adherence to the rule of law remains more hope than reality.

Things could have been worse, of course. Imagine, for example, if during the Cold War, the United States had used any of the thousands of nuclear weapons it had acquired at enormous cost. Yet what actually did occur was bad enough. To reflect on the conduct and the consequences of American wars (and sundry covert interventions) since 1950 is to confront an appalling record of recklessness, malfeasance, and waste.

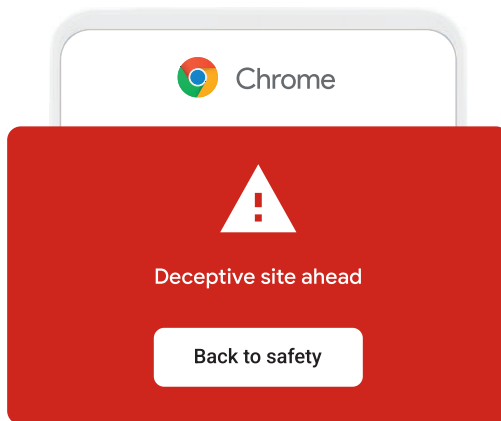
The Iraq war, which began 20 years ago, represents the acme of American military folly—second only to the Vietnam War. Launched with expectations of unleashing a tidal wave of liberation that would transform the Middle East, Operation Iraqi Freedom instead produced a mournful legacy of death and destruction that destabilized the region. For a time, supporters of the war consoled themselves with the thought that the removal from power of the Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein had made the world a better place. Today, no amount of sophistry can sustain that claim.

Many ordinary Americans might consider it too harsh to declare that all the sacrifices made by U.S. troops since World War II have been for naught. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the result in Iraq was more akin to a rule than to an exception. President Harry Truman's decision to send U.S. troops north of the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula in 1950 was an epic blunder, albeit one eclipsed 15 years later by President Lyndon Johnson's decision to commit U.S. combat



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troops to Vietnam. Beginning in 2001, the war in Afghanistan gave new meaning to the term “quagmire.” As for Iraq, it remains impossible to refute Barack Obama’s 2002 denunciation, delivered when he was a state senator in Illinois, of the approaching U.S. invasion as a “dumb,” “rash,” “cynical attempt” by “weekend warriors” to “shove their own ideological agendas down our throats.”

Yet in each case, those choices served as concrete expressions of what American global leadership seemed to require in the moment. According to the logic embedded in NSC-68, to pass by the opportunity to liberate and unify the two Koreas or to allow the Republic of Vietnam to fall to communism would have been the height of irresponsibility. So, too, would allowing the Taliban to retain power in Kabul. Take seriously the claim that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction (and was intent on developing more), and his removal could be seen as a political and moral imperative.

In each instance, however, egregiously faulty judgment squandered—there is no other word—vast troves of American wealth and thousands of American lives (not to mention hundreds of thousands of non-American lives). Brown University’s Costs of War project has estimated that U.S. military actions since the 9/11 attacks have cost around \$8 trillion, a sum several dozen times greater than that approved for the Biden administration’s highly touted “Building a Better America” infrastructure initiative. And it is hard to see how the benefits of those military operations outweighed the costs.

Yet the basic logic that favored intervention in all those cases remains intact. Even Biden, who as vice president opposed a major surge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and who as president ultimately withdrew the troops, has not forsaken a fundamental belief in the enduring efficacy of American military power. His response to defeat in Afghanistan was to propose an increase in Pentagon spending. Congress not only agreed but chipped in a bonus.


#### WHICH IKE DO YOU LIKE?

The clout wielded by the sprawling U.S. national security apparatus partially explains why this mindset has persisted. On that score, the famous admonition conveyed in President Dwight Eisenhower’s farewell address in January 1961 has lost none of its relevance. In that speech, Eisenhower warned against “the disastrous rise of misplaced power” in the hands of “the military-industrial complex.” He also





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proposed a solution: “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry” to keep the country’s “huge industrial and military machinery of defense” in check “so that security and liberty may prosper together.” But his hope was misplaced. On matters related to national security, Americans have proven to be more indifferent than watchful. Many Americans still revere Eisenhower. But it is not the president of 1961 to whom they tend to look for inspiration but the general of 1945, who secured the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich.

The victory in World War II bestowed a new sense of purpose on U.S. policy, which was subsequently codified in NSC-68. But it also imposed a straitjacket. As the scholar David Bromwich has recently written, “The Second World War is the picture that has held us captive.” In important respects, the story of U.S. national security policy over the past seven decades centers on an effort to preserve and update that picture. The overarching aim has been to engineer another such victory, thereby delivering security, prosperity, deference, and privilege—or, more broadly, a world run on American terms, a dominance justified by a self-assigned mission to spread freedom and democracy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the collapse of communism and the U.S. victory in the 1990–91 Gulf War seemed, for a brief moment, to bring that world within reach. Here were victories that, taken together, arguably compared in scope to that of 1945. The alleged “end of history” had resulted in a unipolar order over which a sole superpower presided as the world’s “indispensable nation.” Today, such phrases fall into the same category as “white man’s burden” and “the war to end all wars”: they can only be employed ironically. Yet they accurately reflect the intoxication that overtook political elites after 1989. Never has a country putatively devoted to noble causes created or underwritten more mayhem than did the United States following the Cold War, as it set out to smite evildoers everywhere.

Washington’s ideology-fueled bender lasted until 2016, when Donald Trump upended American politics. As a candidate for president, Trump vowed to chart a different course, one that would put “America first.” That seemingly benign phrase had explosive connotations, harking back to widespread popular opposition to possible U.S. intervention on behalf of the United Kingdom as it resisted Nazi aggression. Trump was not simply promising a less belligerent foreign policy. Knowingly or not, he was threatening to jettison the moral underpinnings of postwar American statecraft.

NATO countries were “not paying their fair share” and were “ripping off the United States,” Trump complained during a characteristic rant at a 2016 campaign rally. “And you know what we do? Nothing. Either they have to pay up for past deficiencies or they have to get out. And if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO.” He returned to this theme again and again, including in his inaugural address. “We’ve defended other nations’ borders while refusing to defend our own, and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas, while America’s infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay,” Trump declared. “We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon.” Not anymore, he pledged: “from this day forward, it’s going to be only America first.”

Such heresies triggered a nervous breakdown from which the U.S. foreign policy establishment has yet to fully recover. Of course, Trump’s mendacity and historical illiteracy made it hard to tell whether he even grasped what the phrase “America first” signified. And even if he did, his staggering incompetence and short attention span allowed the status quo to survive. During Trump’s term in office, the endless war that started after 9/11 dragged on. Alliances remained intact. With minor adjustments, so, too, did the country’s military footprint abroad. At home, the military-industrial complex prospered. A costly modernization of the U.S. nuclear strike capabilities continued, attracting minimal attention. All in all, the essentials of the NSC-68 paradigm survived, as did the conviction that World War II somehow retained its relevance as a policy touchstone. “Isolationist” remained an epithet hurled at anyone not supporting the vigorous use of U.S. power abroad to cure the world’s ills.

Yet even as establishment thinking about the U.S. role in the world remained mired in the past, the world itself was undergoing profound changes. And herein lies a central paradox of the Trump presidency: Trump’s vow to abandon the postwar paradigm led the establishment to circle the wagons and mount a spirited defense of the NSC-68 framework—even as the United States confronted a rising tide of problems to which that framework was all but irrelevant. The list is long: the rise of China, a deepening climate crisis, a loss of control of the U.S. southern border, the evaporation of working-class

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Trump’s heresies triggered a nervous breakdown in the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

opportunities, skyrocketing drug-related fatalities, a brutal pandemic, and domestic upheaval spurred by polarization along racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, partisan, and religious lines. Those divisions fueled Trump's election in 2016, allowed him to win an even larger number of votes in his losing reelection campaign, and made possible his effort to prevent the peaceful transfer of power and overthrow the constitutional order in the wake of his defeat.

#### THE MYTHMAKERS

These cascading failures and shortcomings and the inability of the postwar vision of U.S. power to contend with them seemed to herald a Suez moment. Instead, in the history of U.S. statecraft, the Biden presidency marks a turning point when things didn't turn. Midway through Biden's term, U.S. grand strategy is mired in a tangle of unacknowledged contradictions. Preeminent among them is Washington's insistence that the United States must sustain the now hallowed model of militarized global leadership even as the relevance of that model diminishes, the resources available to pursue it dwindle, and the prospects of preserving the country's privileged place in the international order decline. Yet the foreign policy establishment insists there is no conceivable alternative to militarized American leadership—pointing above all to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to make its case.

In this view, the war in Ukraine revalidates NSC-68. But the Russian army is not the Red Army—not even close. Unless Putin opts to use nuclear weapons, an unlikely scenario, Russia poses a negligible threat to the security and well-being of the United States. A Russian army that can't even make it to Kyiv doesn't pose much of a danger to Berlin, London, or Paris, much less to New York City. The ineptitude displayed by Russia's military reinforces the argument that European democracies, should they make the effort, are more than capable of providing for their own security. In sum, for Washington, the war should have bolstered the case for classifying Russia as someone else's problem. If the United States has nearly \$50 billion to spare (the amount that Congress allotted to assist Ukraine between February 2022 and November 2022), it should use that money to alleviate climate change, address the border crisis, or ameliorate the distress of working-class Americans—vital tasks that the Biden administration treats with far less urgency than arming Ukraine.



Biden has spoken of the war in Ukraine in sweeping terms that echo the rhetoric of earlier eras. “Now is the hour: our moment of responsibility, our test of resolve and conscience of history itself,” he intoned in a State of the Union address delivered barely a week after Russia invaded Ukraine, in February 2022. “And we will save democracy.” Such a moment and such a task would seem to involve not only demonstrating commitment and resolve but also making sacrifices and hard choices. But the U.S. effort in Ukraine has not required those things; it is a proxy war, and Biden has wisely pledged that despite the alleged existential stakes for democracy, no U.S. troops will fight on behalf of Ukraine. Harking back to NSC-68, administration rhetoric, compounded by an endless stream of media commentary, has created the impression that the Ukraine war has summoned the United States to once again grab the tiller of history and steer humankind toward its intended destination. But this is precisely the sort of hubris that has led the country astray time and again.

It is hard to imagine a better chance to move past this self-satisfied posturing and find a more responsible way to talk about and understand the U.S. role in the world—but Biden seems determined to miss the opportunity. Consider this passage from the administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy:

Around the world, the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. Meanwhile, shared challenges that impact people everywhere demand increased global cooperation and nations stepping up to their responsibilities at a moment when this has become more difficult. In response, the United States will lead with our values, and we will work in lockstep with our allies and partners and with all those who share our interests. We will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure.

This word salad offers something for everyone but is devoid of specificity and cannot serve as a basis for a coherent policy. Marketed as a statement of strategy, it instead testifies to the absence of strategy.

#### THE KENNAN WAY

What the United States needs today is a clear statement of strategic purpose that will replace the zombie NSC-68 paradigm. Almost unnoticed, such an alternative has been available ever since the heady days

following the U.S. victory in World War II. In 1948, at the outset of the Cold War, George Kennan, Nitze's predecessor as director of policy planning, proposed an approach to measuring the success of U.S. policy that was devoid of ideological fantasies. Noting that the United States at that moment possessed "about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population," he suggested that the task ahead was "to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security."

The aim was to keep Americans safe while preserving and even enhancing the material abundance that made the United States the envy of the world. Achieving that goal, according to Kennan, would require the United States "to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming" and concentrate "on our immediate national objectives." The country could ill afford "the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction," Kennan wrote.

Kennan's long memorandum outlined in considerable detail how the United States should deal with the problems of the postwar world. That world no longer exists. So it is not the particulars of his analysis that should command attention today but the spirit that informs it: realism, sobriety, and an appreciation of limits, along with an emphasis on purposefulness, discipline, and what Kennan called "economy of effort." In 1948, Kennan feared that Americans might succumb to "the romantic and universalistic concepts" that had sprouted during the recent war. He was right to worry.

Since 1948, the economic disparity to which Kennan referred has dwindled. Yet it has not disappeared: today, the United States accounts for just over four percent of the world's population but still holds around 30 percent of the world's wealth. And within the country, the distribution of that wealth has shifted dramatically. In 1950, the richest 0.1 percent of Americans controlled around 10 percent of the country's wealth; today, they control close to 20 percent of it. Meanwhile, the country's fiscal health has declined: the total U.S. national debt now exceeds \$31 trillion, with the federal deficit having averaged more than a trillion dollars per year since 2010.

A combination of grotesque inequality and feckless profligacy goes a long way toward explaining why such an immense and richly endowed country finds itself unable to contend with dysfunction at home and crises abroad. Military might cannot compensate for an absence of internal cohesion and governmental self-discipline. Unless the United

States gets its house in order, it has little hope of exercising global leadership—much less prevailing in a mostly imaginary competition pitting democracy against autocracy.

Washington urgently needs to follow the advice that Kennan offered in 1948 and that generations of policymakers have ignored: avoid needless war, fulfill the promises in the country's founding documents, and provide ordinary citizens with the prospect of a decent life. A place to begin is to reconfigure the U.S. military into a force designed to protect the American people rather than to serve as an instrument of global power projection. The United States should require the Defense Department to defend.

What might that look like in practice? For starters, it would mean taking seriously the obligation, embedded in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, to eliminate nuclear weapons; closing down various regional military headquarters, with U.S. Central Command first on the chopping block; reducing the size of the U.S. military footprint abroad; prohibiting payments to military contractors for cost overruns; putting a lock on the revolving door that sustains the military-industrial complex; reinvigorating congressional war powers as specified by the U.S. Constitution; and, barring a declaration of war, capping military spending at two percent of GDP—which would still allow the Pentagon to lead the world in military expenditures.

In 1947, in perhaps the most famous essay ever to appear in *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan, using the byline “X,” wrote that “to avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.” Today, those traditions may be in tatters, but Kennan's counsel has lost none of its salience. The chimera of another righteous military triumph cannot fix what ails the United States. Only the “alert and knowledgeable citizenry” that Eisenhower called for can fill the needs of the moment: a polity that refuses to tolerate the further misuse of American power and the abuse of American soldiers that have become the hallmarks of our time. 🌐

# How Democracy Can Win

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## The Right Way to Counter Autocracy

SAMANTHA POWER

**W**hen U.S. President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, the United States had just witnessed four of the most turbulent years in recent memory, culminating in the failed insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Without a doubt, American democracy had been shown to be far more fragile than it was when Biden left the vice presidency in 2017.

The picture abroad wasn't much brighter. Populist parties with xenophobic and antidemocratic tendencies were gaining momentum in both established and nascent democracies. The world's autocracies seemed newly emboldened. Russia was clamping down on dissent at home and encouraging authoritarianism abroad through election interference, disinformation campaigns, and the actions of its paramilitary Wagner Group. Meanwhile, China's government had become even more repressive at home and more assertive abroad,

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stripping Hong Kong of its autonomy and leveraging its vast bilateral financial investments to secure support for its policies in international institutions. In February 2022, just three weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a new strategic partnership that they claimed would have "no limits."

But early 2022 may prove to be a high-water mark for authoritarianism. Putin's ambitions to dominate Ukraine failed miserably, thanks to the unwavering resolve and courage of the Ukrainian people. Putin made mistake after strategic mistake while the free people of Ukraine successfully mobilized, innovated, and adapted.

The root causes of Moscow's disastrous showing are numerous, but several bear the hallmarks of authoritarianism. Graft has rotted the Russian military from within, yielding reports of soldiers selling fuel and weapons on the black market. Russian commanders have taken massive risks with the lives of their soldiers: conscripts arrive at the front having been lied to and manipulated rather than properly trained. To avoid upsetting their superiors, military leaders have supplied overly rosy assessments of their ability to conquer Ukraine, leading one pro-Russian militia commander to call self-deception "the herpes of the Russian army."

Russia's ghastly conduct in Ukraine has left Moscow more isolated than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Most European countries are in a race to decouple their economies from Russia, and Finland and Sweden are on the brink of joining an expanded and united NATO. Public opinion of Russia and Putin has plummeted in countries around the world, reaching record lows, according to the Pew Research Center. In Russia's immediate neighborhood, Moscow's traditional security and economic partners are staying neutral, refusing to host joint military exercises, seeking to reduce their economic dependence on Russia, and upholding the sanctions regimes. Russians themselves are voting with their feet: officially, hundreds of thousands of citizens have fled, but the true number is likely well over one million and includes tens of thousands of valued high-tech workers.

The past few years have also demonstrated the shortcomings of Beijing's model. In 2020 and 2021, senior Chinese officials claimed that the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the superiority of their system. They regularly took potshots at the United States for its high COVID-19 death toll. Unquestionably, the United



States and other democracies made mistakes in handling COVID-19. But unlike Chinese citizens, dissatisfied voters in these countries were able to elect new leaders and consequently change their governments' approach to the pandemic. By contrast, Beijing withheld vital data from the World Health Organization, refused to work with other nations in developing a vaccine, and stuck with its harsh "zero COVID" policy until late 2022. It continues to be opaque about the COVID-19 situation in China, limiting the international community's understanding of potential variants.

Elsewhere, public support for populist parties, leaders, and antipluralist attitudes has dropped significantly since 2020, in part because of how populist-led governments mishandled the pandemic. Between mid-2020 and the end of 2022, populist leaders saw an average decline of 10 percentage points in their approval ratings in 27 countries analyzed by researchers at Cambridge University. In the same time frame, prominent leaders with autocratic tendencies lost power at the ballot box. And American democracy has proved resilient; the U.S. Congress passed meaningful electoral reforms and held powerful public investigations into the events leading up to January 6.

Autocrats are now on the back foot. Under Biden's leadership, the United States and countries around the world have joined forces to protect and strengthen democracy at home and abroad and to work together on challenges such as climate change and corruption. After a year of faltering authoritarianism and stubborn democratic resilience, the United States and other democracies have a chance to regain their momentum—but only if we learn from the past and adapt our strategies. For the last three decades, advocates of democracy have focused too narrowly on defending rights and freedoms, neglecting the pain and dangers of economic hardship and inequality. We have also failed to contend with the risks associated with new digital technologies, including surveillance technologies, that autocratic governments have learned to exploit to their advantage. It is time to coalesce around a new agenda for aiding the cause of global freedom, one that addresses the economic grievances that populists have so effectively exploited, that defangs so-called digital authoritarianism, and that reorients traditional democracy assistance to grapple with modern challenges.

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The world's  
autocrats are  
finally on the  
defensive.

NOT A FRAGILE FLOWER

In his address to the British Parliament in 1982, U.S. President Ronald Reagan observed that “democracy is not a fragile flower; still, it needs cultivating.” Since then, the cultivation of democracy abroad has largely meant the provision of what we call democracy assistance: funding to support independent media, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, civil society, pluralistic political parties, and free and fair elections.

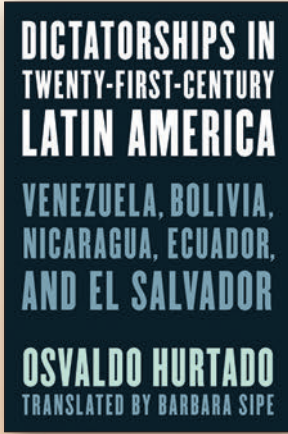
This assistance from the United States, which grew from just over \$106 million in 1990 to over \$520 million in 1999, supported democratic actors in countries locked behind the Iron Curtain as they became proud, thriving members of a free Europe. After brave protesters broke the grip of Soviet rule, our assistance helped newly independent countries establish everything from public broadcasters to independent judiciaries. Similar initiatives aided reformers throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America as they solidified their democracies.

Although it is difficult to measure just how much these programs have advanced democratic progress around the world, multiple studies have identified ways in which democracy assistance from the United States and other donors has supported positive outcomes. The U.S. Agency for International Development, the institution I lead and the largest provider of democracy assistance in the world, has had “clear and consistent impacts” on civil society, judicial and electoral processes, media independence, and overall democratization, according to one study of the agency’s democracy promotion programs between 1990 and 2003. A later study commissioned by USAID found that every \$10 million of democracy assistance it provided between 1992 and 2000 contributed to a seven-point jump on the 100-point global electoral democracy index maintained by the nonprofit Varieties of Democracy.

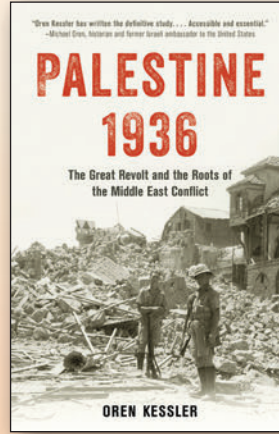
But the same study showed that these positive effects began to falter in the years after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Between 2001 and 2014, the same amount of investment only saw an increase of a third of a point—still two and a half times more than the average annual change among countries in the electoral democracy index over that period, but a much more diminished impact than in previous years.

Of course, a host of interrelated factors contribute to democracy’s struggles: polarization, significant inequality and widespread economic dissatisfaction, the explosion of disinformation in the public sphere, political gridlock, the rise of China as a strategic competitor

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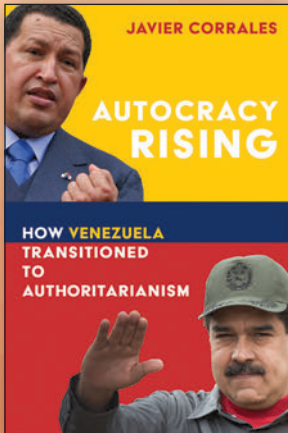


“[T]he reader can expect to be dazzled by the sheer brilliance of the analysis, which is matched by a degree of academic objectivity that is remarkable in one who spent fifty years fighting the evils of dictatorship.”  
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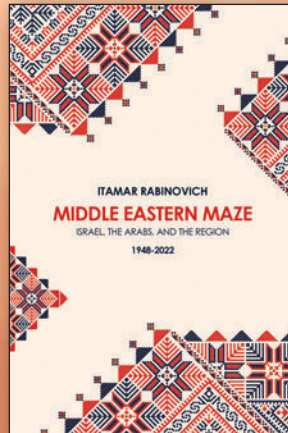


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of the United States, and the spread of digital authoritarianism aimed at repressing free expression and expanding government power. Many of these challenges can only be solved domestically. But those of us invested in the global renewal of democracy must help societies address economic concerns that antidemocratic forces have exploited; take the fight for democracy into the digital realm, just as autocracies have; and adapt our toolkit to meet not just long-standing challenges to democracy but also new ones.

#### BLINDED BY THE RIGHTS

At the core of democratic theory and practice is respect for the dignity of the individual. But among the biggest errors many democracies have made since the Cold War is to view individual dignity primarily through the prism of political freedom without being sufficiently attentive to the indignity of corruption, inequality, and a lack of economic opportunity.

This was not a universal blind spot: a number of political figures, advocates, and individuals working at the grassroots level to advance democratic progress presciently argued that economic inequality could fuel the rise of populist leaders and autocratic governments that pledged to improve living standards even as they eroded freedoms. But too often, the activists, lawyers, and other members of civil society who worked to strengthen democratic institutions and protect civil liberties looked to labor movements, economists, and policymakers to address economic dislocation, wealth inequality, and declining wages rather than building coalitions to tackle these intersecting problems.

Democracy suffered as a result. Over the past two decades, as economic inequality rose, polls showed that people in rich and poor countries alike began to lose faith in democracy and worry that young people would end up worse off than they were, giving populists and ethnonationalists an opening to exploit grievances and gain a political foothold on every continent.

Moving forward, we must look at all economic programming that respects democratic norms as a form of democracy assistance. When we help democratic leaders provide vaccines to their people, bring down inflation or high food prices, send children to school, or reopen markets after a natural disaster, we are demonstrating—in a way that a free press or vibrant civil society cannot always do—that democracy delivers. And we are making it less likely that autocratic forces will take advantage of people's economic hardship.

Nowhere is that task more important today than in societies that have managed to elect democratic reformers or throw off autocratic or antidemocratic rule through peaceful mass protests or successful political movements. These democratic bright spots are incredibly fragile. Unless reformers solidify their democratic and economic gains quickly, populations understandably grow impatient, especially if they feel that the risks they took to upend the old order have not yielded tangible dividends in their own lives. Such discontent allows opponents of democratic rule—often aided by external autocratic regimes—to wrest back control, reversing reforms and snuffing out dreams of rights-regarding self-government.

The task before reformist leaders is enormous. Often they inherit budgets laden with debt, economies hollowed out by corruption, civil services built on patronage, or a combination of all three. When Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema took office in 2021 after winning a landslide victory over an incumbent whose regime had arrested him more than a dozen times, he discovered that his predecessors had accumulated over \$30 billion in unserviceable debt, nearly one and a half times the country's GDP, with very little new infrastructure or return on borrowing to show for it. In Moldova, where the anticorruption advocate Maia Sandu was elected president in 2020, a single corruption scandal had previously siphoned off a whopping 12 percent of the country's GDP.

To help rising democracies overcome such hurdles, USAID has stepped up with additional support. We have identified and increased our investment in a number of democratic bright spots, including the Dominican Republic, Malawi, the Maldives, Moldova, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia. That list is by no means comprehensive, and admittedly some of these bright spots shine more intensely than others in their commitment to democratic reform. But all are working to fight corruption, create more space for civil society, and respect the rule of law. Biden has also created a special fund at USAID so we can move quickly to help bright spots deliver on their key economic priorities as they pursue reforms and consolidate democratic gains.

But we don't just want to boost our assistance to these countries; we want to help them prosper beyond the impact of our programming.

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We must break down the wall that separates democratic advocacy from economic development work.



The U.S. government's flagship food security initiative, Feed the Future, which works with agribusiness, retailers, and university research labs to help countries improve their agricultural productivity and exports, recently expanded to include Malawi and Zambia. USAID has also partnered with Vodafone to expand the reach of a mobile app called m-mama to every region in Tanzania. The app is akin to an Uber for expectant mothers, helping pregnant women who lack ambulance services reach health facilities and contributing to a significant decrease in maternal mortality. In Moldova, which is pushing ahead with anti-corruption reforms despite ramped-up economic pressure from Russia, USAID has worked to increase the country's trade integration with Europe. And at the UN General Assembly in September, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and I gathered the heads of state of many of these rising democracies, together with corporate executives and private philanthropies, to encourage new partnerships.

That event illustrated a crucial point: strengthening democratic reformers cannot be the task of government alone. All who believe in the importance of transparent and accountable governance must mobilize whenever there is a democratic opening, helping reformers deliver tangible benefits to their people. For governments and multilateral institutions, that could mean enacting favorable policy reforms, lowering tariffs or quotas, or simply making high-level official visits to visibly embrace reformers. For foundations, philanthropies, and civil society, that could mean offering new grants and partnerships. And for businesses and financial institutions, it could mean expanding existing investments or exploring new ones. Even individuals can do their part to support democracy by considering a democratic bright spot for their next vacation.

#### PRINCIPLED AID

Everywhere they provide assistance, democratic countries must be guided by and seek to promote democratic principles—including human rights, norms that counter corruption, and environmental and social safeguards. In contrast to the approach of autocratic governments, we showcase the potential benefits of our democratic system when we provide assistance in a fair, transparent, inclusive and participatory manner—strengthening local institutions, employing local workers, respecting the environment, and providing benefits equitably in a society.





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The gift of grain: unloading USAID wheat shipments, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, September 2021

Over the past four decades, Beijing has transformed from one of the largest recipients of foreign assistance to the largest bilateral provider of development finance, mostly in the form of loans. Through its enormous infrastructure investments, Beijing has helped many developing countries build seaports, railways, airports, and telecommunications infrastructure. But the second-order effects of China's financing can undermine the long-term development objectives of partner countries and the health of their institutions. Much of the development financing China offers, even to highly indebted poor countries, is provided at nonconcessional market rates through opaque agreements hidden from the public. According to the World Bank, 40 percent of the debt owed by the world's poorest countries is held by China. And attempts by highly indebted borrowers such as Zambia to restructure their debts to China have been slow and fractured, with Chinese lenders rarely agreeing to reductions in interest rates or the principal.

Because they are subject to little public oversight, Beijing's loans are often diverted for personal or political gain. A 2019 study in the *Journal of Development Economics* found that Chinese lending to African countries increased closer to elections and that funds disproportionately wound up in the hometowns of political leaders. These loans skirt local labor and environmental safeguards and help the

Chinese government secure access to natural resources and strategic assets, boosting state-owned or state-directed enterprises.

Democratic donor countries and private businesses must increase their investments in projects that elevate economic and social inclusion and strengthen democratic norms—decisions that ultimately yield not only more equitable results but also stronger development performance. Together with the rest of the G-7, the United States plans to mobilize \$600 billion in private and public investment by 2027 to finance global infrastructure. Crucially, we will do so in a way that advances the needs of partner countries and respects international standards—a model for all such investments moving forward. This new Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment will finance clean energy projects and climate-resilient infrastructure; fund the responsible mining of metals and critical minerals, directing more of the profits to local and indigenous groups; expand access to clean water and sanitation services that particularly benefit women and the disadvantaged; and expand secure and open 5G and 6G digital networks so that countries don't have to rely on Chinese-built networks that may be susceptible to surveillance.

#### DIGITAL DANGERS

Like inequality and economic privation, potentially dangerous digital technologies have not received nearly enough attention from most democracies. The role that such tools have played in the rise of autocratic governments and ethnonationalist movements can hardly be overstated. Authoritarian regimes use surveillance systems and facial recognition software to track and monitor critics, journalists, and other members of civil society with the goal of repressing opponents and stifling protests. They also export this technology abroad; China has provided surveillance technology to at least 80 countries through its Digital Silk Road initiative.

Part of the problem is a lack of global norms and legal or regulatory frameworks that embed democratic values into tech design and development. Even in democratic countries, programmers often have to define their own professional ethics on the fly, developing boundaries for powerful technologies while also trying to meet ambitious quarterly goals that leave them little time to reflect on the human costs of their products.

Biden came into office recognizing the vital role technology will play in shaping our future. That is why his administration partnered

with 60 other governments to release the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, which outlines a shared positive vision for digital technologies as well as a blueprint for an AI bill of rights so that artificial intelligence is used in line with democratic principles and civil liberties. In January 2023, the United States also assumed the chair of the Freedom Online Coalition, a group of 35 governments committed to reinvigorating international efforts to advance Internet freedom and counter the misuse of digital technology.

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Democracy is not  
in decline. Rather,  
it is under attack.

To build resilience to digital authoritarianism, we are kicking off a major new digital democracy initiative that will help partner governments and civil society assess the threats that misuse of technologies pose to citizens. We launched a new initiative with Australia, Denmark, Norway, and other partners

to better align our export controls with our human rights policies. We blacklisted flagrant offenders, such as Positive Technologies and nso Group, both of which sold hacking tools to authoritarian governments. And in the coming months, the White House will finalize an executive order barring the U.S. government from using commercial spyware that poses a security threat or a significant risk of improper use by a foreign government or person.

But perhaps the biggest threat to democracy from the digital realm is disinformation and other forms of information manipulation. Although hate speech and propaganda are not new, the rise of mobile phones and social media platforms has enabled disinformation to spread at unprecedented speed and scale, even in remote and relatively disconnected regions of the world. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, 81 governments have used social media in malign campaigns to spread disinformation, in some cases in concert with the regimes in Moscow and Beijing. Both countries have spent vast sums manipulating the information environment to fit their narratives by disseminating false stories, flooding search engines to drown out unfavorable results, and attacking and doxxing their critics.

The most important step the United States can take to counter foreign influence campaigns and disinformation is to help our partners promote media and digital literacy, communicate credibly with their publics, and engage in “pre-bunking”—that is, seeking to inoculate their societies against disinformation before it can spread.

In Indonesia, for example, USAID has worked with local partners to develop sophisticated online courses and games that help new social media users identify disinformation and reduce the likelihood that they will share misleading posts and articles.

The United States has also helped Ukraine in its fight against the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation. For decades, USAID has worked to enhance the media environment in the country, encouraging reforms that allow greater access to public information and supporting the emergence of strong local media organizations, including the public broadcaster Suspilne. After Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, our work expanded to help the country's local journalists produce Russian-language programming that could reach into Kremlin-occupied territories, such as *Dialogues With Donbas*, a YouTube channel that featured honest conversations with Ukrainians about life behind Russian lines. We also helped support the production of the online comedy show *Newspalm*, which regularly racks up tens of thousands of views as it skewers Putin's lies. And even before Moscow's full-scale invasion began in February 2022, we worked with the government of Ukraine to stand up the Center for Strategic Communications, which uses memes, well-produced digital videos, and social media and Telegram posts to poke holes in Kremlin propaganda.

#### A RECIPE FOR RENEWAL

Despite these successes, the global fight against digital authoritarianism remains fragmented and underfunded. The United States and other democracies must work more closely with the private sector and civil society groups to identify challenges, build partnerships, and increase investments in digital freedom around the world. At the same time, we must react to new challenges that journalists, election monitors, and anticorruption advocates face, updating democracy assistance programming to respond to ever-evolving threats.

To that end, the United States has launched several new initiatives—many of them inspired by activists, civil society, and pro-democracy nongovernmental organizations—under the banner of the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, which Biden unveiled at his 2021 Summit for Democracy. For instance, we have heard from independent journalists around the world that one of the major impediments to their work, in addition to death threats and intimidation, is lawsuits brought against them by those whose corruption they seek to expose.



These frivolous lawsuits can cost journalists and their outlets millions of dollars, putting some out of business and creating a chilling effect for others. In addition to helping strengthen the physical security of news organizations, therefore, USAID has established a new insurance fund, Reporters Shield, that will help investigative journalists and civil society actors defend themselves against bogus charges. In recognition of the economic challenges all traditional media outlets face even in the United States, we have also organized a new effort to help media organizations that are struggling financially develop business plans, lower costs, find audiences, and tap into new sources of revenue so that they do not go bankrupt when independent journalism is needed most.

The United States is also working with its partners to support free and fair electoral processes around the world. Autocrats no longer simply stuff ballot boxes on election day; they spend years tilting the playing field through cyber-hacking and voter suppression. Together, the leading global organizations that support electoral integrity, both within governments and outside them, have formed the Coalition for Securing Election Integrity to establish a consistent set of norms for what constitutes a free and fair election. The coalition will also help identify critical elections that the United States and other donor countries can help support and monitor.

Finally, we are taking a much more aggressive and expansive approach to fighting corruption, going beyond addressing the symptoms—petty bribes and shady backroom deals—to tackle the root causes. In late 2021, for instance, the Biden administration announced the first U.S. strategy on anticorruption, which recognizes corruption as a national security threat and lays out new ways to tackle it. We are also working with partner governments to detect and root out corruption that is occurring on a grand international scale, abetted by an industry of shadowy facilitators. In Moldova, for instance, we helped the country's electoral commission to encourage greater transparency in financial disclosures so that external actors looking to exert influence over elections cannot hide their contributions. And in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia, where USAID had previously closed its missions, we have restarted assistance to local institutions in part to support their efforts to curb corruption.

At the same time, we are raising the costs of corruption by bringing to light massive multinational schemes to hide illicit gains. We support global investigative units that unite forensic accountants and journalists



to expose illicit dealings, including those detailed in the Luxembourg Leaks and the Pandora Papers. And as corruption grows more complex and global in scope, we are helping link investigative journalists across borders, including in Latin America, where such efforts have uncovered the mismanagement of nearly \$300 million in public funding.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

Democracy is not in decline. Rather, it is under attack. Under attack from within by forces of division, ethnonationalism, and repression. And under attack from without by autocratic governments and leaders who seek to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of open societies by undermining election integrity, weaponizing corruption, and spreading disinformation to strengthen their own grip on power. Worse, these autocrats increasingly work together, sharing tricks and technologies to repress their populations at home and weaken democracy abroad.

To fend off this coordinated assault, the world's democracies must also work together. That is why in March 2023, the Biden administration will host its second Democracy Summit—this time, held simultaneously in Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, the United States, and Zambia—where the world's democracies will take stock of their efforts and put forward new plans for democratic renewal.

After years of democratic backsliding, the world's autocrats are finally on the defensive. But to seize this moment and swing the pendulum of history back toward democratic rule, we must break down the wall that separates democratic advocacy from economic development work and demonstrate that democracies can deliver for their people. We must also redouble our efforts to counter digital surveillance and disinformation while upholding freedom of expression. And we must update the traditional democratic assistance playbook to help our partners respond to ever more sophisticated campaigns against them. Only then can we beat back antidemocratic forces and extend the reach of freedom. 🌐

# Innovation Power

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## Why Technology Will Define the Future of Geopolitics

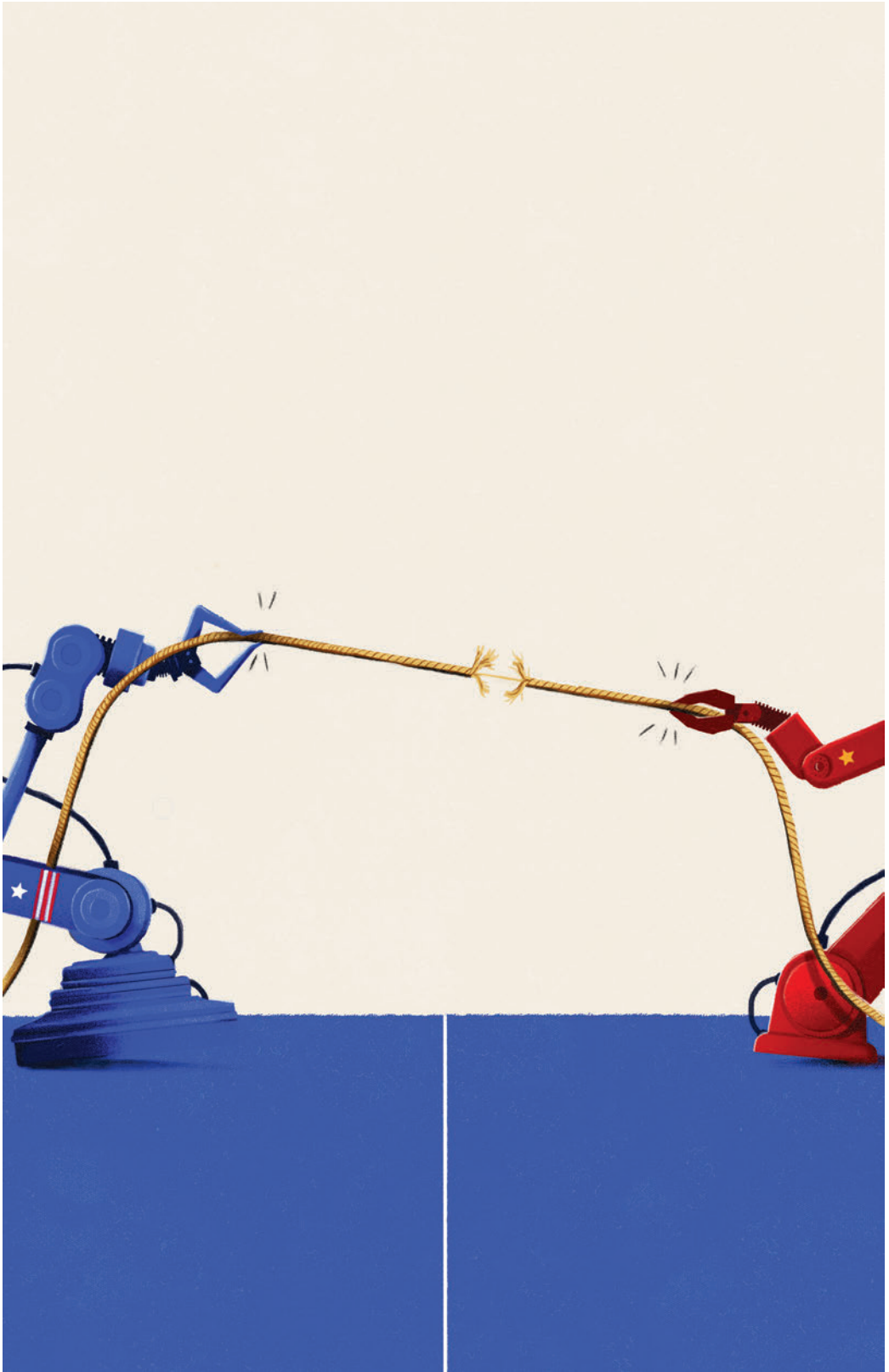
ERIC SCHMIDT

**W**hen Russian forces marched on Kyiv in February 2022, few thought Ukraine could survive. Russia had more than twice as many soldiers as Ukraine. Its military budget was more than ten times as large. The U.S. intelligence community estimated that Kyiv would fall within one to two weeks at most.

Outgunned and outmanned, Ukraine turned to one area in which it held an advantage over the enemy: technology. Shortly after the invasion, the Ukrainian government uploaded all its critical data to the cloud, so that it could safeguard information and keep functioning even if Russian missiles turned its ministerial offices into rubble. The country's Ministry of Digital Transformation, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had established just two years earlier,

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repurposed its e-government mobile app, Diia, for open-source intelligence collection, so that citizens could upload photos and videos of enemy military units. With their communications infrastructure in jeopardy, the Ukrainians turned to Starlink satellites and ground stations provided by SpaceX to stay connected. When Russia sent Iranian-made drones across the border, Ukraine acquired its own drones specially designed to intercept their attacks—while its military learned how to use unfamiliar weapons supplied by Western allies. In the cat-

and-mouse game of innovation, Ukraine simply proved nimbler. And so what Russia had imagined would be a quick and easy invasion has turned out to be anything but.

Ukraine's success can be credited in part to the resolve of the Ukrainian people, the weakness of the Russian military, and the strength of Western support. But it also owes to the defining new force of international politics: innova-

tion power. Innovation power is the ability to invent, adopt, and adapt new technologies. It contributes to both hard and soft power. High-tech weapons systems increase military might, new platforms and the standards that govern them provide economic leverage, and cutting-edge research and technologies enhance global appeal. There is a long tradition of states harnessing innovation to project power abroad, but what has changed is the self-perpetuating nature of scientific advances. Developments in artificial intelligence in particular not only unlock new areas of scientific discovery; they also speed up that very process. Artificial intelligence supercharges the ability of scientists and engineers to discover ever more powerful technologies, fostering advances in artificial intelligence itself as well as in other fields—and reshaping the world in the process.

The ability to innovate faster and better—the foundation on which military, economic, and cultural power now rest—will determine the outcome of the great-power competition between the United States and China. For now, the United States remains in the lead. But China is catching up in many areas and has already surged ahead in others. To emerge victorious from this century-defining contest, business as usual will not do. Instead, the U.S. government will have to overcome its stultified bureaucratic impulses, create favorable conditions for innovation, and invest in the tools and talent needed to kick-start the virtuous cycle of technological advancement. It needs to commit itself

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Increasingly,  
AI systems will  
start making  
decisions  
themselves.

to promoting innovation in the service of the country and in the service of democracy. At stake is nothing less than the future of free societies, open markets, democratic government, and the broader world order.

#### KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

The nexus between technological innovation and global domination dates back centuries, from the muskets the conquistador Francisco Pizarro wielded to defeat the Inca Empire to the steamboats Commodore Matthew Perry commanded to force the opening of Japan. But the sheer speed at which innovation is happening has no precedent. Nowhere is this change clearer than in one of the foundational technologies of our time: artificial intelligence.

Today's AI systems can already provide key advantages in the military domain, where they are able to parse millions of inputs, identify patterns, and alert commanders to enemy activity. The Ukrainian military, for example, has used AI to efficiently scan intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data from a variety of sources. Increasingly, however, AI systems will move beyond merely assisting human decision-making and start making decisions themselves. John Boyd, a military strategist and U.S. Air Force colonel, coined the term "OODA loop"—observe, orient, decide, act—to describe the decision-making process in combat. Crucially, AI will be able to execute each part of the OODA loop much faster. Conflict can happen at the speed of computers, not the speed of people. As a result, command-and-control systems that rely on human decision-makers—or, worse, complex military hierarchies—will lose out to faster, more efficient systems that team machines with humans.

In previous eras, the technologies that shaped geopolitics—from bronze to steel, steam power to nuclear fission—were largely singular. There was a clear threshold of technological mastery, and once a country reached it, the playing field was leveled. Artificial intelligence, by contrast, is generative in nature. By presenting a platform for continuous scientific and technological innovation, it can lead to yet more innovation. That phenomenon makes the AI age fundamentally different from the Bronze Age or the steel age. Rather than natural resource wealth or mastery of a given technology, the source of a country's power now lies in its ability to continuously innovate.

This virtuous cycle will only get faster and faster. Once quantum computing comes of age, superfast computers will allow for the



Liftoff: testing a prototype of a homemade weaponized drone, Kyiv, Ukraine, November 2022

processing of ever-larger amounts of data, producing ever-smarter AI systems. These AI systems, in turn, will be able to produce breakthrough innovations in other emerging fields, from synthetic biology to semiconductor manufacturing. Artificial intelligence will change the very nature of scientific research. Instead of making progress one study at a time, scientists will discover the answers to age-old questions by analyzing massive data sets, freeing the world's smartest minds to devote more time to developing new ideas. As a foundational technology, AI will be critical in the race for innovation power, lying behind countless future developments in drug discovery, gene therapy, material science, and clean energy—and in AI itself. Faster airplanes did not help build faster airplanes, but faster computers will help build faster computers.

Even more powerful than today's artificial intelligence is a more comprehensive technology—for now, given current computing power, still hypothetical—called “artificial general intelligence,” or AGI. Whereas traditional AI is designed to solve a discrete problem, AGI should be able to perform any mental task a human can and more. Imagine an AI system that could answer seemingly intractable questions, such as the best way to teach a million children English or to treat a case of Alzheimer's disease. The advent of AGI remains years, perhaps even



decades, away, but whichever country develops the technology first will have a massive advantage, since it could then use AGI to develop ever more advanced versions of AGI, gaining an edge in all other domains of science and technology in the process. A breakthrough in this field could usher in an era of predominance not unlike the short period of nuclear superiority the United States enjoyed in the late 1940s.

Whereas many of AI's most transformative effects are still far off, innovation in drones is already upending the battlefield. In 2020, Azerbaijan employed Turkish- and Israeli-made drones to gain a decisive advantage in its war against Armenia in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, racking up battlefield victories after more than two decades of military stalemate. Similarly, Ukraine's fleet of drones—many of which are low-cost commercial models repurposed for reconnaissance behind enemy lines—have played a critical role in its successes.

Drones offer distinct advantages over traditional weapons: they are smaller and cheaper, offer unmatched surveillance capabilities, and reduce soldiers' risk exposure. Marines in urban warfare, for example, could be accompanied by microdrones that serve as their eyes and ears. Over time, countries will improve the hardware and software powering drones to outinnovate their rivals. Eventually, autonomous weaponized drones—not just unmanned aerial vehicles but also ground-based ones—will replace soldiers and manned artillery altogether. Imagine an autonomous submarine that could quickly move supplies into contested waters or an autonomous truck that could find the optimal route to carry small missile launchers across rough terrain. Swarms of drones, networked and coordinated by AI, could overwhelm tank and infantry formations in the field. In the Black Sea, Ukraine has used drones to attack Russian ships and supply vessels, helping a country with a minuscule navy constrain Russia's mighty Black Sea Fleet. Ukraine offers a preview of future conflicts: wars that will be waged and won by humans and machines working together.

As developments in drones make clear, innovation power underlies military power. First and foremost, technological dominance in crucial domains bolsters a country's ability to wage war and thus strengthens its deterrent capabilities. But innovation also shapes economic power by giving states leverage over supply chains and the ability to make the rules for others. Countries reliant on natural resources or trade, especially those that must import rare or foundational goods, face vulnerabilities others do not.

Consider the power China can wield over the countries it supplies with communications hardware. It is no surprise that countries dependent on Chinese-supplied infrastructure—such as many countries in Africa, where components produced by Huawei make up about 70 percent of 4G networks—have been loath to criticize Chinese human rights violations. Taiwan’s primacy in semiconductor manufacturing, likewise, provides a powerful deterrent against invasion, since China has little interest in destroying its largest source of microchips. Leverage also accrues to countries pioneering new technologies. The United States, thanks to its role in the foundation of the Internet, has for decades enjoyed a seat at the table defining Internet regulations. During the Arab Spring, for example, the fact that the United States was home to technology companies that provided the backbone of the Internet enabled those companies to refuse Arab governments’ censorship requests.

Less obvious but also crucial, technological innovation buoys a country’s soft power. Hollywood and tech companies such as Netflix and YouTube have built up a trove of content for an increasingly global consumer base—all the while, helping spread American values. Such streaming services project the American way of life into living rooms around the world. Similarly, the prestige associated with U.S. universities and the opportunities for wealth creation created by U.S. companies attract strivers from across the globe. In short, a country’s ability to project power in the international sphere—militarily, economically, and culturally—depends on its ability to innovate faster and better than its competitors.

#### RACE TO THE TOP

The main reason innovation now lends such a massive advantage is that it begets more innovation. In part, it does so because of the path dependency that arises from clusters of scientists attracting, teaching, and training other great scientists at research universities and large technology companies. But it also does so because innovation builds on itself. Innovation relies on a loop of invention, adoption, and adaptation—a feedback cycle that fuels yet more innovation. If any link in the chain breaks, so, too, does a country’s ability to innovate effectively.

A lead in invention is typically built on years of prior research. Consider the way the United States led the world into the 4G era of telecommunications. The rollout of 4G networks across the country

facilitated the early development of mobile applications such as Uber that required faster cellular data connections. With that lead, Uber was able to refine its product in the United States so it could roll it out in developing countries. This led to many more customers—and much more feedback to incorporate—as the company adapted its product for new markets and new releases.

But the moat around countries that enjoy structural advantages in technology is shrinking. Thanks in part to more accessible academic research and the rise of open-source software, technologies now diffuse more quickly around the world. The availability of new advances has helped competitors catch up at record speed, as China eventually did in 4G. Although some of China's recent technological success stems from economic espionage and a disregard for patents, much of it traces back to innovative, rather than derivative, efforts to adapt and implement new technology.

Indeed, Chinese companies have enjoyed resounding success in adopting and commercializing foreign technological breakthroughs. In 2015, the Chinese Communist Party laid out its “Made in China 2025” strategy to achieve self-sufficiency in high-tech industries such as telecommunications and AI. As part of this bid, it announced an economic plan of “dual circulation,” whereby China intends to boost both domestic and foreign demand for its goods. Through public-private partnerships, direct subsidies to private companies, and support for state-backed companies, Beijing has poured billions of dollars into ensuring it comes out ahead in the race for technological supremacy. So far, the record is mixed. China is ahead of the United States in some technologies yet lags in others.

It is hard to say whether China will seize the lead in AI, but top officials in Beijing certainly think it will. In 2017, Beijing announced plans to become the global leader in artificial intelligence by 2030, and it may achieve that goal even earlier than expected. China has already accomplished its goal of becoming the world's leader in AI-based surveillance technology, which it not only uses to control dissidents at home but also sells to authoritarian governments abroad. China still ranks behind the United States in attracting the best minds in AI, with almost 60 percent of top-tier researchers working in U.S. universities. But China's loose privacy laws, mandatory data collection,

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**Innovation  
begets more  
innovation.**

and targeted government funding give the country a key advantage. Indeed, it already leads in the production of autonomous vehicles.

For now, the United States still retains an edge in quantum computing. Yet over the past decade, China has invested at least \$10 billion in quantum technology, roughly ten times as much as the U.S. government. China is working to build quantum computers so powerful that they will easily crack today's encryption. The country is also investing heavily in quantum networks—a way of transmitting

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More than half of all AI researchers in the United States hail from abroad.

information in the form of quantum bits—presumably in the hope that such networks would be impervious to monitoring by other intelligence agencies. Even more alarming, the Chinese government may already be storing stolen and intercepted communications with an eye to decrypting them once it possesses the computing power to do so, a strategy known as “store now, decrypt later.”

When quantum computers become fast enough, all communications encrypted through non-quantum methods will be at risk for interception, raising the stakes of achieving this breakthrough first.

China is also actively trying to catch up with the United States in synthetic biology. Scientists in this field are working on a range of new biological developments, including microbe-made cement that absorbs carbon dioxide, crops with an increased ability to sequester carbon, and plant-based meat substitutes. Such technology holds enormous promise to fight climate change and create jobs, but since 2019, Chinese private investment in synthetic biology has outpaced U.S. investment.

When it comes to semiconductors, China has ambitious plans, too. The Chinese government is funding unprecedented efforts to become a leader in semiconductor manufacturing by 2030. Chinese companies are currently creating what are known in the industry as “seven nanometer” chips, but Beijing has set its sights further, announcing plans to domestically produce the new generation of “five nanometer” chips. For now, the United States continues to outperform China in semiconductor design, as do U.S.-aligned Taiwan and South Korea. In October 2022, the Biden administration took the important step of blocking leading U.S. companies producing AI computer chips from selling to China as part of a package of restrictions released by the Department of Commerce. Yet Chinese companies control

85 percent of the processing of the rare-earth minerals that go into these chips and other critical electronics, offering an important point of leverage over their competitors.

#### A BATTLE OF SYSTEMS

The competition between the United States and China is as much a competition between systems as it is between states. In the Chinese model of civil-military fusion, the government promotes domestic competition and funds emerging winners as “national champions.” These companies play a dual role, maximizing commercial success and advancing Chinese national security interests. The American model, on the other hand, relies on a more disparate set of private actors. The federal government provides funding to basic science but largely leaves innovation and commercialization to the market.

For a long time, the trifecta of government, industry, and academia was the primary source of American innovation. This collaboration drove many technological breakthroughs, from the moon landing to the Internet. But with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government grew averse to allocating funding for applied research, and it even lowered the amount devoted to fundamental research. Although private spending has taken off, public investments have plateaued over the past half century. In 2015, the share of government funding for basic research dropped below 50 percent for the first time since the end of World War II, having hovered around 70 percent in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the geometry of innovation—the respective role of public and private players in driving technological progress—has changed since the Cold War, in ways that have not always yielded what the country needs. The rise of venture capital helped accelerate adoption and commercialization, but it did little to address higher-order scientific problems.

The reasons for Washington’s reluctance to fund the science that serves as the foundation of innovation power are structural. Innovation requires risk and, at times, failure—something politicians are loath to accept. Innovation can demand long-term investments, but the U.S. government operates on a single-year budget cycle and, at most, a two-year political cycle. Despite these obstacles, Silicon Valley (along with other hot spots in the United States) has still managed to encourage innovation. The American success story relies on a potent mix of inspiring ambition, startup-friendly legal and tax regimes, and a culture of openness that allows entrepreneurs and researchers to iterate and improve on new ideas.



That may not be enough, however. Government support has long played a critical role in jump-starting innovation in the United States, and research in technologies that seem outlandish now may prove critical in the not-too-distant future. In 2013, for example, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency invested in messenger RNA vaccines, working with the biotech company Moderna, which would later develop and deliver a COVID-19 vaccine in record time. But such examples are rarer than they should be.

Competition with China demands a reenergizing of the interplay among the government, the private sector, and academia. Just as the Cold War led to the creation of the National Security Council, today's tech-fueled competition should spur a rethinking of existing policy-making structures. As the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (which I chaired) recommended, a new "technology competitiveness council," inspired by the NSC, could help coordinate action among private actors and develop a national plan to advance crucial emerging technologies. In a promising sign, Congress appears to have recognized the need for decisive support. In 2022, in a bipartisan vote, it passed the CHIPS and Science Act, which directs \$200 billion in funding for scientific R & D over the next ten years.

#### INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

As part of its effort to ensure that it remains an innovation superpower, the United States will need to invest billions of dollars in key areas of technological competition. In semiconductors, perhaps the most vital technology today, the U.S. government should redouble its efforts to onshore and "friend shore" supply chains, relocating them to the United States or friendly countries. In renewable energy, it should fund R & D for microelectronics, stockpile the rare-earth minerals (such as lithium and cobalt) needed for batteries and electric vehicles, and invest in new technologies that can replace lithium-ion batteries and offset China's resource dominance. Meanwhile, the rollout of 5G in the United States has been slow, in part because government agencies—most notably, the Department of Defense—control most of the high-frequency radio spectrum that 5G uses. To catch up with China, the Pentagon should open up more of the spectrum to private actors.

The United States will need to invest in all parts of the innovation cycle, funding not just basic research but also commercialization. Meaningful innovation requires both invention and implementation, the abil-

ity to execute and commercialize new inventions at scale. This is often the main stumbling block. Research in electric cars, for example, helped General Motors bring its first model onto the market in 1996, but it took two more decades before Tesla mass-produced a commercially viable model. Every new technology, from AI to quantum computing to synthetic biology, must be pursued with the clear goal of commercialization.

In addition to directly investing in the technologies that fuel innovation power, the United States must invest in the input that lies at the core of innovation: talent. The United States boasts the world's top startups, incumbent companies, and universities, all of which attract the best and the brightest from around the world. Yet too many talented people are prevented from coming to the United States by its outdated immigration system. Instead of creating an easy path to a green card for foreigners who earn STEM degrees from American schools, the current system makes it needlessly difficult for top graduates to contribute to the U.S. economy.

The United States has an asymmetric advantage when it comes to employing highly skilled immigrants, and its enviable living standards and abundant opportunities explain why the country has attracted most of the world's brightest AI minds. More than half of all AI researchers working in the United States hail from abroad, and the demand for AI talent still far exceeds supply. If the United States closes its doors to talented immigrants, it risks losing its innovative edge. Just as the Manhattan Project was led in large part by refugees and émigrés from Europe, the next American technological breakthrough will almost certainly rely on immigrants.

#### THE BEST DEFENSE

As part of its efforts to translate innovation into hard power, the United States must fundamentally rethink some of its defense policies. During the Cold War, the country designed various “offset” strategies to counterbalance Soviet numerical superiority through military strategy and technological innovations. Today, Washington needs what the Special Competitive Studies Project has called an “Offset-X” strategy, a competitive approach through which the United States can maintain technological and military superiority.

Given how much modern militaries and economies rely on digital infrastructure, any future great-power war is likely to start with a cyber-strike. The United States' cyberdefenses, therefore, need a response time faster than humans' reaction time. Having faced constant cyberattacks



Chipping away: on a semiconductor production line, Jiangsu Province, China, September 2022

even in peacetime, the United States should armor itself with redundancy, creating backup systems and alternative paths for data flows.

What starts in cyberspace could easily escalate into the physical realm, and there, too, the United States will need to meet new challenges. To counter possible swarm drone attacks, it must invest in defensive artillery and missile systems. To improve battlefield awareness, the U.S. military should focus on deploying a network of inexpensive sensors powered by AI to monitor contested areas, an approach that is often more effective than a single, exquisitely crafted system. As human intelligence becomes harder to obtain, the United States must increasingly rely on the largest constellation of sensors of any country, ranging from undersea to outer space. It will also need to focus more on open-source intelligence, given that most of the world's data today is publicly available. Without this capability, the United States risks being surprised by its intelligence failures.

When it comes to actual fighting, military units should be networked and decentralized to better outmaneuver opponents. Facing adversaries with rigid military hierarchies, the United States could gain an advantage by using smaller, more connected units whose members are adept at network-based decision-making, employing the tools of artificial intelligence to their advantage. For example, a single unit

could bring together capabilities in intelligence collection, long-range missile attacks, and electronic warfare. The Pentagon needs to provide battlefield commanders with all the best information and allow them to make the best choices on the ground.

The U.S. military must also learn to integrate new technologies into its procurement process, battle plans, and warfighting. In the four years that I chaired the Defense Innovation Board, I was astounded by how difficult this was to do. A major bottleneck is the Pentagon's burdensome procurement process: major weapons systems take more than ten years to design, develop, and deploy. The Department of Defense should look for inspiration in the way the tech industry designs products. It should build missiles the way companies now build electric cars, using a design studio to develop and simulate software, looking for innovations ten times as fast and as cost-effective as current processes. The current procurement system is especially ill suited for a future in which software primacy proves decisive on the battlefield.

The United States spends four times as much as any other country to procure military systems, but price is a poor metric for judging innovation power. In April 2022, Ukrainian forces fired two Neptune missiles at the *Moskva*, a 600-foot Russian warship, sinking the vessel. The ship cost \$750 million; the missiles, \$500,000 apiece. Likewise, China's state-of-the-art hypersonic antiship missile, the YJ-21, could someday sink a \$10 billion U.S. aircraft carrier. The U.S. government should think twice before committing another \$10 billion and ten years to such a vessel. It often makes more sense to buy many low-cost items instead of investing in a few high-ticket prestige projects.

#### PLAYING TO WIN

In the contest of the century—the U.S. rivalry with China—the deciding factor will be innovation power. Technological advances in the next five to ten years will determine which country gains the upper hand in this world-shaping competition. The challenge for the United States, however, is that government officials are incentivized to avoid risk and focus on the short term, leaving the country to chronically underinvest in the technologies of the future.

If necessity is the mother of invention, war is the midwife of innovation. Speaking to Ukrainians on a visit to Kyiv in the fall of 2022, I heard from many that the first months of the war were the most productive of their lives. The United States' last truly global

war—World War II—led to the widespread adoption of penicillin, a revolution in nuclear technology, and a breakthrough in computer science. Now, the United States must innovate in peacetime, faster than ever before. By failing to do so, it is eroding its ability to deter—and, if necessary, to fight and win—the next war.

The alternative could be disastrous. Hypersonic missiles could leave the United States defenseless, and cyberattacks could cripple the country's electric grid. Perhaps even more important, the warfare of the future will target individuals in completely new ways: authoritarian states such as China and Russia may be able to collect individual data on Americans' shopping habits, location, and even DNA profiles, allowing for tailor-made disinformation campaigns and even targeted biological attacks and assassinations. To avert these horrors, the United States needs to make sure it remains ahead of its technological competitors.

The principles that have defined life in the United States—freedom, capitalism, individual effort—were the right ones for the past and remain so for the future. These basic values lie at the foundation of an innovation ecosystem that is still the envy of the world. They have enabled breakthroughs that have transformed everyday life around the world. The United States started the innovation race in pole position, but it cannot rest assured it will remain there. Silicon Valley's old mantra holds true not just in industry but also in geopolitics: innovate or die. 🌐



# People Over Robots

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## The Global Economy Needs Immigration Before Automation

LANT PRITCHETT

**W**e live in a technological age—or so we are told. Machines promise to transform every facet of human life: robots will staff factory floors, driverless cars will rule the road, and artificial intelligence will govern weapons systems. Politicians and analysts fret over the consequences of such advances, worrying about the damage that will be done to industries and individuals. Governments, they argue, must help manage the costs of progress. These conversations almost always treat technological change as something to be adapted to, as if it were a force of nature, barreling inexorably into the staid conventions and assumptions of modern life. The pace of change seems irrepressible; new technologies will remake societies. All people can do is figure out how best to cope.

Nowhere is this outlook more apparent than in the discussion of automation and its impact on jobs. My local grocery store in rural

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Utah has hung, with no apparent sense of irony, a sign proclaiming the company's support for U.S. workers above a self-checkout machine, a device that uses technology to replace the labor of an employee with the labor of the customer. Much ink has been spilled in explaining how automation threatens some low-skilled workers and what governments should do to help: for instance, countries could support retraining initiatives, revamp education systems, or invest in redistributive schemes. At the same time, many governments hope that machines

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Automation is  
not inevitable;  
it is a choice.

can save their economies from the consequences of demographic decline and aging. Techno-optimists argue that the United States and many other wealthy countries need automation to make up for dwindling working-age populations and looming gaps in workforces. Happily, they suggest, the

advance of technology will sweep aside the troubles of demography.

But these debates and arguments miss a very simple point. As seismic as it may seem, technological change is not a natural force but the work of human beings. Of course, technology has radically improved human lives: no one wants to live without electricity, flush toilets, or (in Utah) central heating. In other cases, however, it is new policies, and not new technologies, that societies need most.

Automation is often a solution in search of a problem. It is a choice people have made, not an inevitability and certainly not a necessity. For instance, the United States faces a scarcity of truck drivers. The American Trucking Association has estimated that in 2021 there were 80,000 fewer drivers than the total needed and that, given the age of current drivers, over a million new ones will have to be recruited in the coming decade. To deal with this deficit, many tech moguls, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, have invested in the research and development of self-driving vehicles, technology that would reduce the demand for drivers. For Bezos, such technology makes corporate financial sense; Amazon relies on low shipping costs to keep its prices down. But it does not make wider economic sense because millions of people would be happy to drive trucks in the United States—they just need to be allowed to work in the country.

There is no global scarcity of people who would like to be long-haul truck drivers in the United States, where the median wage for such work is \$23 per hour. In the developing world, truck drivers make

around \$4 per hour. Yet firms cannot recruit workers from abroad even at the higher wage because of restrictions on immigration, so business leaders in the United States are impelled to choose machines over people and eradicate jobs through the use of technology. But if they could recruit globally, they would have less incentive to destroy those jobs and replace people with machines. The implacable fact of national borders steers businesses toward investing in technology that does not respond to global scarcities—and that no one really needs.

What is true for truck driving is also true for many other industries in the rich industrial world that require nonprofessional workers in specific work environments. A 2021 report by the financial services company Mercer estimated that, by 2025, the United States would face a shortage of some 660,000 home health aides, lab technicians, and nursing assistants.

Barriers to migration encourage a terrible misdirection of resources. In the world's most productive economies, the capital and energies of business leaders (not to mention the time and talents of highly educated scientists and engineers) get sucked into developing technology that will minimize the use of one of the most abundant resources on the planet: labor. Raw labor power is the most important (and often the only) asset low-income people around the world have. The drive to make machines that perform roles that could easily be fulfilled by people not only wastes money but helps keep the poorest poor.

To be sure, some social and political concerns regarding the cross-national movement of economic migrants are legitimate, including those about how such flows of people would be managed, affect current domestic workers, and create social tensions. Advocates are also right to worry about how migrant workers would be protected from exploitation. From the perspective of individual firms and industries, it is easier to figure out how to get artificial intelligence to drive a truck than it is to lower the bureaucratic barriers of immigration restrictions.

But choosing devices over people is a mistake. It leads the world to miss out on the real economic and humanitarian gains that would come from letting people move to where they are needed instead of trying to invent machines that can supplant humans. The refusal to allow people to cross national borders as economic migrants, especially to engage in jobs that require just core labor skills, massively distorts the trajectory of technological change in ways that make everybody, especially the world's poor, worse off.

RISE OF THE MACHINES

A popular view in the West holds that the governments of wealthy societies do not need to bring more workers into their countries. If anything, they can comfortably raise barriers as technological progress destroys so-called low-skill jobs. But this is just not the case.

Some technological changes are driven by progress in basic science. Often, discussions of the future of labor assume that the path and the pattern of technological change are already determined and that the effects on jobs and workers are just natural consequences of the inevitable progress of science. But economists have developed increasingly nuanced understandings of how technological change has reshaped labor markets and wages and how innovation is a consequence—not just a cause—of the costs that firms face.

For decades, economic and policy discussions about labor markets and technology had tended to focus on how shifts in wages reflected the skills of workers, where “skill” was treated as synonymous with “cognitive skill,” with a worker’s level of formal education as a rough proxy for cognitive skill. The standard analysis was that advances in information and communications technology have helped boost the incomes of highly educated workers and reduced those of all less-educated, low-skilled workers. But that is not what happened: although the wages of the highly skilled have risen in the United States since 1979 relative to those in the broad middle of earners, the wages in traditionally low-wage occupations also rose in percentage terms more than those in the middle—and over some periods by as much as those at the top.

Research by the economists David Autor, David Dorn, and others shows that the demand for various occupations in response to technology does not change in a simple linear relationship with worker skill but depends on the nature of the tasks that that worker must perform. Jobs in service occupations, such as food preparation, cleaning and janitorial work, maintenance, in-person health assistance, and security, involve manual and nonroutine tasks. Many manual nonroutine tasks are very difficult to either automate or offshore, as they require the direct physical presence of the worker, and so these jobs remain in demand, and their wages have remained robust even in the wake of technological advances.

Undoubtedly, truly revolutionary changes have occurred in how people communicate, seek information, organize and process data, and entertain themselves. But the notion that the rapid technological change

in some sectors of the economy in recent decades has accelerated the transformation of the entire economy is wildly off the mark. In fact, the growth of economic productivity in industrial countries by the standard measure of growth of “total factor productivity” (which assesses productivity by dividing total production, or output, by its costs, or inputs) has been considerably slower in recent decades than it was between the early twentieth century and 1970. Nearly every developed country has experienced a substantial deceleration in productivity growth since 1980.

Meanwhile, the supply of workers for manual, nonroutine tasks has markedly decreased in rich industrialized countries, thanks to dramatically lowered fertility and rising levels of education. The number of open jobs is increasingly out of sync with the number of domestic candidates available to fill those jobs. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics *Occupational Outlook Handbook* forecasts that, between 2021 and 2031, the occupational categories that require less than a college degree and for which existing median earnings are less than \$40,000 will see a net rise of more than five million new jobs, with home health and personal care aides adding around 924,000 jobs and cooks adding 419,000. But according to UN demographic projections, the number of people between the ages of 20 and 40 in the United States (not factoring in any migration) will fall by more than three million in the same period. The medium-term demographic future of the native born in the rich industrial world is already clear: by the 2040s, there will be millions too few native-born people in developed countries available to perform all the essential, nonroutine, manual tasks in the economy.

The more than trillionfold increase in computing power over the last century has radically changed those occupations in which people did routine and repetitive tasks. The African American women who made the moon landing possible (and were made famous in the movie *Hidden Figures*) worked for NASA as “computers,” busily making numerous calculations that machines can now make in an instant. There are no more human computers, and machines called computers are just markedly more effective than humans at computing. But for many tasks, no increase in computing power will make them more appropriate for machines to perform. Machines are not better at personal care, machines are not better cooks, and machines will not necessarily be better than people at driving trucks.

If self-driving trucks eventually proliferate on American roads, it will not be evidence of the relentless march of scientific progress.



Rather, their use will be a demonstration of something else entirely: the consequences of barriers to the movement of labor that create massive private financial incentives that, in turn, drive powerful people and corporations to undertake enormous investments of scarce human resources in technological innovation—with the wider result of replacing people with machines. Ultimately, U.S. firms opt for automation because it is far easier to solve even very hard technical problems, such as those that self-checkout machines and driverless vehicles attempt to solve, than it has been for countries to address the social and political obstacles that prevent them from allowing foreigners to do those jobs.

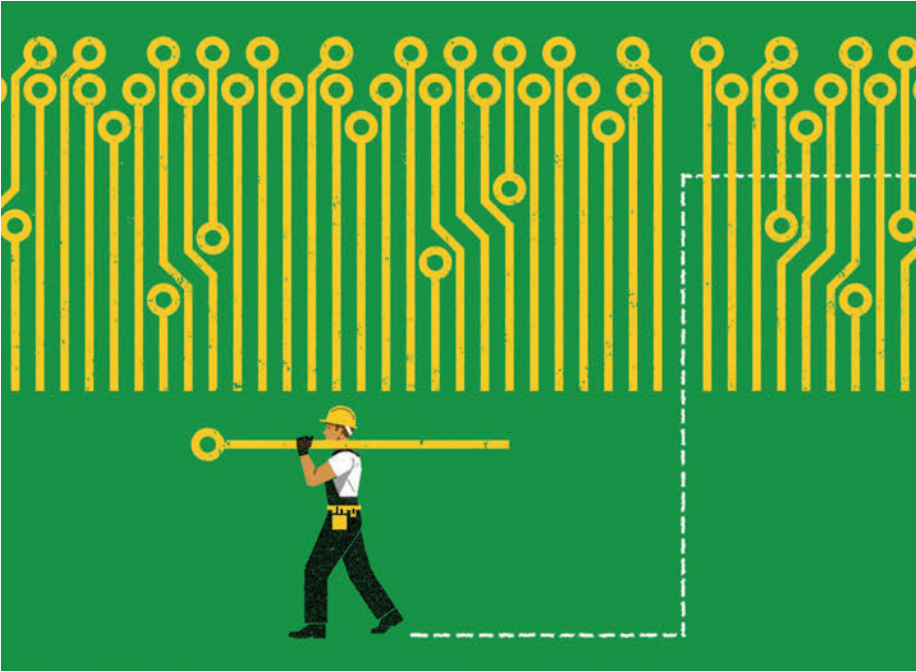
#### PRIDE OF PLACE

The arbitrary facts of birth, nationality, and citizenship profoundly affect people's lives. Where people are born and where they can move fundamentally shape how much money they can earn over the course of their life. Restricting the movement of people across borders creates a massive price differential between equally productive workers.

In research I did with co-authors, we looked at the earnings of workers born and educated in 42 different countries. We compared the earnings of those who remained in their home countries with those who worked in the United States. We adjusted these earnings for the differences in the price of goods and services between countries to take into account discrepancies in purchasing power. The wage differential for equally productive workers between the 42 countries we studied and the United States ranged from two to ten times as much in the United States, averaging around four times as much. Such proportions are evident across occupations (including those of waiters and truck drivers) and across education and skill levels.

This gulf in the wages of equally productive people in different countries is the largest policy-induced price distortion in the world today (and probably in all of human history). Barriers to migration generate an artificial scarcity of labor. Many industries in the United States struggle to find workers at labor costs they can afford. That deficit spurs companies to search for solutions through automation and other technologies that are unnecessary and inefficient.

Experience shows that letting more workers into a country would indeed change patterns of innovation. The United States has run this experiment before, in reverse. In the middle of the twentieth century, the United States allowed the seasonal migration of agricultural



guest workers from Mexico under the rubric of the Bracero Program. The government eventually slowed the program and finally stopped it entirely in 1964. Researchers compared the patterns of employment and production between those states that lost Bracero workers and those that never had them. They found that eliminating these workers did not increase the employment of native workers in the agricultural sector at all. Instead, farmers responded to the newly created scarcity of workers by relying more on machines and technological advances; for instance, they shifted to planting genetically modified products that could be harvested by machines, such as tomatoes with thicker skins, and away from crops such as asparagus and strawberries, for which options for mechanized harvesting were limited.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but false necessity is the mother of dumb inventions. Prohibition in the early twentieth century banned the importation, production, transportation, and sales of alcoholic beverages in the United States. These restrictions were an enormous boon to illegal distillers of moonshine, who saw demand for their booze explode. But their product needed to be shipped to thirsty drinkers. Just hiding flasks in boots (the origin of the term “bootlegger”) was insufficient. To transport more moonshine, people

built “moonshine runners”: vehicles that could speedily carry heavy shipments of moonshine without drawing attention. The development of moonshine runners required technological savvy and innovation, but they still represented a dumb invention. The banning of a perfectly ordinary economic transaction—buying alcohol—led not to better liquor trucks but to the innovation of making a liquor truck look like a regular vehicle, which was a pure waste of time and talent.

#### THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

Proponents of barriers to migration insist that they are necessary to protect the wages of current citizens, but that is not true. There have been times in the past century when governments were concerned that their country could not provide sufficient jobs for their citizenry, but the shifting demographics of the rich industrial world have changed that logic completely. For the foreseeable future, the challenge will be finding enough workers to fill available jobs. Even countries that have traditionally not welcomed immigrants, such as Japan, are now aggressively recruiting workers from abroad. They can do so with the knowledge that immigrants do not necessarily hurt the wages of natives. A 2017 National Academy of Sciences review found that the net impact of immigration on the average wages of domestic workers in the United States was either zero or, more likely, slightly positive. In economic terms, migrants are not substitutes for the typical U.S. worker, but complements, so that more migrants actually raise the average wage of citizens. Having more assistants, for instance, does not lower but rather raises the wages of skilled workers, such as nurses, by freeing more of their time for tasks that need their unique skills. Of course, some particularly disadvantaged U.S. workers may compete directly for jobs with migrants, but limitations on migration are neither an effective nor an efficient way to help those native workers. Programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit are a vastly more cost-effective means of buttressing the wages of domestic workers. I have done calculations to show that, even under more pessimistic assumptions about the negative impact of migrants on the wages of disadvantaged native workers, only a modest increase in the EITC is required to completely offset those losses—and it is a tiny fraction compared with the economic loss that would result from banning migrants in the first place.

The main economic losers from the restrictions rich countries place on labor mobility are the world’s poor. Decades of well-intentioned

development programs and aid initiatives cannot equal the benefit of permitting a person in a poor country to work in a wealthier, more productive one. If they want to help the world's poor, citizens of rich countries should understand that all the worthy development projects, antipoverty programs, and foreign aid to poor countries have an inconsequentially small effect compared with the benefits of just letting people move to the rich countries that need them and work for the going wage justified by their productivity.

For instance, a widely cited 2015 paper published in *Science* considered the effects of an antipoverty program that transferred livestock across six poor countries, with the goal of increasing the income of chronically poor households. The program spent \$4,545 per household in its first two years. By the third year, annual household consumption was higher by just \$344 on average across five of the six countries where the program produced positive results—Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Pakistan, and Peru. (In Honduras, nearly all the livestock died.) And, given that so many attempts through similar projects to raise the incomes of the poor had failed, this modest gain of \$344 in annual household consumption by spending \$4,545 was regarded by the authors as a major success.

By contrast, my research suggests that workers without a high school degree would make, on average, as much as \$13,119 more per year in the United States than would their counterparts in the five countries studied. Even if ten percent of the wage differential is absorbed in the travel costs of moving back and forth for a year, allowing the same low-skilled workers to be employed in the United States, rather than consigning them to their home country, would produce a boost in income 35 times larger than that enabled by an effective, well-designed, and well-implemented antipoverty program.

The phenomenon of global poverty today is not one of “poor people” but of people trapped in “poor places,” unable to leave because of barriers limiting their movement. The derisive caricature of poverty has it that people are poor because they lack “human capital,” but the reality is that the massive expansion of education in the developing world since the 1950s means that the average adult in Haiti today has had more schooling than the average adult in France had in 1970. But Haiti is a chaotic and low-productivity place to use any type of capital, including human capital; hence, most Haitians who have escaped poverty have done so by leaving their country. Some may fret about “brain drain,” the spurious notion that a poor country will be further immiserated

by losing its best and brightest overseas. The principal attraction of arguments regarding “brain drain” seems to be that the words rhyme, as there has never been any evidence that outward migration in general has harmed a country’s prospects. It is worth remembering that many of the richest countries in the world today—including Denmark, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden—had some of the highest emigration rates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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False necessity  
is the mother of  
dumb inventions.

Wage differentials create a deep desire to traverse national borders. Between 2015 and 2017, Gallup asked people around the world whether they would move permanently to another country if they could and, if so, to which country they would move. From these samples, one can estimate that around 750 million people would choose to leave their home countries permanently if they could (and even more people would be willing to move temporarily). Based on the survey, 158 million additional migrants would want to come to the United States; Australia, Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom would each receive around 30 million more migrants. This is not to say that these countries should or would accommodate so many migrants, but it does suggest that there is no shortage of people ready to come and work in rich countries.

The restrictions on mobility that create labor scarcity in rich countries perpetuate poverty for millions of people who are willing and able to work productively—but are prohibited from doing so. And the scarcity propels businesses to invest wastefully in technology that need not exist. Automation, in other words, is not inevitable but driven by the artificial scarcity of labor. Companies perceive a financial incentive to choose machines over people. Without such an incentive, businesses and households would make different choices. Walmart is not making you ring up your own purchases on self-checkout machines because it thinks you always had a hankering to work for the company but because it cannot find all the workers it needs at viable costs. And households, too, can make different decisions that benefit everyone involved. Research in Singapore shows that highly skilled women are much more likely to be in the labor force when care workers are available to take up tasks in the home. The availability of home aide workers also allows the elderly to stay out of institutionalized care longer and leads to greater quality of life at a much lower cost.



DOORS IN THE WALLS

It would be no small thing, of course, to figure out how countries could realize the potential of available labor in the world. The major mechanisms for global cooperation—chiefly those institutions that emerged after World War II, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank—set in motion the globalization of markets for goods and capital. But they did not put in place any meaningful infrastructure to support and promote the movement of labor. Money and shipping containers flowed freely across borders, but people did not.

Today, every country unilaterally sets whatever restrictions it wants on the entry of foreign nationals. Belying the facile right-wing talking point that the United States maintains “open borders” or similarly dubious claims that the world is “flat,” all rich countries have transformed their borders into cliffs, with the threshold for legal entry high and often altogether unreachable. At great expense and with mixed results, countries enforce these restrictions. In 2022, the United States allotted \$26 billion to border enforcement, more than it has devoted in most years to its international development agency, USAID.

Instead of funneling resources into the quixotic pursuit of job-killing technology, countries should pursue international cooperation with regard to labor mobility. The potential gains for the countries from which people emigrate, the migrants themselves, and the countries that receive migrants are enormous. Rich countries should allow more people to live and work in their countries not out of altruism but to reckon with a growing demographic necessity.

The solution is the creation of a global mechanism for labor mobility. It should recruit workers fairly without excessive costs and, based on reliable information and contracts, place them in jobs that suit their abilities, protect them from abuse while they are away from their home countries, and, with time-limited mobility agreements, facilitate their orderly return home. Larger flows of economic migrants will require an industry to handle the key functions of recruitment, training, placement, protection, and return. The trucking industry, the health-care industry, and the hospitality industry cannot be expected to manage the international movement of labor to meet their needs. Instead, the task of moving people must be taken up by a globally connected and networked group of organizations and individuals. Of course, such an industry should be carefully regulated and monitored, as the risks of

abuse are immense. But a well-functioning, ethical global industry that moves workers can be a huge force for good by matching people who want jobs with the enterprises that need them.

Global associations already cooperate with industry and governments to produce positive outcomes in the movement of people and things. Look up from reading this article, and you will see items around you that moved about the world as part of the 11 billion tons of maritime freight shipped every year. Or if reading online, don't look up; your device is almost certainly one of those items. Over 4.5 billion airline passengers traveled around the world in 2019, with only 283 fatalities. (My thinly populated home state of Utah alone had 320 traffic deaths in 2022.) Safe worldwide travel on airlines has been created and supported by governments, international associations, and industry groups. Similarly, in 2018, 1.4 billion tourists traveled internationally, supported by a wide variety of industries and industry associations that facilitate such a massive movement of people safely and reliably.

Political obstacles stand in the way of the orderly cross-border movement of people to work. Countries are stuck in a Catch-22. Politicians are reluctant to create the laws, policies, and regulations that would allow labor mobility programs to flourish until such programs have been demonstrated to be safe, effective, and beneficial. But existing wage differentials between rich and poor countries, as well as the undeniable demand for workers, means that the movement of people happens anyway, but without legal sanction and with the complicity of employers. Invariably, such movement is unsafe, migrants are exploited and abused, and they cannot easily return home. As a result, the very idea of labor mobility is tainted.

It may seem paradoxical, but the pitfalls of labor mobility in the present are reasons to facilitate even more movement, only through legal and well-devised channels. The benefits of allowing people to move where their labor is needed are huge for all concerned. Rich and democratic societies need to stop blindly pursuing technological advances that economize on precisely what is abundant around the world. Wealthy countries have created strong incentives for their firms and innovators to choose machines over people. It is time to make the bet on a future built by and for people. 🌐

# China's Hidden Tech Revolution

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## How Beijing Threatens U.S. Dominance

DAN WANG

**I**n 2007, the year Apple first started making iPhones in China, the country was better known for cheap labor than for technological sophistication. At the time, Chinese firms were unable to produce almost any of the iPhone's internal components, which were imported from Germany, Japan, and the United States. China's overall contribution to the devices was limited to the labor of assembling these components at Foxconn's factories in Shenzhen—what amounted to less than four percent of the value-added costs.

By the time the iPhone X was released, in 2018, the situation had dramatically changed. Not only were Chinese workers continuing to assemble most iPhones, but Chinese firms were producing many of the sophisticated components inside them, including acoustic parts, charging modules, and battery packs. Having mastered complex technologies, these firms could produce better products than their Asian and European competitors. With the latest generation of iPhones,

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this pattern has only accelerated. Today, Chinese tech firms account for more than 25 percent of the device's value-added costs.

Although the iPhone is a special case—as one of the most intricate pieces of hardware in existence, it relies on an exceptional range of technologies—its expanding footprint in China captures a broader trend. In a majority of manufactured goods, Chinese firms have moved beyond assembling foreign-made components to producing their own cutting-edge technologies. Along with its dominance of renewable power equipment, China is now at the forefront of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing. These successes challenge the notion that scientific leadership inevitably translates into industrial leadership. Despite relatively modest contributions to pathbreaking research and scientific innovation, China has leveraged its process knowledge—the capacity to scale up whole new industries—to outcompete the United States in a widening array of strategic technologies.

In its growing rivalry with Beijing, the U.S. government has sought to limit Chinese access to critical Western technologies and reinforce its own tradition of scientific innovation. Thus, in 2022, the Biden administration imposed broad new restrictions on selling advanced Western chip technology to Chinese firms while bolstering U.S. technology through the \$280 billion CHIPS and Science Act. That piece of legislation, in addition to the Inflation Reduction Act, meaningfully helps the United States recover some of its leadership in the production of semiconductors and renewables. But the steadily advancing technological prowess of Chinese firms suggests that this approach may be missing a more central issue: China's rise is not merely the result of copying and stealing from Western firms; nor has it depended on scientific breakthroughs. To a significant degree, it has been fueled by improvements in China's own industrial capabilities—gains that have come from the country's vast and sophisticated manufacturing workforce. Already, these strengths are apparent in China's response to U.S. chip restrictions of the past few years. Previously, Chinese firms tended to avoid domestic Chinese technologies, preferring to buy the best—which was usually American. Now that Washington is preventing them from doing so, they are working harder to cultivate a thriving domestic chip industry.

For the United States and its allies, China's arrival as a major tech power holds crucial lessons. Unlike the West, China has grounded its technology sector not in glamorous research and advanced science but in the less flashy task of improving manufacturing capabilities.

If Washington is serious about competing with Beijing on technology, it will need to focus on far more than trailblazing science. It must also learn to harness its workforce the way China has, in order to bring innovations to scale and build products better and more efficiently. For the United States to regain its lead in emerging technologies, it will have to treat manufacturing as an integral part of technological advancement, not a mere sideshow to the more thrilling acts of invention and R & D.

#### CHINA'S MOONSHOTS

Many observers are justifiably skeptical about China's tech leadership. For one thing, the country has created few multinational firms or globally recognized brands. Unlike Japan and South Korea, China has failed to establish new categories of consumer electronics, such as digital cameras or game consoles; nor has it been able to compete with Europe and the United States in automobiles or airliners. Instead, for the most part, Chinese companies have concentrated on making products they can sell at lower price points in the developing world. The relative lack of prominent Chinese brands has reinforced a Western understanding of China as a factory floor rather than a hotbed of innovation.

China also remains well behind the West in several critical technologies. China's chip industry has a few notable achievements, including in the design of mobile phone chips and certain advanced memory chips. But in the fabrication of logic chips—the processors inside all digital products—Chinese firms are at least five years behind TSMC, the Taiwanese company that is the global leader in advanced semiconductors. They are even weaker when it comes to developing the specialized tools required for making chips. For the all-important lithography machines, used for printing patterns on silicon wafers, and metrology equipment, used for quality control in a production process that demands hundreds of steps, Chinese firms rely overwhelmingly on imports from Japan, the United States, and Europe. And they are barely out of the starting gate in creating the software tools needed to design the most advanced chips.

A similar dynamic exists in China's aviation industry. Consider the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), China's answer to Airbus and Boeing, a state-owned venture backed by an estimated \$71 billion in government funding. Fifteen years after its founding, it has scarcely begun to produce its first operational commercial airliner. Chinese firms in both the chip and the aviation industries are achingly

aware that many of their core components continue to be supplied by the West: production equipment and advanced software tools in the case of chip manufacturers, and the engine as well as the avionics systems in the case of COMAC jets. It is this kind of reliance on Western technology that gives new U.S. chip restrictions the potential to throw Chinese firms into turmoil.

But amid these serious vulnerabilities, China is making rapid progress in many other technologies. Chinese firms have quickly gained ground against their European and Japanese counterparts in the production of advanced machine tools such as robotic arms, hydraulic pumps, and other equipment. As the iPhone demonstrates, China now rivals Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in its mastery of the electronics supply chain. And in the digital economy, despite recent efforts by President Xi Jinping to tighten government control of Internet companies such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Didi, China remains strong. Chinese companies can still offer spirited competition to Silicon Valley's tech giants, as ByteDance's TikTok has been doing to Facebook. China leads the world in building modern infrastructure, including ultrahigh-voltage transmission lines, high-speed rail, and 5G networks. In 2019, China became the first country to land a rover on the far side of the moon; a year later, Chinese scientists achieved quantum-encrypted communication by satellite, pushing the country closer to creating unbreachable quantum communications. These achievements are emblematic of China's steady effort to master more and more difficult tasks.

Taken as a whole, then, China's technological development is considerably more dynamic than the country's image suggests. China remains behind in several critical areas, and some of its most important tech firms face regulatory squeezes—whether from Washington or Beijing itself. Regardless of these challenges, Chinese industries are reaching world-class standards, and the country's science is steadily advancing. Along the way, Chinese firms have begun to make significant innovations of their own, including in strategic areas that the United States has prioritized.

#### SOLAR SUPERPOWER

One of China's major tech triumphs in recent years has been in renewable power equipment. When a commercial market emerged for solar technologies early in the twenty-first century, most innovations came from the United States, and it seemed logical that U.S. firms would drive the industry. In 2010, however, China's State Council, the central



government's executive branch, designated solar power generation as a "strategic emerging industry," triggering a cascade of government subsidies and business creation, much of it aimed at expanding manufacturing capacity. In the process, Chinese firms learned the basics of solar photovoltaics and began to improve on existing methods of producing them. Today, Chinese firms dominate almost every segment of the solar value chain—from processing polysilicon used in solar cells to assembling solar panels. They have also advanced the technology itself. Chinese solar panels are not only the cheapest on the market; they are the most efficient. The breathtaking decline in solar costs over the past decade has been driven by manufacturing innovations in China.

Over the last few years, Chinese firms have also staked out strong positions in the production of large-capacity batteries that power electric vehicles. As the world moves away from internal combustion engines, advanced battery technology has become the most critical component in car manufacturing. China has led the way: CATL, a Chinese company founded in 2011, is now the biggest battery manufacturer in the world, partnering with major car companies such as BMW, Tesla, and Volkswagen. In addition to having far greater manufacturing capacity than its rivals—which matters for lowering costs—CATL has taken the lead in developing new and more efficient chemical mixtures, for example in its sodium-ion batteries, which can be produced without using scarce lithium and cobalt minerals.

The Biden administration has recognized the risks of depending on China for the critical technologies it needs for the United States' green transition. But various rounds of U.S. tariffs, as well as U.S. investigations into forced labor allegations in China's polysilicon supply chain, have failed to dislodge Beijing from its dominant position in the solar industry. One such investigation by the U.S. Commerce Department, which threatened retroactive tariffs on solar imports of up to 250 percent, threw American solar buyers into turmoil, and in June 2022, President Joe Biden was forced to issue an executive order forestalling any tariffs for the next two years. Meanwhile, although Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, passed in August 2022, aims to dramatically accelerate the transition to electric vehicles in the United States, the legislation is off to a halting start because it has made many

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China's tech innovations have been made in factories, not labs.

current EVs on the market potentially ineligible for federal EV subsidies. For now, the United States and many of its Western allies will remain significantly dependent on China in their drive to decarbonize.

China has not achieved dominance in such industries as solar components, EV batteries, and electronics in a vacuum. This rapid progress connects directly to the country's strengths in manufacturing and quality control. From the early 1990s to today, the Chinese workforce has moved from producing simple toys and textiles to conducting the extraordinarily complex operations needed to produce sophisticated electronics such as the iPhone. Along the way, Chinese firms have often made significant advances of their own: in China, tech innovations have come not from universities and research labs but through the learning process generated by mass production itself. At the heart of the country's ascendancy in advanced technology, then, is its spectacular capacity for making things.

#### BETTER CHEFS, BETTER OMELETS

By any account, China's technological progress has come at enormous cost. In the most generous reading, Beijing has established the country's position through a fantastic waste of government resources. These giant subsidies have a distorting effect: a study published in December by the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found that Beijing has a poor record of picking winners and the recipients of Chinese government subsidies tend to have lower productivity growth. More often, according to many critics, Chinese advances have been spurred by extreme protectionism and widespread intellectual property theft. Although there is some truth to all these claims, they are not sufficient to account for China's rise. For every example of a Chinese industry that has benefited from protectionism—such as the Internet platform Baidu, which thrived behind the Great Firewall—there is another, such as China's car industry, for which such measures have failed to produce world class companies. Forced technology transfers and intellectual property theft may well have helped the development of some industries, and it is right for the United States and its allies to push back on these practices. But they do not explain China's emergence in such fields as batteries, hydrogen, and artificial intelligence.

Instead, the most important factor in China's burgeoning tech industries is its manufacturing ecosystem. Over the past two decades, China has developed an unrivaled production capacity for tech-intensive

industries, one that is characterized by a deep labor pool, dense clusters of suppliers, and extensive government support. This strength draws in part on China's industrial history. In earlier decades, the government gave industry special importance: disastrously during Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, and more effectively under Deng Xiaoping in his Four Modernizations. Beginning in the 1990s, central government initiatives were less important than market drivers, with China's manufacturing capacity taking off in the wake of the country's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001.

Over the past decade, Xi has put China's industrial obsession into overdrive. Two years after taking office, he launched Made in China 2025—a sweeping policy framework aimed at lifting China's manufacturing base from labor-intensive industries to high-technology sectors. And in 2021, in its latest five-year plan, the central government announced a campaign to turn China into a “manufacturing superpower.” That is not an idle goal: over the past few decades, Beijing has directed vast sums of cheap credit and energy to advanced tech firms, even when they are years away from profitability.

The solar industry is a case in point. By showering subsidies on all comers, the government encouraged too many firms to enter the field. But it also provoked greater entrepreneurial risk-taking, creating a brutally competitive industry in which the strong muscled out the weak. As a result, Chinese firms today dominate a strategic industry that the rest of the world depends on. This approach—promoting manufacturing to the point of excess capacity—is in sharp contrast to the economic orthodoxy in much of the West, which stresses high-value activities such as R & D and product branding while downplaying the value of physical production as something that can be done cheaply offshore, often in Asia.

Beijing's manufacturing-driven approach has become critical to its ability to challenge the West in advanced technology. To understand why, it is crucial to recognize the forces that go into successful innovations. Producing new technology can be likened to preparing an omelet: ingredients, instructions, and a well-equipped kitchen are helpful, but they will not in themselves guarantee a good result. Even people with the fanciest equipment and the most exquisite recipe may not be able to make a delicious omelet if they have never cooked before. An additional element is required: practical experience—skills that can only be learned by doing. These skills can be referred to as process knowledge, and they are part of what has helped China become a major tech innovator.

Although process knowledge is difficult to measure, it can be gauged by a workforce's general level of experience and by the creation of clusters of varied industrial activity. China has notable strengths in both. The country's most significant technological achievement over the past two decades has been its development of a vast and highly experienced skilled workforce, which can be adapted as needed for the most tech-intensive industries. For example, Apple still counts on China as the only country that can call up hundreds of thousands of highly trained workers on short notice, quickly access dense networks of component suppliers, and rely on government support to help solve the manifold problems that come with producing millions of iPhones each year. Equally striking, however, is the way that China has used foreign firms to help build industrial clusters, or what economist Brad DeLong calls "communities of engineering practice." American firms such as Caterpillar, General Electric, and Tesla have become large employers in China. And most of Apple's products are produced by contract manufacturers such as Foxconn and Pegatron, which manage workers in China. Unlike Japan, which maintained a mostly closed market during its decades of postwar growth, China has significantly boosted its industrial rise by learning directly from foreign firms. Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's trade war, Beijing refrained from significant retaliation against U.S. firms in China, partly because it recognizes the managerial expertise they bring and their transmission of manufacturing skills to Chinese workers.

Through continual exposure to the world's leading manufacturing processes, Chinese workers have acquired skills they can take to domestic firms. Consider the production of EV batteries. Manufacturing these units requires around a dozen discrete steps, each of which demands a near-perfect handoff from the preceding stage. Chinese engineering managers have gained the process knowledge needed for this task through experience in consumer electronics. This transfer of manufacturing know-how has also been one of the keys to China's dominance of the solar industry. Goosed by subsidies and aided by their ready access to skilled labor, Chinese firms were soon producing better and cheaper solar panels than their U.S. and German counterparts. And these manufacturing innovations have increasingly defined the global industry: the advances in solar over the last decade have been driven less by breakthroughs in science—America's specialty—than by driving costs down through more efficient production, which is China's strength.



The rise of Shenzhen as a global tech center is itself a validation of the importance of process knowledge. In the years after it began mass producing the iPhone in 2007, the city developed a vibrant local tech industry optimized for producing intricate devices; soon, workers used their engineering and production expertise to invent other products. With R & D labs right next to manufacturing facilities, Shenzhen's engineers had unparalleled access to component suppliers, experienced workers, and skilled designers. Today, Shenzhen has staked out a leading position in consumer drones, virtual reality headsets, and other novel electronics. Behind this dominance is a skilled workforce that has spent years mixing with daring entrepreneurs in an era in which electronics components such as cameras, batteries, and screens plummeted in cost. Thus Shenzhen now resembles the Bay Area, where university researchers, entrepreneurs, workers, and investors continually rub elbows. Small wonder that Shenzhen has become the Silicon Valley of high-tech hardware.

#### SCIENCE, NOT INDUSTRY

In the decades after World War II, the United States used its scientific leadership to dominate many emerging tech industries, from computers to aviation. For Washington, this made sense at a time when design



breakthroughs and laboratory innovations were a major part of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. The science-driven approach also seemed to find support in the market. In the 1990s, Stan Shih, the Taiwanese electronics entrepreneur, observed that most of the profits in tech industries are made at the beginning of the value chain—design, research, and development—and at the end, in marketing the product. The least amount of profit is made in actual manufacturing, which is the middle of the value chain. This so-called smiling curve is exemplified by Apple, the world's most valuable company, which handles the development and marketing of its products, leaving the low-margin manufacturing work to be done by its partners in China and elsewhere in Asia. Drawing on this insight, U.S. companies have spent much of the past two decades concentrating on R & D and marketing while relying on China in particular for many of their manufacturing needs.

One result of this longtime emphasis is the continued U.S. leadership in some industries that demand the complex integration of different scientific disciplines. Although Intel and Boeing have seen better days, the United States continues to be an industry leader in semiconductor production equipment and aircraft engines. Significantly, both industries are highly interdisciplinary: semiconductor technologies demand synthesizing fields that include electrical engineering, chemistry, and computer science; aviation involves aerodynamics, materials science, mechanical engineering, and other highly specialized fields. Unlike the United States, China does not have a tradition of pushing scientific frontiers. In fact, it does less of the groundbreaking science in these industries and has a relatively poor track record of commercializing useful research.

But all is not well with the U.S. tech sector. Many companies have taken the logic of the smiling curve too far in recent decades, putting ever more resources into the tips of the curve while leaving manufacturing capabilities to wither. Since 2000, the United States has lost around five million manufacturing jobs—about a quarter of its manufacturing workforce—prompting cascades of skill loss among not just line workers but also machinists, managers, and product designers. In the long term, this decline has left the United States in a poor position to dominate emerging technologies. For example, with its own science leading the way, the United States should have dominated the solar industry. And Washington was prepared to help it do so: as early as 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama imposed tariffs



on Chinese solar imports in an effort to protect domestic producers. But even with these protections, U.S. manufacturers could not compete. Whereas China had ready access to a huge base of skilled workers and suppliers and could scale up production almost without limit, the United States, after successive layoffs of millions of workers, had lost much of its stock of process knowledge and did not have the capacity to build a healthy manufacturing base. As a result, by 2022, U.S. imports of solar technology reached \$8 billion, much of it coming from Chinese companies producing in Southeast Asia.

The failure of the U.S. solar industry is part of a bigger story of decline in U.S. manufacturing. To a degree, this trend has been driven by increasing automation. But the sector is also beset by internal weaknesses. Consider the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other countries, the United States needed vast quantities of personal protective equipment and other medical supplies. Yet U.S. firms struggled to adapt their production lines to make facemasks and cotton swabs—uncomplicated products by any measure—because they had lost much of the requisite process knowledge. By contrast, Chinese manufacturers were quickly able to retool for the emergency and produced many of the medical supplies that the United States and other countries needed.

So far, U.S. efforts to reshore manufacturing jobs from Asia have been disappointing. A big push by Apple to make more desktop computers in Texas, for example, floundered after 2012 because it lacked a supporting industrial ecosystem of component parts. One exception has been the United States' rapid production of messenger RNA vaccines, which have proved more effective than China's inactivated virus vaccines. To compete against China's advanced industries in the years to come, however, the United States will need far more than a one-off biotech victory.

#### SCALE UP OR LOSE OUT

Even as it challenges the West's approach to tech advances, Beijing has recognized its weakness in scientific knowledge. In his report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022, Xi declared that science and technology will be one of the party's top priorities. And although improving its research culture will take time, China has been making steady progress, including in such areas as space exploration and quantum communications. Beijing is especially keen to augment domestic semiconductor development now that

Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei and Chinese chip maker SMIC have been denied access to U.S. and European semiconductor technologies. One unintended result of Washington's new chip restrictions has been to jump-start Chinese investments in science and R & D.

By contrast, the United States has not yet come to grips with its own deficit in process knowledge. Certainly, Congress's passage of the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 constitute major steps forward in industrial policy, given that both allocate billions of dollars of federal funding for advanced industries. But too much of U.S. policy—including this legislation—is focused on pushing forward the scientific frontier rather than on building the process knowledge and industrial ecosystems needed to bring products to market. As such, Washington's approach to its growing tech rivalry with China risks repeating the mistakes it made in the solar industry, with U.S. scientists laying the foundation for a new technology only to see Chinese firms take the lead in building it. Take the production of electrolyzers, which extract hydrogen from water and have become the crucial tool in the production of green hydrogen. As with solar, China is poised to dominate the green hydrogen industry by manufacturing the most efficient products at scale.

To avoid repeating the solar story, the United States will have to give greater priority to advanced manufacturing. Andy Grove, the legendary CEO of Intel, recognized this problem a decade ago, when he urged the country to focus less on “the mythical moment of creation” and more on bringing innovations to market. “This is the phase where companies scale up,” he wrote in an influential article in 2010. “They work out design details, figure out how to make things affordably, build factories, and hire people by the thousands.” But to get better at scaling up, the United States will also have to learn to think differently about the value of manufacturing work. Policymakers must resist the urge to scorn manufacturing as a mere “commoditized activity” that can be done overseas. Instead, the mass production of new technologies needs to be seen as equal in importance to the innovations themselves—an activity that depends on the kinds of deep process knowledge that can only come from the better training and integration of workers, engineers, and scientists.

The new U.S. investments in tech industries that flow from the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act will help reverse the tide. But as China understands well, money is only the beginning of the

process of building a durable technology sector. Such investments must also be accompanied by efforts to end the cost overruns that plague U.S. efforts to build better infrastructure. Local colleges and elite universities must better train students for advanced manufacturing. And Washington should learn to follow Beijing's lead and court greater foreign investment. Like the Trump administration before it, the Biden administration has invited Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese firms to build chip factories in the United States; these companies should also be welcomed for their expertise in batteries and the broader electronics supply chain.

The economic reality, of course, is that the United States will always be a relatively difficult place to make things. Because of its smaller population and higher wage requirements—and the fact that the U.S. dollar remains the global reserve currency, raising the relative cost of producing goods domestically—the United States cannot outcompete China in most high-volume manufacturing. Nor is a campaign to revitalize U.S. manufacturing capability likely to create many jobs; any such effort will involve highly automated lines that rely more on capital than on labor. And of course, the United States should not attempt to make absolutely everything. U.S. policy must target strategic industries in which it has a plausible comparative advantage.

Indeed, in several such industries, the United States is well-positioned to outperform China. By strengthening its manufacturing potential, the United States could expand its lead in biotech, semiconductor production equipment, and aircraft engines. It should make sure it does not lose next-generation energy technologies such as hydrogen electrolyzers. And it could attempt to recover some of the electronics supply chain from Asia. Moreover, in the wake of Beijing's repeated COVID-19 lockdowns and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, investors are increasingly rattled about the risks of investing in China, and the United States has an exceptional opportunity to win back manufacturing jobs. But as an ideological starting point, a new industrial policy will need to be centered on workers and their process knowledge rather than on financial margins. Otherwise, it is likely to be China, not the United States, that leads the next technological revolution. 🌐

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The United States  
will always be a  
difficult place to  
make things.

# What Russia Got Wrong

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## Can Moscow Learn From Its Failures in Ukraine?

DARA MASSICOT

**T**hree months before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, CIA Director William Burns and U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan met in Moscow with Nikolai Patrushev, an ultra-hawkish adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Burns and Sullivan informed Patrushev that they knew of Russia's invasion plans and that the West would respond with severe consequences if Russia proceeded. According to Burns, Patrushev said nothing about the invasion. Instead, he looked them in the eye, conveying what Burns took as a message: the Russian military could achieve what it wanted.

Once home, the two Americans informed U.S. President Joe Biden that Moscow had made up its mind. Not long after, Washington began publicly warning the world that Russia would attack Ukraine. Three months ahead of the invasion, the Kremlin knew that the United States

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had discovered its war plans and that the world would be primed for an assault—yet Putin decided to deny his intentions to Russia’s own troops and most of its senior leaders. They did not learn of the invasion until several days or even hours before it began. The secrecy was a mistake. By orchestrating the attack with just a small group of advisers, Putin undercut many of the advantages his country should have had.

These strengths were substantial. Before the invasion, Russia’s military was larger and better equipped than Ukraine’s. Its forces

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Russia stretched its logistics and support systems to the breaking point.

had more combat experience than did Kyiv’s, even though both had fought in Ukraine’s eastern territories. Most Western analysts therefore assumed that if Russian forces used their advantages wisely, the Ukrainians could not withstand the attack for long.

Why Russia did not prevail—why it was instead stopped in its tracks, routed outside major cities, and put on the defensive—has become one of the most important questions in both U.S. foreign policy and international security more broadly. The answer has many components. The excessive internal secrecy gave troops and commanders little time to prepare, leading to heavy losses. Russia created an invasion plan that was riddled with faulty assumptions, arbitrary political guidance, and planning errors that departed from key Russian military principles. The initial invasion called for multiple lines of attack with no follow-on force, tethering the military to operational objectives that were overly ambitious for the size of its forces. And the Kremlin erroneously believed that its war plans were sound, that Ukraine would not put up much resistance, and that the West’s support would not be strong enough to make a difference. As a result, Russia was shocked when its troops ran into a determined Ukraine backed by Western intelligence and weapons. Russian forces were then repeatedly beaten.

But as the war drags on into its second year, analysts must not focus only on Russia’s failures. The story of Russia’s military performance is far more nuanced than many early narratives about the war have suggested. The Russian armed forces are not wholly incompetent or incapable of learning. They can execute some types of complex operations—such as mass strikes that disable Ukraine’s critical infrastructure—which they had eschewed during the first part of the invasion, when Moscow hoped to capture the Ukrainian state largely intact.



The Russian military has learned from its mistakes and made big adjustments, such as downsizing its objectives and mobilizing new personnel, as well as tactical ones, such as using electronic warfare tools that jam Ukrainian military communications without affecting its own. Russian forces can also sustain higher combat intensity than most other militaries; as of December, they were firing an impressive 20,000 rounds of artillery per day or more (although, according to CNN, in early 2023, that figure had dropped to 5,000). And they have been operating with more consistency and stability since shifting to the defensive in late 2022, making it harder for Ukrainian troops to advance.

Russia has still not been able to break Ukraine's will to fight or impede the West's materiel and intelligence support. It is unlikely to achieve its initial goal of turning Ukraine into a puppet state. But it could continue to adjust its strategy and solidify its occupied holdings in the south and east, eventually snatching a diminished variant of victory from the jaws of defeat.

#### TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

Before the war in Ukraine began, the Russian military had several known structural problems, each of which undermined its ability to conduct a large invasion. Over a decade ago, Moscow deliberately dismantled its army and turned it into a smaller force designed for rapid response operations. The transformation required massive changes. After World War II, the Soviet Union maintained an enormous force designed to wage protracted, vast conflicts in Europe by conscripting millions of soldiers and creating a huge defense industry to menace NATO and enforce communist rule in allied states. The Soviet military suffered from endemic corruption, and it struggled to produce equipment on par with the West's. But its size and sprawling footprint made it a formidable Cold War challenge.

When the Soviet regime collapsed, Russian leaders could not manage or justify such a large military. The prospect of a land battle with NATO was fading into the past. In response, starting in the early 1990s, Russia's leaders began a reform and modernization process. The goal was to create a military that would be smaller but more professional and nimble, ready to quickly suppress flare-ups on Russia's periphery.

This process continued, on and off, into the new millennium. In 2008, the Russian military announced a comprehensive reform program called "New Look" that intended to restructure the force

by disbanding units, retiring officers, overhauling training programs and military education, and allocating more funds—including to expand the ranks of professional enlisted soldiers and to acquire newer weapons. As part of this process, Russia replaced sizable Soviet divisions designed to fight major land wars with less-cumbersome brigades and battalion tactical groups (BTGs). Moscow also worked to reduce its dependence on conscripts.

By 2020, it seemed as if the military had met many of its benchmarks. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu declared that 70 percent of his country's equipment was new or had been modernized. The country had a growing arsenal of conventional precision munitions, and the military possessed more professional enlisted personnel than conscripts. Russia had conducted two successful operations, one in Syria—to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad—and another to take territory in eastern Ukraine.

But the 2022 wholesale invasion of Ukraine exposed these reforms as insufficient. The modernization effort neglected, for example, the mobilization system. Russia's attempts to build better weapons and improve training did not translate into increased proficiency on the battlefield. Some of the ostensibly new gear that left Russian factories is seriously flawed. Russia's missile failure rates are high, and many of its tanks lack proper self-defense equipment, making them highly vulnerable to antitank weapons. Meanwhile, there is little evidence that Russia modified its training programs ahead of its February 2022 invasion to prepare troops for the tasks they would later face in Ukraine. In fact, the steps Russia did take to prepare made proper training more difficult. By deploying many units near the Ukrainian border almost a year before the war and keeping equipment in the field, the Russian military deprived its soldiers of the ability to practice appropriate skills and conduct required equipment maintenance.

Russia's modernization efforts also failed to root out corruption, which still afflicts multiple aspects of Russian military life. The country's armed forces frequently inflated the number of prewar personnel in individual units to meet recruiting quotas, allowing some commanders to steal surplus funds. The military is plagued by missing supplies. It generally has unreliable and opaque reporting up and down the command chain, which possibly led Russia's leadership to believe its forces were better, quantitatively and qualitatively, than they really were at the start of the invasion.

Modernization may have helped Russia in its smaller, 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its air campaigns in Syria. But it does not appear to have learned from its operational experience in either conflict. In both, for instance, Russia had many ground-based special forces teams to guide incoming strikes, something it has lacked in the current war. Russia also had a unified operational command, which it did not create for the current invasion until several months after it began.

In at least one case, the modernization effort was actively incompatible with high-intensity warfare. As part of its scheme to cultivate trust with the Russian population after its wars in Chechnya, the Kremlin largely prohibited new conscripts from serving in war zones. This meant that Russia pulled professional soldiers from most units across the country and deployed them as BTGs to staff its Ukraine invasion. The move was itself a questionable decision: even a fully staffed and equipped BTG is not capable of protracted, intense combat along an extended frontline, as many experts, including U.S. Army analysts Charles Bartles and Lester Grau, have noted. On top of that, according to documents recovered from the invasion by the Ukrainian military, plenty of these units were understaffed when they invaded Ukraine. Personnel shortages also meant that Russia's technically more modern and capable equipment did not perform at its full potential, as many pieces were only partly crewed. And the country did not have enough dismounted infantry or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance forces to effectively clear routes and avoid ambushes.

The resulting failures may have surprised much of the world. But they did not come as a shock to many of the experts who watch the Russian military. They knew from assessing the country's force structure that it was ill suited to send a force of 190,000 personnel into a large neighboring state across multiple lines of advance. They were therefore astonished as the Kremlin commanded the military to do exactly that.

#### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

To understand how Russia's bad planning undermined its performance and advantages, it is helpful to imagine how the invasion of Ukraine would have started if Moscow had followed its prescribed military strategy. According to Russian doctrine, an interstate war such as this one should begin with weeks of air and missile attacks against an enemy's military and critical infrastructure during what strategists call "the initial period of war." Russia's planners consider this the decisive

period of warfare, with air force operations and missile strikes, lasting between four and six weeks, designed to erode the opposing country's military capabilities and capacity to resist. According to Russia's theory, ground forces are typically deployed to secure objectives only after air forces and missile attacks have achieved many of their objectives.

The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) did conduct strikes against Ukrainian positions at the war's beginning. But it did not systematically attack critical infrastructure, possibly because the Russians believed they

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has already taken.

would need to quickly administer Ukraine and wanted to keep its leadership facilities intact, its power grid online, and the Ukrainian population apathetic. Fatefully, the Russian military committed its ground troops on day one rather than waiting until it had managed to clear roads and suppress Ukrainian units. The result was catastrophic. Russian forces, rushing to meet what they believed were orders to

arrive in certain areas by set times, overran their logistics and found themselves hemmed in to specific routes by Ukrainian units. They were then relentlessly bombarded by artillery and antiarmor weapons.

Moscow also decided to commit nearly all its professional ground and airborne forces to one multi-axis attack, counter to the Russian military's tradition of keeping forces from Siberia and the Russian Far East as a second echelon or a strategic reserve. This decision made little military sense. By attempting to seize several parts of Ukraine simultaneously, Russia stretched its logistics and support systems to the breaking point. Had Russia launched air and missile strikes days or weeks before committing ground forces, attacked along a smaller frontline, and maintained a large reserve force, its invasion might have looked different. In this case, Russia would have had simpler logistics, concentrated fires, and reduced exposure for its advancing units. It might even have overwhelmed local groups of Ukrainian air defenses.

It is difficult to know exactly why Russia deviated so wildly from its military doctrine (and from common sense). But one reason seems clear: the Kremlin's political interference. According to information obtained by reporters from *The Washington Post*, the war was planned only by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his closest confidants in the intelligence services, the armed forces, and the Kremlin. Based on these accounts, this team advocated for a rapid invasion on multiple

fronts, a mad dash to Kyiv to neutralize Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky through assassination or kidnapping, and the installation of a network of collaborators who would administer a new government—steps that a broader, more experienced collection of planners might have explained would not work.

The Kremlin's ideas were obviously ineffective. Yet it delayed important course corrections, likely because it believed they would be politically unpopular at home. For example, the Kremlin tried to entice ad hoc volunteers in the early summer to plug holes created by severe battlefield losses, but this effort attracted far too few personnel. Only after the September collapse of the military's front in Kharkiv did Moscow order a mobilization. Later, the Kremlin did not allow a retreat from the city of Kherson until months after their positions became untenable, risking thousands of troops.

#### HOW RUSSIA PLAYED ITSELF

Before and during wars, countries rely on operational security, or OPSEC, to keep crucial aspects of their plans secret and to reduce vulnerabilities for their own forces. In some cases, that entails deception. In World War II, for instance, the Allies stationed troops and decoys on a range of beaches in the southern United Kingdom to confuse the Nazis as to which location would be used to launch an attack. In other instances, OPSEC involves limiting the internal dissemination of war plans to lower the risk that they will go public. For example, in preparation for Operation Desert Storm, U.S. pilots who would later be assigned to eliminate Iraqi air defenses trained for months to conduct such strikes but were not told about their specific targets until days before the attack began.

The Kremlin's war plans, of course, were made public months before the war. As a number of news outlets have reported, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, U.S. intelligence agencies uncovered detailed and accurate outlines of Russia's plans and then shared them with the media, as well as with allies and partners. Rather than abort the invasion, the Kremlin insisted to journalists and diplomats that the large contingents of troops massed on Ukraine's borders were there for training and that it had no intention of attacking its neighbor. These claims did not fool the West, but they did fool most Russians—including those in the armed forces. The Kremlin withheld its war plans from military stakeholders at many levels, from

individual soldiers and pilots to general officers, and many troops and officials were surprised when they received orders to invade. A recent report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a British defense and security think tank, which was based on extensive fieldwork and interviews with Ukrainian officials, found that even senior members of the Russian General Staff were kept in the dark about the invasion plans until shortly before it started.

Because most military leaders were not brought into the planning effort until the last minute, they could not correct major mistakes. The government did not appear to undergo what is referred to in Russian strategy as a “special period”—a time of categorizing, stockpiling, and organizing resources for a major war—because its planners did not know they needed to get ready for one. The excessive secrecy also meant that Moscow missed several key opportunities to prepare the defense industry to produce and store essential ammunition. Even after they were stationed near Ukraine, Russian units were not staffed or supplied at appropriate levels, likely because planners believed the troops were conducting training exercises. And because the military did not have time to coordinate its electronic warfare systems, when Russian forces attempted to jam Ukraine’s communications, they also jammed their own.

Prewar secrecy led to problems that were especially pronounced in the air. Before the invasion, Russian pilots had experience fighting in Syria, but operations there had taken place over uncontested territory, most often in the desert. The pilots had virtually no experience fighting over a larger, forested country, let alone against an adversary capable of hitting their jets with layers of air defenses. They were given little to no training in such tactics before the invasion. That inexperience is partly why, despite sometimes flying hundreds of missions per day, Russia has been unable to dismantle Ukraine’s air force or air defenses. Another factor was how Russia decided to employ its forces. Because Russia’s ground troops were in grave danger within days, the vks was quickly reassigned from suppressing Ukrainian air defenses to providing close air support, according to RUSI analysis. This adjustment helped prevent Russia from establishing air supremacy, and it forced the Russians to fly at low altitudes, within reach of Ukraine’s Stinger missiles. As a result, they lost many helicopters and fighter jets.

Prewar secrecy and lies were not the only ways that the Kremlin played itself. Once troops began rushing toward Kyiv, Moscow could no longer deny the fact of its invasion. But for months, it continued



to obscure the conflict or delay important decisions in ways that hurt its own operations. At a basic level, Russia has refused to classify the invasion as a war, instead calling it a “special military operation.” This decision, made either to mollify the Russian population or because the Kremlin assumed the conflict would end quickly, prevented the country from implementing administrative rules that would have allowed it to gain quick access to the legal, economic, and material resources it needed to support the invasion. For at least the first six months, the false classification also made it easy for soldiers to resign or refuse to fight without facing desertion charges.

#### PAY NO HEED

The Russian government appears to have assumed that the Ukrainians would not resist, that the Ukrainian army would fade away, and that the West would not be able to help Kyiv in time. These conclusions were not entirely unsupported. According to *The Washington Post*, the Russian intelligence services had their own prewar covert polling suggesting that only 48 percent of the population was “ready to defend” Ukraine. Zelensky’s approval rating was less than 30 percent on the eve of the war. Russia’s intelligence agencies had an extensive spy network inside Ukraine to set up a collaborationist government. (Ukraine later arrested and charged 651 people for treason and collaboration, including several officials in its security services.) Russian planners may also have assumed that Ukraine’s forces would not be ready because the Ukrainian government did not move to a war footing until a few weeks before the invasion. They likely thought that Ukraine’s artillery munitions would quickly run out. Based on the West’s response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its relatively small arms provisions during the run-up to the war in 2022, Moscow might reasonably have assumed that the United States and Europe would not provide major support for Ukraine, or at least not in time.

But the Kremlin was evaluating data points that simply allowed it to see what it wished to see. The same intelligence services poll, for instance, suggested that 84 percent of Ukrainian respondents would consider Russian forces to be occupiers, not liberators. The United States and its allies broadcast Russia’s plans and various attempts to generate a pretext for invasion, and they warned Russia privately and publicly that the country would face enormous repercussions if it started a war. Yet apparently, no one in Putin’s inner circle convinced

him that he should revise Russia's approach and prepare for a different, harder type of conflict: one in which Ukrainians fought back and received substantial Western assistance.

Such a conflict is exactly what happened. The Ukrainians rallied to defend their sovereignty, enlisting in the military and creating territorial defense units that have resisted the Russians. Zelensky, domestically unpopular before the invasion, saw his approval ratings skyrocket and became a globally recognized wartime leader. And the Ukrainian

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Just as the West overestimated the Russians, it could now underestimate them.

government succeeded in getting historic amounts of aid from the West. As of late January 2023, the United States has provided \$26.8 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since Russia's invasion, and European states have contributed billions more. The Ukrainians have been stocked with body armor, air defense systems, helicopters, M777 artillery, and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS). They are receiving Western tanks.

The massive and diverse weapons provisions enabled Ukrainian forces to gain a qualitative edge over Moscow's troops in terms of battlefield awareness during Russia's initial push to Kyiv, and it allowed Ukraine to conduct precision strikes on Russian logistics depots and command centers in its eastern regions.

Washington also began providing a stream of what U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks described as "vital" and "high-end" intelligence to Kyiv. The director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency claimed that intelligence sharing with Ukraine has been "revolutionary" in nature, and the director of the National Security Administration and U.S. Cyber Command testified that he had never seen a better example of intelligence sharing in his 35 years of government service. (According to the Pentagon, the United States does not provide intelligence on senior leader locations or participate in Ukrainian targeting decisions.)

This intelligence sharing has mattered at several pivotal points in the war. In congressional testimony, CIA director Burns said he informed Zelensky about the attack on Kyiv before the war, and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Zelensky about Russian threats to him personally. These alerts gave Ukraine time to prepare a defense that was essential to protecting both the capital and Zelensky. According to senior

defense officials, the United States also provided planning and war-gaming support for Ukraine's September counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson, both of which ended with tremendous success.

THE BEAR IS LEARNING

Ukraine's supporters have had many reasons to celebrate in 2022, and joyful scenes have emerged from recently liberated Ukrainian land. But difficult scenes followed. Ukrainian and international investigators have uncovered evidence of war crimes in recently liberated cities such as Bucha, Izyum, and Kherson. And despite hopes to the contrary, it is too soon to say that Russia's campaign will collapse. Putin is certainly digging in for the long haul, and although wounded, the Russian military is still capable of complex operations, adaptive learning, and withstanding a level of combat that few militaries in the world can. Sustained high-intensity, high-attrition combined-arms warfare is extraordinarily difficult, and Russia and Ukraine now have more recent experience with it than any other country in the world.

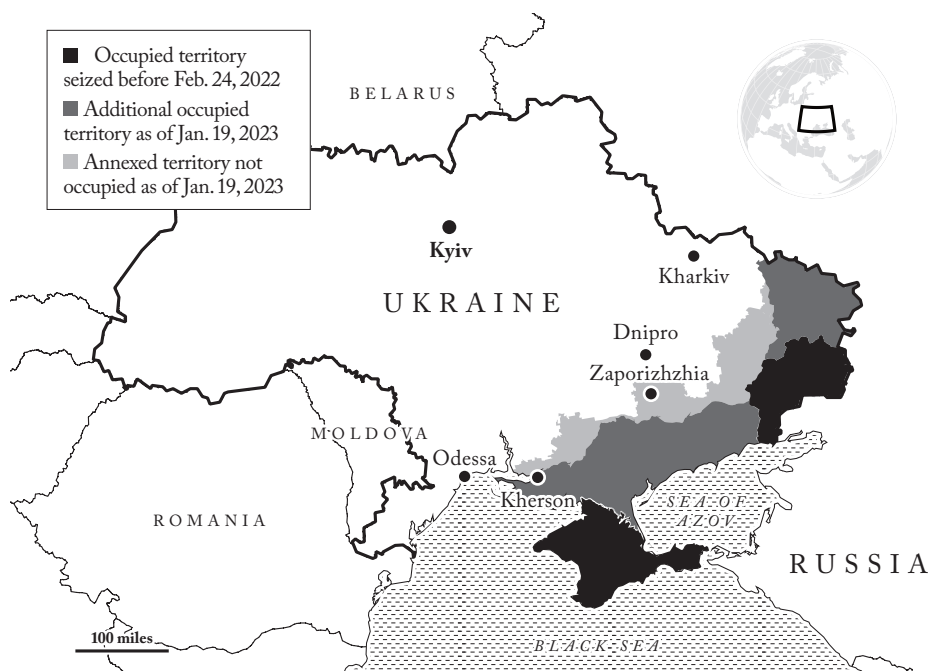
Take, for example, the vks. Although its pilots have failed to suppress Ukraine's air defenses, analysts must remember that such missions are notoriously time-consuming and difficult, as U.S. pilots have noted. The vks is learning, and rather than continuing to waste aircraft by flying more-conservative and less-effective missions, it is trying to wear down Ukrainian air defenses by using empty Soviet-era missiles and Shaheed drones purchased from Iran.

The Russian military also appears to be getting better at performing one of the most dangerous army maneuvers of all: crossing rivers under fire. Such operations require planned withdrawals, discipline, force protection plans, and tight sequencing that few others demand. When these operations are executed poorly, many soldiers can die; in May 2022, the Ukrainian military destroyed a Russian BTG as it attempted to cross the Donetsk River. But the military's November withdrawal across the Dnieper River was comparatively smooth, partly because it was better planned. Despite coming under artillery fire, thousands of Russian forces successfully retreated east.

Russia has learned to correct for past mistakes in other areas, as well. In late spring, Russian forces finally succeeded in jamming Ukrainian communications without jamming their own. During September, the Kremlin declared a partial mobilization to compensate for personnel shortages, pulling 300,000 draftees into the armed forces.

## RUSSIA'S GAINS AND AIMS

What the Russian military controls—and wants next—in Ukraine



Sources: *Institute for the Study of War*; *OpenStreetMap*

The process was chaotic, and these new soldiers have not received good training. But now, these new forces are inside eastern Ukraine, where they have shored up defensive positions and helped depleted units with basic but important tasks. The government is also incrementally putting the Russian economy on a wartime footing, helping the state get ready for a long conflict.

These modifications are starting to show results. Russia's defense industrial base may be straining under sanctions and import restrictions, but its factories are intact and working around the clock to try to keep up with demand. Although Russia is running low on missiles, it has expanded its inventory by repurposing antiship cruise missiles and air-defense missiles. The Russian military has not yet improved its battle damage assessment process or its ability to strike moving targets, but it is now hitting Ukraine's electrical grid with precision. As of January 2023, Russian strikes have damaged roughly 40 percent

of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, at one point knocking out power for more than 10 million people.

The Ukrainians' learning curve has also been steep, and through experimentation, they have been able to keep Russian forces off balance. The military has shown creativity in its planning, and it has hit Russian air bases and the Black Sea Fleet. Ukraine's pilots and soldiers, like Russia's, have garnered remarkable and unique combat experience. Ukraine has benefited more from external support than has Russia.

But Russian forces have successfully adapted and experimented as they have assumed a defensive posture. After weeks of devastating HIMARS attacks during the summer of 2022, Russia moved its command sites and many logistics depots out of range. Russian forces have shown more competence on the defensive than on the offensive, particularly in the south, where they created layered defenses that were difficult for Ukrainian forces to fight through. General Sergey Surovikin, who was named Russia's overall commander in October, was previously the commander of the southern operational group, and he brought this experience to other regions that Russia partly occupies. Troops have dug extensive trenches and created other defensive positions.

Notably, Russia withdrew from the city of Kherson and transitioned to defense only after Surovikin was appointed as the war's commander. Putin also began admitting that the conflict will be challenging once Surovikin assumed charge. These changes suggest that Putin may have received more realistic appraisals of the situation in Ukraine under Surovikin's tenure.

Yet in January 2023, Surovikin was demoted in favor of General Valeriy Gerasimov. Although the reasons for this command change are unclear, palace intrigue and cronyism may be behind it rather than any specific failure of Surovikin's leadership. And no Russian commander has been able to break Ukraine's will to fight even though Russia continues to launch missiles that inflict suffering on the Ukrainian people. But the bombings and entrenchment may well degrade Ukraine's capacity, making it harder for the country to reclaim more of its land.

#### KNOWN UNKNOWNNS

The Kremlin, however, aspires to do more than just hold the land it has already taken. Putin has made it clear that he wants all four provinces that Moscow illegally annexed in September—Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia—and in a televised meeting



last December, he indicated that he is prepared to undergo “a long process” to get them. Putin’s downsized objectives and sudden candor about the campaign’s length show that the Kremlin can adapt to its weakened position and condition its population for a long war. Russia, then, is either evolving or buying time until it can regenerate its forces. The question is whether its changes will be enough.

There are reasons to think the shifts will not salvage the war for Russia, partly because so many things need to change; no single factor explains why the war has gone so poorly for Russia thus far. The explanations include problems that are not easy to address because they are intractable parts of the Russian system, such as the self-defeating deceit illustrated by the Kremlin’s decision to prioritize secrecy and domestic stability over adequate planning. And Moscow has, if anything, doubled down on silencing frank discussion of the conflict, even going so far as to criminalize assessments of combat deaths and forecasts about how the war might unfold. Although officials can safely talk about some problems—for example, Russian military leaders have called for an expansion of the armed forces—others remain decidedly off-limits, including the larger issues of incompetence and the poor command climate that has led to the military’s horrific problems inside Ukraine. This censorship makes it hard for the Kremlin to get good information on what is going wrong in the war, complicating efforts to correct course.

Some of the major issues for Russia are largely beyond Moscow’s control. Ukrainian resolve has hardened against Russia, something the Russian military, for all its brutality, cannot undo. Russia has also been unable or unwilling to interdict Western weapons flows or intelligence to Ukraine. As long as these two factors—Ukrainian resolve and Western support—remain in place, the Kremlin cannot turn Ukraine into a puppet state, as it originally sought to do.

The Russian military has, however, corrected certain important problems. To overcome a bad plan, it fixed its command structure and changed many of its tactics. It has consolidated its positions in Ukraine after heavy losses while adding more personnel, which will make Ukrainian counteroffensives more costly. Russian military leaders announced their intention to bring back many of the larger divisions from before the 2008 reforms to partly correct for force structure problems. As the Russian economy mobilizes, the defense base could better produce more equipment to make

up for wartime losses. Western defense industries, meanwhile, are straining under the demands of replenishing Ukraine. Russia may calculate that it can shore up its position while biding time until Western supplies are exhausted or the world moves on.

But analysts should be careful about forecasting outcomes. The classic adage still holds: in war, the first reports are often wrong or fragmentary. Only time will tell whether Russia can salvage its invasion or whether Ukrainian forces will prevail. The conflict has already followed an unpredictable course, and so the West should avoid making hasty judgments about what went wrong with Russia's campaign, lest it learn the wrong lessons, devise incorrect strategies, or acquire the wrong types of weapons. Just as the West overestimated Russia's capabilities before the invasion, it could now underestimate them. And it could overestimate a similarly closed system, such as the Chinese military. It takes time for analysts to learn how a combatant adapts and changes its tactics.

Experts should not, however, toss out the tools they now use to evaluate military power. Many standard metrics—such as the way a force is structured, the technical specifications of its weapons, and the quality of its training programs—are still valid. But although these factors, along with a military's doctrine and previous operations, are important, they are not necessarily predictive. As this war and other recent conflicts have shown, analysts need better ways to measure the intangible elements of military capability—such as the military's culture, its ability to learn, its level of corruption, and its will to fight—if they want to accurately forecast power and plan for future conflicts.

Unfortunately, analysts will likely have plenty of time to develop and hone such metrics. Because for all the uncertainty, this much is clear: as Russia continues to mobilize and Kyiv and its supporters dig in, the war is poised to continue. 🌐

# The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership

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China and Russia Can't Be Split,  
but They Can Be Thwarted

PATRICIA M. KIM

**O**n February 4, 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, at the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing. After talks, the two sides released a joint statement declaring that China and Russia's bilateral partnership was greater than a traditional alliance and that their friendship would know "no limits." Twenty days later, Russia invaded Ukraine. Putin's brazen gambit immediately cast scrutiny on Beijing; many observers perceived that it had backed Putin's offensive or, at best, willfully ignored it. Russia's tight embrace of China since then comes as no surprise, given its dire need for partners in the face of global isolation. More striking is Beijing's steadfast refusal to distance itself from Moscow, despite the costs to its global image and its strategic interests. Even as Russia has become a pariah, Beijing has not paused bilateral exchanges and

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joint military exercises or dialed down its public exhortations on deepening strategic coordination with its friend to the north.

Beijing's resolve to maintain ties with Moscow is partly practical. Chinese leaders want to keep their nuclear-armed neighbor and former rival on their side as they look ahead to intense, long-term competition with the United States. But China's alignment with Russia is not only a matter of realpolitik. Beijing sees Moscow as its most important partner in the wider project of altering a global order that it perceives as skewed unfairly toward the West. In this order, according to the Chinese and Russian line, the United States and its allies set the rules to their advantage, defining what it means to be a democracy and to respect human rights while retaining the power to isolate and punish actors for failing to uphold those standards. Beijing and Moscow purport to seek a "fairer," multipolar order that better takes into account the views and interests of developing countries.

Such revisionist aspirations undoubtedly resonate in the global South and even in some quarters of the developed world. But Xi's designation of Putin as a key ally in the push for a less Western-centric world has ultimately set Beijing back in accomplishing its objectives. China's association with a revanchist Russia has only drawn more attention to its own aggressive posture toward Taiwan. The perception of a hardening Chinese-Russian axis has, in turn, reinforced ties among U.S. allies and partners. And China's proximity to Russia has undermined the credibility of Beijing's claims of being a champion for peace and development.

In short, the Chinese-Russian alignment has proved far more threatening to the U.S.-led order in its conception than in its operation. To be sure, the partnership can still cause damage—for instance, by shielding the likes of Russia and North Korea from punitive measures at the United Nations and enabling their continued aggression. But Beijing's and Moscow's conflicting priorities and the latter's generally dismal prospects limit the pair's ability to revise the existing global order in a truly coordinated and radical way. Western leaders should nevertheless accept that efforts to push Beijing to cut its ties with Moscow are likely to fail. In the near term, the United States and its allies should focus instead on preventing the partnership from veering down a more destructive path by taking advantage of Beijing's strong interest in the preservation of global stability. More broadly, Washington and its allies should recognize that China and Russia are channeling real disaffection with the existing international

order in many parts of the world—and should get to work bridging the gap between the West and the rest.

#### FRIENDS IN NEED

Since Xi's rise to power in 2012, Russia has become one of China's key partners with the steady strengthening of economic, political, and military ties. Moscow and Beijing may have started off as allies in the early days of the Cold War, but decades of rivalry and mistrust followed a split over ideological differences that emerged in the late 1950s. Beijing and Moscow have been brought together again in the twenty-first century by shared grievances with the West and the clear parallels they perceive in their respective situations, with Russia accusing NATO of encirclement and China feeling hemmed in by U.S. alliances in Asia. Chinese and Russian leaders also share a fear of "color revolutions"—popular uprisings that have ousted autocratic governments around the world, including in former Soviet states—which they allege are Western-sponsored attempts at regime change.

Last year's rhetoric about a friendship with "no limits" followed an earlier upgrade to relations in 2019, when China and Russia announced they had forged a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" during Xi's visit to Moscow. China accords this deliberately long moniker to relations with no other state. And by invoking "a new era" (a phrase Xi coined to reflect China's bid for national rejuvenation in a shifting geopolitical landscape), the label also underscored the two states' intention to work hand in hand during a period of strategic opportunity.

In recent decades, China has shunned formal alliances for both pragmatic and ideological reasons and has criticized the United States' vast alliance network as a "vestige of the Cold War." But Beijing has increasingly resorted to semantic gymnastics to talk about its alignment with Russia. Chinese statements regularly insist that the bilateral partnership is "not an alliance" and "not targeted" against any third party while also making the case that China and Russia's relationship "surpasses" traditional alliances. Even before the joint statement in February 2022, Beijing had stressed that no areas of cooperation were off limits and that the partnership would stand firm in the face of international headwinds.

Hard military ties have grown alongside this rhetorical camaraderie since the first joint Chinese-Russian military exercise conducted in 2005. Since 2012, the two sides have engaged in increasingly ambitious and



frequent training, including naval exercises in the East China and South China Seas and joint engagements with third parties, such as Iran, South Africa, and members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a China-led grouping of states. In late 2021, China and Russia made headlines by holding their first joint naval exercise in the western Pacific, during which their vessels sailed through key waterways around Japan.

Economic ties, too, have deepened in the last decade, with the two sides signing dozens of agreements outlining cooperation on energy, infrastructure, agriculture, finance, and technology. Bilateral trade has grown in volume over the last two decades, but it has also become increasingly unbalanced, with China's economy rapidly eclipsing Russia's. As of 2021, China accounted for 18 percent of Russia's total trade, while Russia only accounted for two percent of China's. Russia's top exports to China are natural resources, such as gas, oil, and coal, that may be important today but will become less so as Beijing turns more toward renewable energy sources. China's top exports to Russia, however, are largely manufactured goods, such as machinery and electronics. Russia depends overwhelmingly on the more advanced Chinese economy for technology imports, from semiconductors to telecommunications equipment.

#### WOULD-BE REVOLUTIONARIES

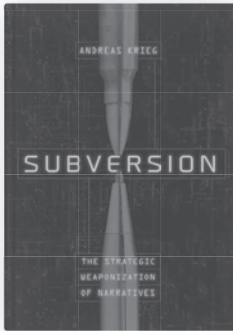
This material relationship sits alongside an intensifying ideological alignment. China and Russia both seek to challenge what they perceive to be a Western-dominated global order that allows the United States and its allies to impose their interests on others. The two countries have frequently protested the primacy of "Western values" in international forums and have argued for a conditional understanding of human rights and democracy, defined "in accordance with the specific situation in each country." In their joint statement from February 2022, China and Russia insisted that they, too, are democracies and took a swipe at "certain states" for using the "pretext of protecting democracy and human rights" to sow discord among other countries and intervene in their internal affairs.

Beijing and Moscow accuse Washington of unfairly using its economic power, including the privileged position of the U.S. dollar in the global financial system, to impose punitive measures on its rivals. China and Russia have both pushed back on Western sanctions, despite employing economic coercion themselves against others. Beijing has

argued that sanctions levied outside the auspices of the UN violate states' "right to development," a framing that has its roots in the Chinese Communist Party's efforts after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests to prioritize the "right to subsistence" above civil liberties and political freedoms. Although China no longer struggles with concerns about basic subsistence, Beijing has criticized high-tech export restrictions and other decoupling measures adopted by the United States and its allies as unfairly constraining China's development and "right to rejuvenation." Beijing has also used this language to object to Western sanctions on Russia regardless of its offenses, claiming that the sanctions infringe on Russia's economic rights and have damaging side effects on developing countries.

In the global South, China continues to market itself as an apolitical champion for development, a position that Russia supports. The two have extolled the virtues of Chinese projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, a vast infrastructure development program, and the more recently announced Global Development Initiative, a still vaguely defined scheme seen as a successor to the BRI that, according to Beijing, brings development "back" to the center of the global agenda. Such initiatives, along with Chinese messaging about development, have found receptive audiences in the global South, given that many low-income countries want rapid development but remain averse to international scrutiny on their domestic governance.

Over the years, Beijing and Moscow have advanced various measures to weaken U.S. control of the international economy. They have cooperated to create alternative financial institutions and mechanisms to dent the dollar's dominance and blunt the impact of Western sanctions. This effort has gained greater urgency since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent cutting off of major Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system. Since Beijing and Moscow agreed in 2019 to boost the use of national currencies in cross-border trade, the Russian central bank has significantly reduced its dollar holdings and increased its investment in Chinese yuan. About a quarter of Chinese-Russian trade is now settled in renminbi and rubles, and this percentage will increase following the announcement last fall that China will begin to pay for Russian gas half in renminbi and half in rubles. Beijing and Moscow's efforts to reduce the dominance of the dollar have been warmly welcomed in friendly groupings such as the SCO and the BRICS, which brings together Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

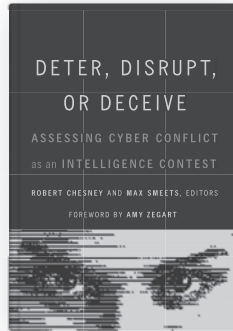


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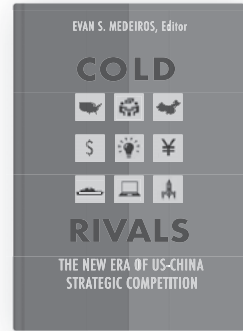


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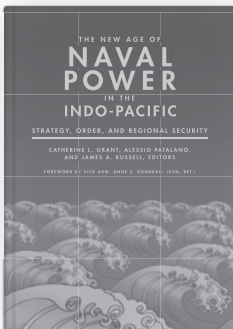


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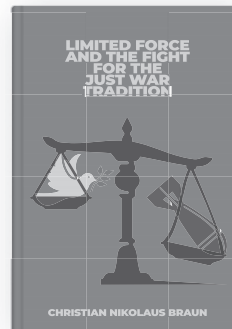


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At the heart of China and Russia's ideological alignment is a common desire to weaken the vast U.S.-led alliance architecture in Europe and Asia. The two countries accuse Washington and its allies of violating the principle of "indivisible security" by advancing their security interests at the expense of others'. The Kremlin has employed this argument to justify its war in Ukraine and to redirect blame for the conflict on NATO. And this narrative has caught on in many parts of the global South, thanks in part to Chinese state media amplifying Russian talking points. In Asia, Beijing has pointed to the strengthening of the U.S. alliance network—including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a security partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and AUKUS, a partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as evidence of the U.S.-led containment of China. But Beijing faces an uphill battle in challenging the U.S. presence, given that many Asian governments are concerned about China's aggressive behavior and welcome the United States' balancing role in the region.

Despite seeking to change elements of the current global order, Beijing and Moscow do not wish to revise all elements of the existing architecture. They continue to stress that the United Nations and UN Security Council should play a leading role in the international arena. This position is unsurprising, given the privileges China and Russia enjoy as permanent members of the Security Council and their ability to rally developing world partners at the UN.

#### DOUBLING DOWN

Until February 24, 2022, when Russian troops stormed Ukraine, Beijing saw little downside to its burgeoning relationship with Moscow. It is unclear just how much Chinese leaders knew of Putin's plans in advance. But they were likely taken aback when the Russian attack floundered and placed a heavy spotlight on China. Even so, Beijing has ultimately chosen not to distance itself from Russia. Chinese leaders have yet to explicitly condemn Putin's ongoing aggression in Ukraine and have spoken in defense of Russia's "legitimate security concerns." Chinese state media outlets have also amplified Russian propaganda and disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

At the same time, China maintains that it is not a party to the conflict and that it supports peaceful negotiations, as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states. It has expressed concern about the "prolonged and expanded crisis" in Ukraine, including its negative spillover



Squad goals: a Chinese warship taking part in a joint exercise with Russia, East China Sea, December 2022

effects. China also abstained on three UN resolutions last year that condemned Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territory. Chinese officials privately insist that these abstentions were a sign of Beijing's disapproval of Russian behavior and that they went to great lengths to rebuff Moscow's repeated requests that Beijing veto these resolutions.

Chinese leaders have also made clear to their Russian counterparts that they oppose the threat or use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine and underlined their expectations that Moscow pursue a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Moreover, China has not supplied weapons or extended any direct material assistance to Russia's military efforts. Chinese banks and businesses have also largely complied with sanctions by curtailing shipments of restricted goods and suspending select operations in the Russian market, although last year, the U.S. Department of Commerce accused five Chinese firms of violating sanctions.

Beijing has nevertheless made a point of maintaining normal trade ties with Moscow, and nonsanctioned sectors of bilateral trade have ballooned as a result. Just weeks before the Russian invasion, the two countries signed oil and gas deals worth nearly \$120 billion and announced the lifting of Chinese restrictions on Russian wheat and barley imports. China replaced Germany as the largest importer



of Russian energy last year, and Chinese–Russian trade reached a record-breaking \$180 billion in 2022.

China and Russia have also kept up their steady pace of diplomatic engagement. According to China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, top Chinese and Russian officials have met 21 times since last February. Russian state media has reported that Xi may pay Putin a visit in Moscow this spring.

Perhaps most remarkably, Beijing and Moscow have maintained their steady pace of joint military exercises, even as the Russian military is bombarding Ukrainian cities. Last May, as U.S. President Joe Biden traveled in the region, Chinese and Russian bombers flew over the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and into South Korea’s air defense identification zone. China participated in Russian exercises in the Russian Far East and in the Sea of Japan in September, and the two capped the year off with a major joint naval exercise in the East China Sea in late December. Their first joint military exercise of 2023 has been planned for February, coinciding with the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and will include South Africa, a BRICS partner.

#### BLOWBACK

China’s decision to double down on its alignment with Russia even after the latter’s naked aggression in Ukraine has raised grave concerns on the part of the United States and its allies. Polling by the Pew Research Center indicates that the percentage of Americans with unfavorable views of China, which was already at historic highs in 2021, increased further, from 76 percent to 82 percent, in 2022. Moreover, 62 percent believed the relationship between China and Russia is a “very serious” problem for the United States. Views of China have soured, particularly in Europe, dashing Beijing’s hopes that the European Union would adopt a more benign posture than that of the United States. Polling by the German Marshall Fund last September found that many Europeans preferred a “tougher” approach to China, even if such policies would come at an economic cost. Although Tokyo has long been wary of the threat posed by China, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and fears of a similar scenario in Asia have inspired the recent, historic changes in Japan’s defense policies, including its moves to develop counterstrike capabilities, to double its defense budget, and to sign unprecedented security pacts with Australia and the United Kingdom.

The most damaging consequence of Russia’s aggression for China is the heightened global awareness and sense of urgency about Taiwan.



Preventing Taiwan from becoming “the next Ukraine” has become a topic of grave concern, not just in Washington but among U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, many of whom once viewed Taiwan’s fate as only vaguely relevant, if at all, to their own security or a matter too politically sensitive to discuss. A record number of lawmakers from countries including Australia, France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States have visited Taipei in the last year to express support for the island. Fears about Chinese and Russian revisionism have strengthened ties between NATO and the United States’ Indo-Pacific allies, as well. Last year, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea participated in a NATO summit for the first time. Leaders there jointly recognized the danger of conflict in the Taiwan Strait and called for greater coordination among like-minded European and Asian partners.

Although negative views of China have spiked among developed democracies, that has not been the case in the developing world, especially among nondemocratic states. As a study published last fall by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy found, China’s and even Russia’s favorability ratings remain relatively high in many parts of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

#### BOUNDS IN THE BOUNDLESS

Partnership with Russia has hurt China’s image in the West and has inspired more concerted coordination among the United States and its partners to the detriment of Chinese ambitions. But China will not forsake Russia anytime soon. Beijing must keep Moscow close as it looks ahead to decades of competition with Washington. It cannot afford to be distracted by tensions with a militarily formidable neighbor with which it shares a 2,600 mile border. In addition, Xi has invested a great deal in his relationship with Putin, the two having met a remarkable total of 39 times since 2012. The Chinese state cannot backpedal away from this personal commitment without suggesting that Xi, its “core leader,” has erred.

Nonetheless, Beijing’s behavior since February demonstrates that there are indeed some limits to its partnership with Moscow. Although China and Russia share revisionist goals and seek privileged positions for themselves at the top of the international hierarchy, the two countries do not always agree about how to achieve these objectives. Even as China grapples with a relative economic slowdown after decades of rapid growth and faces various challenges at home, it remains the

world's second-largest economy. It has much more to lose than Russia does from global instability and economic isolation. Chinese leaders and citizens know well that their country's integration into the global economy, along with the flow of investments and people in and out of China, has fueled the country's economic miracle. China still has great capacity to influence other countries through its economic offerings, such as investments, loans, and infrastructure and trade agreements, all of which have allowed Beijing to project power and promote its agenda globally in recent years. Russia, on the other hand, is a lopsided power that has significant military capabilities but dismal economic prospects. With fewer tools of influence at its disposal, Moscow has turned to brute force to achieve its aims and has become increasingly isolated as a result, with years of economic contraction looming. Chinese leaders have staked their legitimacy on achieving their country's revitalization, so they are less likely to emulate or join in the Kremlin's violent revisionism.

Moreover, the fact that China has yet to provide Russia with direct military assistance, whether in the form of weapons or operational support, suggests that military coordination between the two countries remains more performative than geared to actual joint combat. In fact, Beijing is likely to refuse any direct Russian military assistance in the event of a war over Taiwan, given the deep nationalist sentiments that undergird its quest to consolidate rule over the island. Similarly, it is hard to imagine Moscow welcoming any operational presence of the People's Liberation Army in its own backyard. Despite the official rhetoric of friendship, China and Russia ultimately lack close cultural and people-to-people ties that could inspire their citizens to die in war for each other—a high bar to meet even for countries that share such bonds. These factors suggest that the prospect of a joint Chinese-Russian military campaign remains remote for the time being.

China and Russia's partnership is real and likely to endure for the foreseeable future. But its strategic implications should not be overstated or underestimated. The fundamental differences between their respective outlooks, along with Russia's growing limitations, will curb the alignment's appeal and its ability to revise the existing global order, which requires exerting influence among both developing and developed countries. A limited partnership between the two countries can still be destabilizing, particularly if China serves as Russia's economic lifeline and the pair continue to partner in protecting fellow autocracies and enabling their transgressions at home and abroad.

The United States should neither expect the disintegration of this alignment nor resign itself to the further consolidation of Chinese-Russian ties. Instead, U.S. officials should appeal to Beijing's fundamental interest in stability to push Chinese leaders to rein in Russian recklessness. Recent efforts by Biden, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and others to press Xi to oppose the threat or use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine offer a good example of how Western powers can work with China to send the right signals to Moscow. The same approach should be used to advocate for a peace agreement that delivers justice for the people of Ukraine, once a road map for such an accord emerges. Skeptics may question whether attempting to work with Beijing will be worth the effort, given that it is unlikely to endorse tough measures that jeopardize its ties with Moscow. China will also seek credit for its cooperation, which should be given when due. It will attempt to link its willingness to cooperate with Western powers on Ukraine to concessions in other areas, such as easing export restrictions on Chinese companies or curbing diplomatic support for Taiwan. The United States and its partners will need to manage such demands by setting proper expectations with Beijing. China's words and actions, as a member of the UN Security Council and as Russia's most consequential ally and trade partner, will affect Moscow's decisions in Ukraine and beyond. As such, securing China's cooperation in working toward peace in Europe will be essential.

The United States and its allies should also give serious thought to why Chinese and Russian accusations of Western hypocrisy and hegemony resonate in many parts of the world and to how they might address these grievances. They will have to grapple with tough issues, such as the damaging humanitarian consequences in the global South of the West's mounting use of non-UN sanctions. And they will have to find ways to ensure powerful international institutions, including the UN Security Council, the G-20, and the vast array of international standard-setting bodies that shape the rules and norms on everything from global finance to AI research, can better account for the voices and priorities of developing states. To prevent further global division and the exploitation of this gap by China and Russia, the United States and its partners should foster enduring ties with developing countries and actively consider where alterations to the existing international order are necessary rather than ceding the ground to Beijing and Moscow. 🌐

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Xi and Putin have met in person 39 times since 2012.

# Disunited Kingdom

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## Will Nationalism Break Britain?

FINTAN O'TOOLE

**I**n September 2022, the body of Queen Elizabeth was driven across Scotland from Balmoral Castle, where she died, to the royal palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. The coffin was draped in the Royal Standard of Scotland and carried by members of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, who wore tartan kilts. For the first six days after her death, the queen's passing seemed a very Scottish affair indeed. Only then was her body flown south to London, where the rest of the United Kingdom got to show its respects.

This last journey echoed another royal passage, prompted by the death of a previous Elizabeth, that can reasonably be taken as a point of origin for the United Kingdom itself. In April 1603, King James VI of Scotland, then just 36, began a much slower ride from Edinburgh to London, where he would succeed the childless Queen Elizabeth I as James I of England and Wales. A year later, in his

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first address to the English Parliament, he compared the union of his two kingdoms to a marriage from which there could be no divorce: "What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate. I am the husband, and all the whole isle is my lawful wife." Taking the hint, James's court dramatist, William Shakespeare, wrote his most terrifying play, *King Lear*. It warns of all the dreadful things that can happen if a united kingdom is foolishly broken up.

Anxiety about the future of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland is not new. It goes back to the beginning of the story. Yet for many British citizens, the death of Queen Elizabeth II has given a sharp new edge to these old apprehensions. The stability she embodied for so long has been, as Shakespeare might have put it, interred with her bones. Liz Truss, the prime minister whom the queen swore in two days before she died, plunged the United Kingdom almost immediately into a fiscal crisis and was gone just weeks later. Since then, the country has faced soaring energy prices, widespread strikes, and what will likely be the worst economic contraction in decades. Having abandoned Europe, the British government now finds itself not only less influential in the world but also increasingly at odds with Scotland and Northern Ireland, where large majorities voted to stay in the EU. And the monarchy, once an imposing symbol of British influence and British identity, is now the breeding ground for lurid tabloid tales of petty fratricidal wars and princes mired in scandal and enmity.

Of course, the United Kingdom has endured existential crises before. Formally inaugurated in 1707, when Scotland dissolved its own parliament and joined with England and Wales, the kingdom has grown and shrunk over the centuries, with the addition of all of Ireland in 1801 and the loss of most of it in 1922. Yet this peculiar multinational state persists. The first modern book on the topic of dissolution—*The Breakup of Britain*, by the brilliant Scottish socialist intellectual Tom Nairn—was published in 1977. Nairn asserted with absolute confidence, "There is no doubt that the old British state is going down." Nearly a half century later, it is still afloat.

Although Nairn's dire prognosis may have been premature, it could nonetheless have been quite prescient. He described the end of the United Kingdom as "a slow foundering rather than the *Titanic*-type disaster so often predicted"—a useful metaphor for the way the good ship *Britannia* now seems to be holed below the waterline. Scottish politics are now dominated by the Scottish National Party (SNP), for



which leaving the kingdom is a defining mission. For the first time, Northern Ireland has lost the Protestant majority that for more than a century has formed the backbone of its union with Britain; demography alone suggests that its population will, over the coming decades, be ever more inclined toward unification with the Republic of Ireland. Even Wales, which England annexed as far back as 1284, has become increasingly distinct from it. In December, the interim report of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, established by the devolved government in Cardiff, found that current political arrangements with London are not sustainable. The commission pointed to more radical options, including the possibility of Wales becoming a fully independent country.

Most intriguing, as popular support for Brexit revealed, English voters themselves are increasingly asserting an English nationalism that was previously buried under British and imperial identities. These multiplying challenges leave the United Kingdom unsure about not just its place in the international order but also whether it can continue to be regarded as a single place. A polity that once shaped the world may no longer be able to hold its own shape.

#### SHAKY LEGS

The United Kingdom may still stand, but its foundations are shallower than they have been for many centuries. The first of those foundations was empire. To create one, England needed peace on its home island and control over its troublesome and fractious near neighbor, Ireland. It needed to know that if it went to war with Spain or France, it would not be attacked from the north by claymore-wielding Scots and that its European rivals could not use Ireland as a base from which to invade the homeland. Conversely, especially for the Scottish elites, England could offer a lucrative share in its rapidly growing mercantile power. The bargain made sense for both sides: England could dominate the island of Great Britain, but by joining it, Scotland could help it dominate the world.

Second, there was Protestantism. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation took different forms in the various British nations. Over time, Scotland became typically Presbyterian, Wales strongly Methodist, and England loyal to the official Episcopalian church that grew out of Henry VIII's split with Rome. The tensions between these faiths were bitter. Ultimately, however, they carried much less weight than

the imperative of not being Catholic. Ireland, where the majority held on to a strongly Catholic identity, was therefore a perpetually fraught presence in the United Kingdom. But Protestantism solidified the sense of commonality among the other nations.

A third footing was provided by the industrial revolution. Until the 1980s, anyone traveling around the United Kingdom would have been struck by the deep shared history of physical labor that encompassed the Welsh coalfields, the potteries of the English Midlands, the cotton mills

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In the postwar era, the British Empire was replaced by the Rolling Stones and James Bond.

of Manchester, the ironworks of Glasgow, and the shipyards of Belfast. This world forged its own bond of unity—the trade unions and the Labour Party that came, in the twentieth century, to represent a national working class that cut across regional divisions. Labour may have been, at least some of the time, radically reformist, but in terms of national identity, it was also deeply conservative. It gave ordinary

people a powerful sense of common political purpose. The welfare state it created after World War II, buttressed by common institutions like the National Health Service, provided the same benefits to ordinary people regardless of what part of the United Kingdom they inhabited.

Finally, there was prestige. Britishness was a winning brand. The subject peoples of the empire may not have felt the same way, but for the denizens of the mother country, the “great” in Great Britain came to seem, even more than a geographic qualification, an obvious expression of moral and political supremacy. After the rather unfortunate business of the loss of the American colonies, the United Kingdom had an amazing run of successes: crushing Napoleon; smashing (with a violence it was rather good at forgetting) revolts in Africa, the Caribbean, Ireland, India, and elsewhere; defeating Russia in the Crimean War; humiliating China; and winning two world wars.

Even during its postwar decline, when the empire was dissolving and the United Kingdom was settling into its role as junior partner to the new Anglophone world power across the Atlantic, the country was extraordinarily good at replacing hard power with soft. Its sclerotic Establishment was slow to appreciate them, but the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Judi Dench, and Monty Python cast a spell of glamour over Britishness. The physical empire was replaced by a

cultural realm. In the arts and entertainment, in science and thought, Britishness retained a cachet for British citizens themselves as well as for foreigners. Rule Britannia became Cool Britannia.

The success of this branding lay in the ability to encompass two kinds of coolness. The idea of a chic, dynamic pop culture was twinned with the self-image of phlegmatic Brits. Like James Bond's martinis, the British people could be shaken by world events—the Suez Crisis of 1956, the collapse of the pound sterling in 1992—but they would never be stirred enough to make their own system of government, rooted in the mysteries of its unwritten constitution, truly volatile.

These are deep foundations. Many countries that now seem quite stable have shakier legs to stand on. The weakening of one, or even two, of the United Kingdom's pillars would not seem to pose an existential threat to the country. But how about all four? For on any objective analysis, it is impossible to believe that any of these underpinnings of Britishness remain firmly in place today.

#### THE SETTING SUN

The death of Queen Elizabeth II marked, in a belated way, the demise of empire. When she ascended the throne in 1952, her subjects constituted more than a quarter of the world's population. When she died, the United Kingdom had scarcely more than a dozen overseas territories, most of them island tax havens. Even the Commonwealth—long a convenient way to sustain a more symbolic form of cultural imperium—has lost much of its meaning. Such prominent members as Australia and New Zealand are considering following Barbados, which became a republic in 2021, in ditching the British monarch as head of state. The carnival of empire is now, at best, a nostalgic display. At worst, and arguably more realistically, it is a nightmare of unfinished business: the wages of slavery, racism, and savage brutality. (Recent work, such as Caroline Elkins's *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire*, make one marvel at the United Kingdom's ability to sustain for so long its self-image as a benign and civilized colonizer.) One of the attractions of Scottish or Welsh nationalism is the distance it creates between those nations and the guilt of imperialism: shame can be attributed to the United Kingdom and sloughed off as the country is left behind.

As for Protestant identity, the 2021 British census provides a rude awakening. For the first time ever, less than half the country's 67 million citizens—46 percent—describe themselves as Christian, a staggering

decline from 2001, when 72 percent did. Never mind the historic divide between Protestants and Catholics; basic Christian identity no longer serves as a marker of Britishness.

The United Kingdom's prime minister throughout the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher, smashed Britain's industrial base along with its trade unions. During her decade in power, manufacturing output grew by 21 percent in France, 50 percent in Japan, and 17 percent in the United States. In the United Kingdom, it fell by nine percent. This decline began a decisive collapse from which the United Kingdom's reputation as an industrial powerhouse has never recovered. Manufacturing now represents ten percent of the country's economic output and just eight percent of its jobs.

For one part of Thatcher's agenda—breaking organized labor—this was a triumph. But for another—the reassertion of Britishness—it was a long-term problem. As long as the Cold War was still a dominant narrative, Thatcher's projection of Britain as a warrior nation facing down enemies from Berlin to the Falklands compensated for the real loss of industrial power. A mythically militant Britishness could mask the day-to-day experience of decline. But only for so long. Thatcher was simultaneously pumping up a British national identity and eroding its social foundations. Over time, this contradiction was bound to have consequences for the viability of the United Kingdom. When Thatcher carpet-bombed the working class's political base, the collateral damage was a once potent sense of shared belonging that is now greatly diminished. The common culture in which huge numbers of people in England, Scotland, and Wales did the same jobs, belonged to the same unions, and voted for the same party (Labour) is almost gone.

Since the turn of this century, the prestige of Britishness has had to compete with the emergence of new centers of power in Scotland, Wales, and—albeit in more complex ways—Northern Ireland. Tony Blair's Labour government, elected in 1997, gambled that the establishment of devolved administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast would be enough to mollify all but the most fervent Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalists. Yet at least in Scotland and Wales, the very existence of those elected assemblies, and of ministers and leaders who behave like governments, has created a sense that significant political spaces, with their own agendas and discourses, exist beyond the reach of the London-based elites.

Meanwhile, the tradition of British military élan has finally lost its luster. During the Iraq invasion in 2003, when he stood shoulder to shoulder with U.S. President George W. Bush, Blair imagined that he could use, as Thatcher had done, military victory to consolidate a sense of shared British patriotism. But even within the larger disaster of Bush's wars, Britain's experience was a stark tale of hubris and nemesis. In 2016, at the release of his official inquiry into the Iraq war, the career civil servant John Chilcot issued a blunt assessment of British power: "From 2006, the U.K. military was conducting two enduring campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. It did not have sufficient resources to do so." Chilcot described the country's "humiliating" performance in the city of Basra, where British forces had to make deals with the same local militias that were attacking them. After these painful failures, it is no longer possible to see military might as part of the allure of Britishness. The United Kingdom still has important military and intelligence capacities, and former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's moral and practical support for Ukraine had a very real impact. But it is striking that Truss's signature promise to increase the military budget to three percent of GDP evaporated along with her ill-fated premiership. Even among conservative hawks, there is almost no appetite in London for fantasies about renewed global military power and no sense that glory of arms on foreign fields can ever again paper over the cracks on the home front.

#### LITTLER ENGLAND

Brexit was in part an attempt to compensate for the waning of British hard power. As the former Conservative cabinet minister Jacob Rees-Mogg framed it at his party's conference in October 2017, a break with Brussels would be a continuation of historical English triumphs on the continent: "It's Waterloo! It's Crécy! It's Agincourt! We win all these things!" Well, not all of them. If Brexit was intended to provide a great psychological victory over the European Union, it instead swept away any notion of British immunity to a politics of mass delusion. Amid mounting evidence that leaving Europe has made the United Kingdom's long-term economic problems both deeper and more acute, the political pantomime performed by five different prime ministers in the six years since the Brexit referendum has destroyed all notions of British calm, competence, or coherence.

For a while, the English (although certainly not the Scots or the Welsh) entertained themselves with the spectacle of Johnson's know-



ingly ironic clowning, but the joke ceased to be funny after the COVID-19 outbreak. As Johnson and his circle dithered and broke the lockdown rules they had imposed on the public, the devolved regional administrations appeared far more capable. For the first time in many centuries, in the face of a common threat, people in Scotland looked to Edinburgh for leadership, and those in Wales looked to Cardiff. The bitter truth was that their respective first ministers, Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford, did not have to be spectacularly brilliant to seem impressive compared with the chaos-inducing Johnson.

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The greatest threat to the United Kingdom may be England's own nationalists.

Beneath the political farce of Brexit lies the mundane tragedy of impoverishment. "The truth is we just got a lot poorer," Paul Johnson, the director of the London-based Institute for Fiscal Studies, said, after the British government announced its latest budget assessment this past November. He likened the country's disastrous recent poli-

cies—a list that includes, along with Brexit itself, ill-considered cuts to education and other social investments—to “a series of economic own goals.” According to the independent spending watchdog the Office for Budget Responsibility, living standards are expected to fall by an alarming seven percent over the next two years, with the country's economic contraction nearly on par with Russia's. This harm can reasonably be called self-inflicted, but employing that description raises the awkward question of which national self is being talked about. After all, Brexit was decisively rejected by the people of Scotland and Northern Ireland, who have good reason to think that the ensuing economic debacle was needlessly imposed on them by the English.

Indeed, at least since the 1980s, the smaller nations in the United Kingdom have been thinking about Europe very differently from their English counterparts. Before the United Kingdom joined what was then called the European Economic Community in 1973, almost all nationalists—English, Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh—distrusted and feared it as a burgeoning superstate that would destroy their individuality. (In 1975, when the United Kingdom held its first referendum on continuing EEC membership, the SNP claimed that staying in Europe would “strike a death blow to [Scotland's] very existence as a nation.”) As the EU expanded and became ever more multilingual, however, it began to offer the United Kingdom's non-English constituencies

a new kind of buffer from London: an international body in which they could advocate for their own interests and remain connected to bigger powers without being dominated by them. Thus, in the EU era, the SNP promoted the rapid expansion of trade and professional ties between Scotland and the continent, allowing it to ditch its image as a throw-back and project itself as modern, open, cosmopolitan, and European.

English nationalists, to the contrary, tended to see any pooling of sovereignty with Brussels as a betrayal of their own superior destiny. As Enoch Powell, the highly influential former cabinet minister and right-wing member of Parliament, put it in 1977, “submission to laws this nation has not made” raised the haunting prospect “that we . . . will soon have nothing left to die for.” It was not accidental that Powell—and such political heirs as former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage—combined opposition to EU membership with rage against immigrants: both stood for the surrender of English greatness to foreign interference.

In this sense, English nationalism today has become an outlier among nationalist movements in the United Kingdom: more obviously right-wing, anti-immigrant, nostalgic for past greatness, and, above all, anti-European. It is also in part driven by a justified resentment at the way in which England was left without its own specific political identity during Tony Blair’s devolution. Unlike its Scottish, Northern Irish, and Welsh counterparts, Englishness was given no positive expression in political life. It remained incoherent and poorly articulated—until, of course, the Brexit referendum gave it a cause and an opportunity. This was what almost no one who was thinking about the future unity of the United Kingdom had considered: that its most successful nationalist eruption might come not on the Celtic fringes but in the English heartland.

#### YOU CAN CHECK OUT, BUT YOU CAN’T LEAVE

Driven as it was by English politicians and English voters, Brexit could only increase disaffection from the United Kingdom in both Northern Ireland and Scotland. According to the most recent report of the authoritative British Attitudes Survey, more than half the population of Scotland—52 percent—now say they favor Scottish independence—even though just 45 percent voted for it in the 2014 referendum. Likewise, the proportion of people in Northern Ireland wishing to leave the United Kingdom and join with the rest of Ireland,

which before Brexit rarely exceeded 20 percent, has risen dramatically. Now, as many as 30 percent favor a united Ireland, and only 49 percent—no longer a majority—support remaining in the United Kingdom, with the rest undecided and arguably persuadable either way. Especially remarkable is the growing overlap between those who voted to remain in the EU and those who are now drifting away from Britishness. In Scotland in 2016, only 44 percent of Remainers favored independence; now, 65 percent do so. In Northern Ireland, 64 percent of those who voted Remain wanted to stay in the United Kingdom. Now, just 37 percent do so.

This drift is not just a matter of sentiment. In legal fact, Brexit has set in train a process of detaching Northern Ireland from Great Britain. In November 2022, British Foreign Minister James Cleverly told a House of Commons committee that Northern Ireland was as integral to the United Kingdom as was his own constituency in the east of England. “Northern Ireland. North Essex. They are part of the U.K.,” he said. But Brexit has already made Northern Ireland quite unlike North Essex: Northern Ireland has stayed in the EU’s single market and customs union, thanks to the controversial Northern Ireland Protocol of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal agreement, whereas North Essex has, along with the rest of the country, left them. This sets an extraordinary precedent. No polity that was confident about its future integrity would allow one of its constituent parts to be governed by a very different international regime, and both Johnson and his immediate predecessor, May, had strenuously disavowed the possibility of such an arrangement. But in the end, the need to, in Johnson’s words, “get Brexit done” trumped the imperative of preserving the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There is, however, a further irony in the effects of Brexit on national identities within the United Kingdom. In another play that Shakespeare wrote for James I, *Macbeth*, the porter jokes about the effects of alcohol on “lechery”: “it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance.” Brexit has greatly enhanced the desire for independence among the United Kingdom’s constituent parts, especially Scotland. But it makes the performance a lot more difficult. Before Brexit, political, economic, and trade relations between England and an independent Scotland would have been eased by the continuity of shared participation in Brussels’s structures and processes. Now, were England to remain outside the EU and Scotland to rejoin it, the

barriers between the two nations would be formidable. Brexit may have inclined the Scots more toward independence, but it has also provided a rather scary example of how hard it is to leave a union, whether European or British. And whereas the United Kingdom was in the EU for less than 50 years, Scotland has been in the United Kingdom for more than three centuries.

Even the mechanics of holding another vote on independence are fraught. In November 2022, the British supreme court unanimously ruled that “the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to legislate for a referendum on Scottish independence.” This means that no such plebiscite can be lawful unless the British government in London agrees to it. Sturgeon is too canny to press ahead in these circumstances, her natural wariness no doubt reinforced by the bitter experience of the Catalan government, which in 2017 staged an unconstitutional and ultimately abortive referendum on independence from Spain. Her response to the ruling has been to declare that Scotland’s vote in the next British general election will be a “de facto” independence referendum. But this approach, too, is rife with uncertainties: a general election is not a referendum, and if pro-independence parties win a majority, it would still not be clear how their aims could be put into effect without London’s consent.

Nor is a serious push for a united Ireland likely to take place soon. There may no longer be a unionist majority in Northern Ireland, but there is no nationalist majority either. The most notable political trend is the large number of Northern Irish voters who say they are open-minded about the future but in no hurry to leave the United Kingdom. Over the long term, the prosperity of Ireland, the dynamic effects of Northern Ireland’s alignment with the EU, and its changing demography will make Irish unity increasingly likely—but not in the next decade.

#### REFORM OR DIE

What all of this means is that there may yet be a chance for the United Kingdom to save itself. Everything will depend on who forms the next British government—the next general election must take place no later than January 2025—and what that government does about constitutional reform. The current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, is a technocrat at heart and seems to have little interest in identity politics. Yet if the economic reality continues to look

grim, his party may have little option but to double down on the defense of an archaic Britishness. An intransigent Conservative party that somehow wins reelection by appealing to English voters to stand firm against the rebellious Scots and rally around the existing political order could turn a slow process of dissolution into an immediate crisis. It is not hard to imagine that, amid a deepening economic recession and with Sturgeon already a hate figure for the Tory press in England (in December 2022, one column in Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *The Sun* compared her to the mass murderer Rosemary West), some Conservatives might actually relish a "patriotic" rhetorical war against Scottish and Welsh nationalists. The result, however, would be merely to exacerbate divisions and speed up the end of the United Kingdom.

The current likelihood, however, is that Labour leader Keir Starmer will be the next prime minister. Starmer has endorsed a plan, drawn up by a commission headed by former Prime Minister (and proud Scot) Gordon Brown, to clean up the British Parliament, replace the unelected House of Lords with an elected second chamber of "nations and regions," and devolve more power to local governments in what Brown calls "the biggest transfer of power out of Westminster . . . that our country has seen." If Starmer does achieve power, he may not be quite so enthusiastic about giving it away. And even these reforms may not be enough to save the United Kingdom. The case for the creation of a fully federal state seems strong. It has worked well for the former British dominions of Canada and Australia. If Quebec, which came very close to voting for independence in 1995, has settled down as a distinct society within a larger union, might not the same be possible for Scotland and Wales? But the English habit of muddling through—what Winston Churchill called KBO, for "keep bugging on"—is a powerful force for inertia.

The United Kingdom created a beta version of democracy in the eighteenth century: innovative and progressive in its day but long since surpassed by newer models. The country has, however, been extremely reluctant to abandon even the most egregious anachronisms. The biggest transformation in its governance was joining the European Union, and that has been reversed. It now has to make a momentous and existential choice—between a radically reimagined United Kingdom and a stubborn adherence to KBO. If it chooses the latter, it will muddle on toward its own extinction. 🌐



# How Commerce Can Save the Climate

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## The Case for a Green Free Trade Agreement

GORDON H. HANSON  
AND MATTHEW J. SLAUGHTER

**C**risis looms for the planet. In November 2022, world leaders met in Egypt at the UN's annual forum on climate change, known as the Conference of the Parties. Much like the previous 26 rounds of negotiations, COP27 did little to solve the world's environmental emergency. The summit marked another failure to secure meaningful commitments. It is now virtually certain that countries will fail to reach the long-standing goal of limiting average planetary warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. A UN Environment Program report from October 2022 projected that current climate pledges will result in planetary warming of approximately 2.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the twenty-first century. The damage done by the past

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inaction of governments is increasingly palpable and irreversible, but that is no reason to give up.

Humanity must change its habits of consumption to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Replacing carbon-intensive goods and services with green counterparts (that is, products made with dramatically reduced or no carbon emissions) will help curb overall global emissions. Indeed, some of the world's leading climate voices are more openly acknowledging the necessity of such a transition. Last year, in an unusual move, the annual climate-assessment report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change included chapters on efforts to create new environmental goods and services. And promising discoveries have sparked hope for future progress. In December 2022, U.S. scientists announced the breakthrough, after decades of trying, of the first-ever controlled nuclear fusion reaction. Nuclear fusion technology, however, will not be commercially viable anytime soon.

The world cannot wait any longer to forestall the coming climate crisis. Countries must accelerate the invention and deployment of low-cost green products in key areas, including energy generation, distribution, and transportation. Chief among the needed policies is the implementation of a meaningful world carbon price, in the form of a charge on greenhouse gas emissions. Such a price would make new green products cheaper than existing carbon-intensive ones. Without it, the pace of any energy transition would continue to be alarmingly slow: inventors will not have sufficient financial incentive to make bold bets in their research and development, and companies will drag their feet in adopting existing green technologies.

But the prospect of a high and harmonized world price on carbon is not on the horizon. In the United States, for instance, imposing an economically meaningful carbon price is unfeasible, at least in the medium term. The political right derides carbon prices as an intrusive new form of taxation, whereas the political left sees them as tacitly condoning the continued use of fossil fuels.

A more immediate and practical solution would be a free trade agreement for green technology. Under the auspices of the World Trade Organization, countries should expedite necessary inventions and lower the cost of green products by establishing an accord that liberalizes trade in green-tech products, investment in environmental industries, and the immigration necessary to foster entrepreneurship and build skilled workforces. Think of this as a green technology version of the Information Technology Agreement (ITA), a WTO deal initially signed by 29 countries

in 1996 that eliminated tariffs on hundreds of information technology (IT) goods. Governments have struggled to muster the necessary political will and capacity to address the climate crisis. It is time to allow the global market to speed the transition to a green economy.

#### GREEN ENERGY, RED TAPE

Too many countries impede the creation and production of low-cost green goods by erecting barriers to international trade and investment. The United States has been a leading culprit in this regard.

For years, the United States has been restricting the importation of low-cost solar panels and other environmental goods, especially from China. In 2012, the U.S. government concluded an investigation into whether China was unfairly subsidizing local manufacturers of solar panels and parts, in violation of China's commitments to the WTO. After finding that China was indeed running afoul of WTO rules, the United States imposed tariffs on Chinese solar imports. Those restrictions were extended in 2014 to imports from Taiwan after U.S. officials determined that the guilty Chinese companies had shifted production to Taiwan to evade U.S. tariffs. In 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump expanded those tariffs and extended their reach to imports from almost every country on the globe. Around that time, the United States levied new tariffs on other environmental products, such as material for wind-turbine towers from Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan.

More recently, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 provided tax incentives to companies and consumers to buy electric vehicles and other environmental products—but only if the vehicles are ultimately assembled in North America and if their batteries contain enough materials processed in the United States.

These Inflation Reduction Act provisions have provoked fury in many European capitals. The European Union is now claiming that several key parts of the IRA, including tax credits and subsidies, violate WTO rules on discrimination against imports. Many EU leaders are now demanding not just a WTO investigation but retaliatory measures against the United States. In December 2022, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, seemed to hint at a tit-for-tat response: “We also need to act to ensure the European Union keeps its global leadership in the clean-tech sectors.” The EU's new carbon border adjustment tax, which will levy tariffs on imports based on their carbon emissions, reflects the region's assertiveness in advancing climate policy.

Such talk is not propitious. Unfortunately, many governments have a history of erecting investment barriers in the energy industry, for instance, by limiting foreign investment in electricity generation and distribution. Others provide loans and fiscal support to firms deemed to be national energy “champions.” As a result, energy companies have often focused on political strategies rather than business ones, seeking to curry favor among policymakers instead of developing strategies for reducing emissions. Today, environmental and energy companies should not spend time and resources navigating trade barriers. As the planet faces increasing peril, they should accelerate the energy transition as boldly as possible.

International trade in electricity could also facilitate that transition. Just as the abundant winds of the United States’ Great Plains region and the ample solar energy of the Southeast could, if fully harnessed, power much of the Eastern Seaboard, so, too, could the underexploited potential of hydropower in the Canadian provinces of Quebec and British Columbia help address the electricity needs of cities in the U.S. Northeast and Northwest. But connections between the Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. electricity grids remain poorly developed. In 2020, the United States renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico. The result—the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement—did not expand North American trade but rather impeded it by applying more stringent rules regarding the national origin of parts for cars and other goods. The USMCA has a 270-page chapter on rules of origin but devotes just one page to environmental cooperation and green goods and services. Washington missed an opportunity in this accord to fortify regional trade in green electric power. It should seize that chance now by working with its neighbors to improve the integration of electricity grids. Allowing electricity to flow freely across national borders would lower energy prices and mitigate shortages. Such cross-border flows do exist. But they are intermittent and small.

#### TAKE A PAGE FROM TECH

World leaders concerned about climate change should note the dynamism of the IT industry that churns out new product innovations while lowering costs for producers and, in turn, for consumers. Not coincidentally, the sector is truly global, with elaborate networks of production, investment, and people spanning borders.

Much of the success of the IT sector over the past decade can be chalked up to free trade. The WTO’s tariff-busting ITA eventually

expanded from 29 to 82 countries, covering roughly 97 percent of world trade in high-tech products. In 2015, over 50 members concluded an auxiliary ITA agreement, known as ITA-2, that widened coverage to an additional 201 products valued at over \$1.3 trillion a year. The ITA remains the WTO's most comprehensive free-trade agreement.

The ITA helped spur innovation, trade, and investment around the world. Through the agreement, companies invented new goods and services and then grew global production networks to scale up, reduce costs, and benefit from comparative advantage.

Skill-abundant countries, such as the United States, tend to specialize in designing technology, whereas labor-abundant countries, including China, concentrate on assembly. For example, Qualcomm, a U.S. chipmaker, benefits from the ITA by designing chips for mobile phones in San Diego, contracting out the chip manufacturing to Taiwan, and having the components assembled in China before the finished products are exported worldwide. Without the ITA, trade in components would have been taxed at each link in the supply chain, as they moved from the United States to Taiwan to China and to consumer markets. These cumulative trade taxes would have reduced the value of Qualcomm's investments in chip technology.

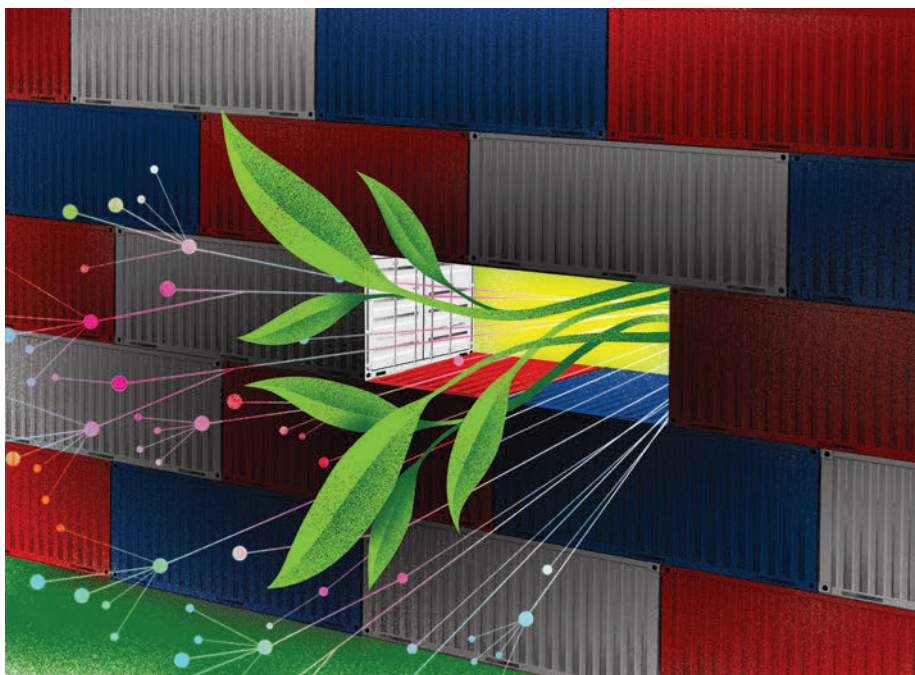
The ITA exemplifies the upsides of globalization. The agreement encourages innovation and reduces costs over time, benefiting not only tech firms but also other companies and consumers who use the technology. A WTO study calculated that between 1996 and 2015, the value of world exports of products covered in the ITA more than tripled, from \$549 billion in 1996 to \$1.65 trillion in 2015. Rising trade and investment flows led to lower prices. In the ten years after the ITA came into force, U.S. import prices relative to U.S. export prices stopped rising and began a decadelong decline—with falling import prices for IT products leading the way. Between 1996, when the ITA was created, and 2022, overall U.S. consumer prices rose by a cumulative 79.5 percent. But at the same time, the price of a personal computer in the United States fell by an astonishing 97 percent.

These striking declines in IT prices are the result of the rapid invention of new products and processes—and, with cause and effect running in both directions, of expanded globalization and freer trade. In many countries, such as China, Singapore, and South Korea, this virtuous cycle

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Washington is guilty of impeding international green trade.





between innovation and globalization helped spur growth in productivity and incomes, not only in the IT sector but across the whole economy.

Again, consider the U.S. experience. From 1973 to 1995, productivity for nonfarm workers grew at just 1.5 percent per year. From 1995 through 2007, this rate grew to an average of nearly 2.5 percent per year. A study by Harvard economist Dale Jorgenson concluded that IT-producing industries “have been the source of most of aggregate U.S. productivity growth throughout the 1990s.” Key to these economy-wide gains was the accelerated investment in IT goods and services throughout the economy. As IT became cheaper, governments, companies, and households “accumulated computers, software, and communications equipment much more rapidly than other forms of capital.” The IT industry alone contributed to nearly two-thirds of the economy-wide growth in productivity: about one-third of it directly, and about one-third driven by other industries investing more in IT goods and services.

But even more than flows of goods and capital, the migration of highly talented people contributed to the success of the IT industry. A 2007 study from the University of California, Berkeley, found that a quarter of all U.S. high-tech firms established between 1995 and 2005 had at least one foreign-born founder. In 2005, these new companies employed 450,000 people and generated more than \$50 billion in sales.

A follow-up study from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation similarly showed that a quarter of the high-tech companies created between 2006 and 2012 were founded by immigrants.

Increased global flows of highly skilled labor allowed the ITA to have maximum impact. In 1990, Congress created the H-1B visa program, which supplied 65,000 work permits to specialized foreign workers for three-year stints, with the chance to renew the visa once. Major U.S. tech companies were the primary beneficiaries as workers in IT quickly dominated the take-up of H-1Bs. For example, Apple's iPhone was designed in California by an international team of electrical engineers and software developers; tremendous innovation was possible because the United States encouraged the arrival of the best talent.

#### TRADE FREE OR DIE

The ITA's success in IT can be reproduced in green products. Like-minded countries should create a similar agreement for green technology, built on the pillars of trade, investment, and immigration, that could harness the innovative power of globalization.

For the first pillar, this accord would start with a free trade deal in environmental goods and services. The WTO began pursuing a green free trade deal in 2001, but those negotiations accomplished little. Enthusiasm revived in 2014 when 14 WTO member countries announced their intention to pursue an Environmental Goods Agreement to eliminate all tariffs on green goods in trade among themselves. They launched formal negotiations later that year, and the group eventually expanded to include 46 countries. But the talks collapsed in 2016 amid disagreements over which goods the agreement should cover. For example, countries advocated to include products in which they were already net exporters.

A rejuvenated agreement for free trade in green products must build on these earlier efforts by being broad, dynamic, and unfettered. A new green free trade agreement must include not just goods but also services, such as the construction of green energy infrastructure and insurance for extreme weather events, and it must err on the side of including rather than excluding products. Consider bicycles. In earlier negotiations, China advocated that bicycles should be viewed as environmental goods and exempted from tariffs. But the United States and the EU resisted—perhaps because each had already been levying duties on imports of Chinese bicycles. But bicycles, including electric ones, provide transport without emitting greenhouse gases and therefore

belong in any effective green trade agreement. Many countries have a pet green sector they want to protect. By having an agreement that covers an expansive set of products, no individual country would be seen as gaining at the expense of others in the export and import of green goods.

A new green free trade agreement should include not just final products but also intermediate inputs and capital goods, which are items that make up a final product and the machines used to manufacture them. For example, an agreement should include equipment to capture the carbon emitted by steel mills and replacement parts for wind turbines. And the agreement should expand its list of covered products annually as new green goods and services are invented. Such flexibility will allow a green trade agreement to generate even greater impact than the ITA did. The original ITA did include intermediates and capital goods. It also called for members to meet periodically to discuss incorporating additional goods in the deal as more were invented. But such reviews stalled in 1998 because members could not agree on which products to add. By 2012, the ITA had finally become so stale that a sufficient coalition of signatories felt the urgency of reviving negotiations. It took four more years to agree to and implement the ITA-2 with an expanded list of covered products, such as video games that use a television receiver. Today, many business leaders and governments are clamoring for an ITA-3. A green free trade agreement should preempt such bureaucratic delays. Member countries must commit to annual reviews whose default is to automatically include new green products. Without annual and automatic expansions, a new green free trade agreement will soon become as outdated as the original ITA.

Additionally, a new green free trade agreement must not be neutralized by carbon border taxes. In December 2022, the EU agreed to levy such a tax. A worldwide tariff on carbon is impractical and hard to enforce, and it would undercut free green trade, a more feasible climate solution. For a new green free trade agreement to work, all the products it covers must be exempted from carbon border taxes.

The second pillar of a green free trade agreement should be unfettered cross-border flows of foreign direct investment in environmental goods and services. Many countries, such as China, explicitly restrict foreign investment in sectors deemed sensitive or strategic. Others, including India, indirectly prevent capital inflows by subjecting multinational companies to nearly insurmountable approval processes.

Trading green goods often requires services provided on site by the foreign seller, which can only happen if the seller has a foreign subsidiary. Therefore, liberalizing foreign direct investment in green sectors would boost green trade. For example, to import wind turbines from a Danish multinational manufacturer, a country needs a foreign subsidiary of the Danish company to be on hand to guide installation. Multinationals lead the way in green innovation. Loosening restrictions on foreign direct investment will make it easier for foreign affiliates to operate and spread the expertise of their parent companies.

A boost in manufacturing is one upside of progress in environmental technology, but for most countries, the creation of jobs and the overall value provided by green-tech services are more important. Take the solar industry in the United States. With a green free trade agreement, a U.S. solar company might lower the price of its product by importing low-cost solar panels from China instead of manufacturing them domestically. In turn, the company sells more solar panels, creating more jobs in the United States in solar panel installation and maintenance. A 2020 study from the Solar Energy Industries Association estimated that only 14 percent of all U.S. solar workers were employed in manufacturing, whereas two-thirds worked in installation and research and development. In 2021, the U.S. government predicted a 27 percent increase in solar-installation employment over the next decade, in contrast with a projected average growth rate across all U.S. occupations of just five percent. Governments should not try to hold on to manufacturing jobs with white knuckles. More jobs will be created through the productivity gains of a green free trade agreement, particularly in services.

The third pillar of a green free trade agreement should be the unencumbered movement across borders of highly talented people working in green industries. In the United States, immigrants generate more patentable ideas and technologies than do native-born workers—and these immigrants are more likely to found companies, which create jobs that benefit everyone. Skilled immigrants complement rather than replace skilled native-born workers. Immigrants were central to the success of the IT industry and will likely be pivotal for green technology as well.

As green technology becomes the locus of innovation, the sector will attract the best global talent, as IT has. In industries that are undergoing rapid technological change, the strongest firms flourish and attract skilled labor. Companies tend to innovate as their employees gather and exchange ideas in proximity to employees of other firms. As companies

become more productive, they draw more skilled labor. This virtuous cycle of innovation and growth achieves its maximum potential when the most talented workers are allowed to move across national borders through relaxed immigration controls. But in the United States, for instance, the H-1B program does not go far enough. Had the United States allocated more visas in recent decades, the ITA would likely have been more effective. Congress should avoid this mistake by doubling or tripling the annual allocation of H-1Bs.

On top of a green free trade agreement, countries should commit to funding research and production of some of the world's most promising green innovations, just as the United States hastened the discovery and manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines through Operation Warp Speed. For companies attempting to create vaccines, the program reduced costs and uncertainty by providing standards that stipulated the research hurdles a company had to clear to receive government support. A similar initiative would accelerate the discovery, production, and cost reduction of green technology, complementing a free trade agreement. In a green Operation Warp Speed, countries would commit to purchasing the most promising technologies in long-duration energy storage, carbon capture, grid digitization, and broad-based electrification, no matter where the successful innovators are. The up-front commitment, made before the technologies are invented, would reduce uncertainty for innovators and short-circuit efforts by individual countries to limit support to their domestic champions.

Governments should also fund university education for engineers and scientists in the field of emerging green technology and train technical workers for jobs such as repairing wind turbines. In addition, governments should simplify regulations on green technology, for example, by making it easier to link new forms of electricity generation to the grid. Such government support would complement a global green free trade agreement without propping up specific companies.

#### INNOVATION NATIONS

A global agreement to liberalize cross-border flows of products, capital, and people would advance innovation and lower clean energy prices. Instead of lobbying for domestic protections, green companies could focus on global ideas, inputs, and customers. Firms and consumers would see the progress evident in smartphones replicated in green technologies such as hybrid vehicles and renewable power.



National security concerns about green technology, such as a fear of relying on other countries for energy needs, are overblown. In an industry as large and as rapidly growing as clean energy, no single country has all the talent and other resources it needs to be able to rely only on its own production. Climate change is the threat that most countries should be worried about. For the planet, what matters is maximizing the speed of invention, the scale of production, and the uptake of green goods and services.

It is now in vogue for political leaders to call for creating green jobs at home. But such efforts are misguided for two reasons—one old, one newer. The old reason is that government efforts to protect and nurture certain industries have largely failed over the long term: the target industries and companies often do not thrive, the per-job costs of government support often vastly exceed the wages of those jobs, and other countries often retaliate in a cycle that harms everyone.

The newer reason is that when it comes to addressing the climate emergency, the key issue is not which countries end up producing new clean goods and services. It is how many countries end up consuming them. Countries must stop chasing the long-elusive goal of selecting and supporting winning industries and companies. Instead, they must start focusing on the immediate imperative of inventing and deploying green innovations as fast and as broadly as possible.

Globalization will reduce the costs of critical green technologies. A 2022 study in the scientific journal *Nature* calculated the costs that arise when countries restrict “the free flow of capital, talent, and innovation.” The authors have estimated that the globalization of the solar photovoltaic supply chain lowered the cost of photovoltaic units, saving installers \$36 billion in China, \$24 billion in the United States, and \$7 billion in Germany between 2008 and 2020. Had tariffs been eliminated, the savings would have been greater. This study further estimates that if this globalization of solar production is not allowed to continue, global solar prices will be around 25 percent higher in 2030 than they would be if globalized production continues in its current state.

To meet the grave climate risks confronting the world, countries must enact bold new policies. Motivated by the gains from the ITA, the world should find clean energy solutions by quickly negotiating and implementing a green free trade agreement. What worked for smartphones and other tech products can also work for the planet. 🌍

# Asia's Third Way

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## How ASEAN Survives—and Thrives— Amid Great-Power Competition

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

**T**he defining geopolitical contest of our time is between China and the United States. And as tensions rise over trade and Taiwan, among other things, concern is understandably mounting in many capitals about a future defined by great-power competition. But one region is already charting a peaceful and prosperous path through this bipolar era. Situated at the geographical center of the U.S.-Chinese struggle for influence, Southeast Asia has not only managed to maintain good relations with Beijing and Washington, walking a diplomatic tightrope to preserve the trust and confidence of both capitals; it has also enabled China and the United States to contribute significantly to its growth and development.

This is no small feat. Three decades ago, many analysts believed that Asia was destined for conflict. As the political scientist Aaron

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Friedberg wrote in 1993, Asia seemed far more likely than Europe to be “the cockpit of great-power conflict.” In the long run, he predicted, “Europe’s past could be Asia’s future.” But although suspicion and rivalry endured—particularly between China and Japan and between China and India—Asia is now in its fifth decade of relative peace, while Europe is once again at war. (Asia’s last major conflict, the Sino-Vietnamese war, ended in 1979.) Southeast Asia has endured a measure of internal strife—in Myanmar especially—but on the whole, the region has remained remarkably peaceful, avoiding interstate conflict despite significant ethnic and religious diversity.

Southeast Asia has also prospered. As the living standards of Americans and Europeans have languished over the last two decades, Southeast Asians have achieved dramatic economic and social development gains. From 2010 to 2020, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), made up of ten countries with a combined GDP of \$3 trillion in 2020, contributed more to global economic growth than the European Union, whose members had a combined GDP of \$15 trillion.

This exceptional period of growth and harmony in Asia is not a historical accident. It is largely due to ASEAN, which despite its many flaws as a political and economic union has helped forge a cooperative regional order built on a culture of pragmatism and accommodation. That order has bridged deep political divides in the region and kept most Southeast Asian countries focused on economic growth and development. ASEAN’s greatest strength, paradoxically, is its relative weakness and heterogeneity, which ensures that no power sees it as threatening. As the Singaporean diplomat Tommy Koh has observed, “The U.S., China, and India are not able to take the role of driving the region because they have no common agenda. ASEAN is able to drive precisely because the three great powers cannot agree. And we can continue to do so as long as the major powers find us neutral and independent.”

ASEAN’s nuanced and pragmatic approach to managing geopolitical competition between China and the United States is increasingly seen as a model for the rest of the developing world. The vast majority of the world’s population lives in the global South, where most governments are primarily concerned with economic development and do not wish to take sides in the contest between Beijing and Washington. China is already making deep inroads across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. If the United States wants to preserve and deepen its ties with countries in these regions, it should learn from the ASEAN success

story. A pragmatic, positive-sum approach that looks past political differences and is open to cooperation with all will be more warmly received in the global South than a zero-sum approach that aims to divide the world into opposing camps.

#### PEACE AND PRAGMATISM

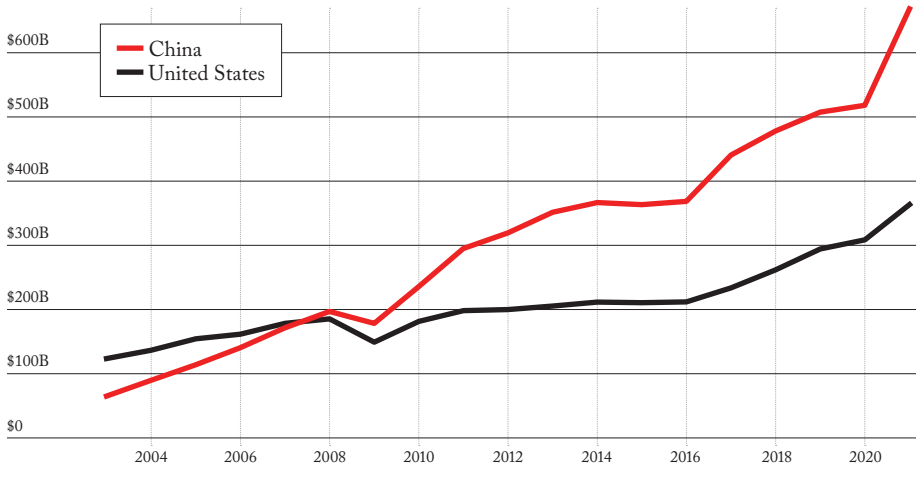
ASEAN was not always seen as evenhanded. Established with strong U.S. backing in 1967, the body was initially condemned by China and the Soviet Union as a neoimperialist American creation. But in recent decades, as China opened up its enormous economy, Beijing has embraced the regional bloc. ASEAN signed a free trade agreement with China in 2002, leading to a spectacular expansion of trade. In 2000, ASEAN's trade with China was worth just \$29 billion—roughly a quarter of the region's trade with the United States. But by 2021, ASEAN's trade with China had exploded to \$669 billion, while its trade with the United States had increased to \$364 billion.

Trade with both China and the United States has helped power ASEAN's remarkable economic rise. The region's combined GDP in 2000 was just \$620 billion, an eighth of Japan's. In 2021, it was \$3 trillion, compared with Japan's \$5 trillion. And projections show that the ASEAN economy will be larger than Japan's by 2030. Clearly, closer economic ties between the 680 million people who reside in ASEAN countries and the 1.4 billion people in China have delivered significant benefits to ASEAN. And this mutually beneficial relationship is just beginning. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—a free trade agreement among Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the members of ASEAN—came into force in January 2022 and will likely spur even more significant jumps in economic growth in the coming decade.

Even as it cultivates closer relations with China, ASEAN is determined to maintain equally close ties with the United States. U.S. President Donald Trump largely ignored Southeast Asia (as he did the rest of the world), but U.S. President Joe Biden has made a major effort to work with ASEAN, and its member states have responded enthusiastically. In May 2022, Biden hosted an ASEAN summit at the White House that was attended by most of the union's key leaders. Later that month, the Biden administration launched its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which aims to deepen U.S. economic engagement with partners in the region. Seven out of ASEAN's ten countries

## BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

ASEAN trade in goods with the U.S. and China, 2003–2021



Source: ASEAN Secretariat via Aseanstats.org

signed on, together with Australia, Fiji, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, demonstrating again that ASEAN wants to preserve its strong ties with Washington.

Geographic proximity to China inevitably means that ASEAN will have more challenges dealing with China than with the United States. Already, disputes have arisen over the South China Sea and Chinese 5G technology, among other issues. China contests the territorial claims of four ASEAN countries—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—but its conduct in the South China Sea disrupts relations with all association members. In 2012, for instance, China unwisely pressured Cambodia, then the chair of ASEAN, to exclude any mention of conflicts over the South China Sea from a joint communiqué following an ASEAN ministerial meeting. Indonesia was able to step in to resolve the impasse by brokering a common ASEAN position a week later. But Beijing subsequently mishandled its relations with Jakarta. Although the so-called nine-dash line on Chinese maps showing Beijing's claims in the South China Sea runs close to Indonesia's Natuna Islands, China had previously assured Indonesia that there were no overlapping claims. Yet in 2016 and 2020, Chinese fishing vessels entered Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone, prompting Indonesian President Joko



Widodo to make high-profile visits to the Natuna Islands to reaffirm his country's sovereignty over the region.

The ambiguous nature of the nine-dash line will likely remain an irritant in ASEAN-Chinese relations. So will the inability of both parties to conclude a long-awaited "code of conduct" agreement for the South China Sea that would reduce the risk of conflict in the disputed waterway. But it is also clear that the culture of pragmatism that envelops ASEAN-Chinese relations will prevent any major flare-ups. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have all increased their economic engagement with China, despite their disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea. In the past, China has also made pragmatic compromises with its smaller ASEAN neighbors, including removing two dashes from its original 11-dash line as a show of friendship to Vietnam in 1952. It would be wise for China to make similar pragmatic compromises in the future.

Another source of friction in ASEAN-Chinese relations is Washington's global campaign against the adoption of Chinese 5G technology. The choice of a 5G telecommunications system is a national decision, so ASEAN has no collective position on whether its members should deal with Chinese telecom giant Huawei. Yet the union's signature pragmatism has prevailed, with each member state making its own decision according to its needs. Indonesia and the Philippines have contracted with Huawei to build their 5G networks, while Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam have not. These decisions indicate that ASEAN countries consider American concerns but balance them against their own interest in having access to cheap technology that benefits their people.

Sometimes, those interests demand that ASEAN countries largely ignore American concerns. The United States has campaigned equally hard against China's Belt and Road Initiative, but this campaign has essentially failed: all ten ASEAN countries have participated in various BRI projects, and the region as a whole has been among the most receptive to China's mammoth infrastructure investment scheme. According to Angela Tritto, Albert Park, and Dini Sejko of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, ASEAN countries had launched at least 53 projects under the BRI umbrella as of 2020.

These projects have brought substantial rewards. Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world, but thanks to the BRI, it now boasts a high-speed train linking the capital, Vientiane, to China's Yunnan Province. With a top speed of 100 miles per hour, the sleek



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new bullet train cuts what was once a 15-hour road trip to under four hours, promising a new tide of trade and tourism from China. Indonesia also turned to China for help building a high-speed train from Jakarta to Bandung, a little more than 90 miles away. It could have purchased a train from any country in the world but chose China after Widodo took a rail journey of similar length in China in less time than it took him to finish a cup of tea. The United States simply has not put forward a viable alternative to the BRI, so the choice to embrace the Chinese initiative over American objections has been an easy one.

#### BELLWETHER OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

ASEAN's approach to managing geopolitical competition between China and the United States holds lessons for the rest of the developing world. As China deepens trade and investment ties with states across the global South, more and more countries are adopting a similarly pragmatic approach to balancing Beijing's and Washington's concerns. This should not come as a surprise. Many developing countries respect and admire ASEAN's achievements and see the region's experience as a guide.

As it has in Southeast Asia, China has cultivated deeper economic relations with Africa. Western countries, including the United States, have warned African governments to be wary of Chinese exploitation, but such admonitions have been met with skepticism, not least because of the West's long and painful record of exploiting Africa. Moreover, the empirical evidence shows that Chinese investment has boosted economic growth and generated new jobs on a continent where jobs are scarce.

According to the development economist Anzetse Were, Chinese investment in Africa has grown at an annual rate of 25 percent since 2000. Between 2017 and 2020, Chinese investment created more jobs than any other single source of foreign investment and accounted for 20 percent of Africa's incoming capital. And Chinese companies "are not in the business of just hiring their own," as some critics have alleged, Were writes. "African employees make up on average 70 percent to 95 percent of the total workforce in Chinese firms."

By comparison, the United States and other Western countries have offered mostly empty promises and inaction. For much of the last decade, U.S. foreign direct investment in Africa has lagged Chinese foreign direct investment by roughly half, and much of the

development aid the United States delivers to the continent—like much Western aid in general—ends up in the hands of Western consultants and companies. As the journalist Howard French has observed, the United States has grown “increasingly stingy and scornful” about development assistance at the same time as China has “gotten into the global public goods game with both feet.”

Hypocritical moralizing about climate change, corruption, and human rights has also undermined the standing of Western countries in Africa. The United States and many European powers have long lectured Africans about the need to transition away from fossil fuels, but they suddenly stopped after Russia invaded Ukraine and they needed Africa’s oil and gas. By contrast, China has been less sanctimonious, delivering aid and investment without the burdensome conditions placed on Western aid. As Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said in January 2022, “Our partnership with China is not a partnership based on China telling us what to do. It is a partnership of friends, working together to meet Kenya’s socio-economic agenda. . . . We do not need lectures about what we need, we need partners to help us achieve what we require.”

China has had similar success in deepening ties with Latin America. Between 2002 and 2019, total Chinese trade with Latin America and the Caribbean increased from less than \$18 billion to more than \$315 billion, according to the Congressional Research Service. By 2021, Chinese trade with the region had ballooned to \$448 billion. That figure is still less than half of U.S. trade with Latin America, but 71 percent of U.S.–Latin American trade is with Mexico. In the rest of the region, Chinese trade has overtaken U.S. trade by \$73 billion.

The growth of Chinese trade with Brazil, Latin America’s largest economy, has been particularly striking. In 2000, Brazil’s exports to China stood at \$1 billion per year. Now, Brazil exports \$1 billion worth of goods and services to China every four days. Some of this growth occurred during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, who was far closer to Trump than he was to Chinese President Xi Jinping. Even during the two years that Trump and Bolsonaro overlapped in office, Brazil continued to pursue deeper economic integration with China, suggesting that an ASEAN-like culture of pragmatism is taking hold in Brasília.

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The United States simply has not put forward a viable alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative.



The Gulf is yet another region where China is making inroads. Traditionally, the oil-rich states of the Gulf have looked to Washington for protection. Yet close political and security ties with the United States have not prevented Gulf countries from deepening their economic ties with China. In 2000, trade between the Gulf Cooperation Council and China stood at just under \$20 billion. By 2020, it had grown to \$161 billion, and China replaced the EU as the GCC's largest trading partner. During the same period, U.S. trade with the GCC grew much more modestly, from nearly \$40 billion to \$49 billion. In 2021, the GCC's trade with China, at \$180 billion, surpassed its combined trade with the United States and the EU.

The GCC countries have some of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world. Their decisions about where to invest are not driven by concerns about politics or a conception of friendship. They are driven by cold calculations about which region is likely to deliver the highest growth. In 2000, the GCC sovereign wealth funds were invested almost entirely in the West. That year, GCC countries accounted for less than 0.1 percent of foreign direct investment into China. But by 2020, most GCC sovereign wealth funds had significantly stepped up their investment in China, although exact investment figures are hard to come by because most of these funds do not disclose their holdings publicly.

Clearly, Gulf countries do not wish to compromise their relations with the United States—and with the Abraham Accords, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates arguably drew closer to Washington in 2020—but neither do they wish to forgo the economic benefits of deeper integration with China. A pragmatic approach that seeks to accommodate both powers is gaining sway.

#### GUNS AND BUTTER

Given that many developing countries are beginning to adopt ASEAN's approach to managing competition between the United States and China, Washington would do well to learn from the association's experience. The strategy ASEAN has used to balance the concerns and sensitivities of China and the United States (and other major powers such as India, Japan, and the European Union) could also enable the rest of the global South to do the same. China is already pursuing deeper trade and investment ties across the developing world. The United States must decide whether to deal pragmatically with these regions or continue with its zero-sum approach to competition with China and risk driving them away.



What would a more pragmatic U.S. approach look like? Consider three simple rules to follow when dealing with ASEAN and, by extension, the rest of the global South. The first is not to ask any country to choose between Beijing and Washington. There is a practical reason for this: compared with China, the United States has little to offer ASEAN. Strained finances and congressional resistance to expanding foreign aid mean that Washington has provided only a fraction of the assistance that Beijing has provided to the region. At the U.S.-ASEAN summit in May 2022, for instance, Biden pledged to spend \$150 million on infrastructure, security, pandemic preparedness, and other efforts in ASEAN countries. Compare that with the \$1.5 billion Xi pledged in November 2021 to help ASEAN countries fight COVID-19 and rebuild their economies over the next three years.

True, Washington has more to offer in terms of defense cooperation and arms sales. But relying too heavily on military rather than civilian cooperation could end up hurting the United States. As Paul Haenle, a China expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, remarked to *The Financial Times*, “The risk is that the optics in the region become the U.S. coming to the table with guns and ammunition and China dealing with the bread and butter issues of trade and economics.” It would be a huge mistake for Washington to be associated with guns while Beijing is associated with butter. The simple truth is that for most people in the global South, the first priority is economic development.

And for good reason. Having grown up in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, when the country’s per capita income was as low as Ghana’s, I understand how psychologically debilitating poverty can be. I also understand how psychologically uplifting it can be for the people of a poor country to experience development successes. Even as a child, I could feel the quality of my life improve as our family acquired a flush toilet, a refrigerator, and a black-and-white TV set.

This is why it has been a mistake for Washington to campaign against China’s BRI. Western governments and media have portrayed the BRI as a pernicious plan to ensnare countries in debt-trap diplomacy. But of the UN’s 193 member states, 140 have rejected that interpretation and signed agreements to join the BRI. The advantages many have reaped from doing so underscore the folly of asking countries to take sides.

The second rule is to avoid passing judgment on countries’ domestic political systems. ASEAN demonstrates why this rule is critical.

The association's ten member states include democracies, autocracies, communist regimes, and an absolute monarchy. In the rest of the developing world, the variety of regime types is even greater. For this reason, Biden's decision to frame world politics as a struggle between democracies and autocracies is a mistake. In practice, Biden understands that the world is more complicated, which is why he traveled to the Middle East to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in July 2022, despite having previously called Saudi Arabia a "pariah."

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Any U.S. effort to counter Chinese influence in the global South is doomed to fail.

The United States is only diminishing its own stature by calling on countries to shun China. Neither of the other two largest democracies in the world—India and Indonesia—see themselves engaged in an ideological struggle with Beijing, even if they have concerns about China's rise. Nor do they feel that Beijing threatens their democracies. By carving the world up by regime type, Washington is just exposing its own double standards at the same time as many other countries are becoming more sophisticated and subtle in their political judgments.

Given the deep ideological conviction of many U.S. policymakers and opinion-makers that the United States should always be seen as a defender of democracy, it will be difficult for Washington to explicitly renounce this commitment. Yet the United States learned to work cooperatively with nondemocratic regimes (including communist China) during the Cold War. If it resuscitates that old culture of pragmatism, it can do so again today.

The third rule for engaging ASEAN and other developing regions is to be willing to work with any country on common global challenges such as climate change. Even if Washington is uncomfortable with Beijing's growing global economic influence, it should embrace China's rise as a leader in clean energy and renewable technologies. China is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases and the biggest user of coal today, but its investments in green technology will be crucial in fighting climate change. China leads the world in the production and consumption of renewable energy, manufacturing more solar panels, wind turbines, and electric car batteries than any other country. In short, there can be no feasible plan to fight climate change without involving China and its global economic partners.

Chinese investment will also be critical to ensure that other countries can fulfill their climate obligations while meeting their development and infrastructure needs. The Export-Import Bank of China has funded major solar and wind projects around the world, including Latin America's largest solar plant, in Jujuy, Argentina, and a major wind farm in Coquimbo, Chile. China is also taking steps to make the BRI more climate-friendly, including by developing green-power, transportation, industry, and manufacturing projects. And it is expanding cooperation in green finance—for instance, by working with the EU to develop a common taxonomy for sustainable finance. Taken together, these efforts arguably exceed anything the Bretton Woods Institutions have done to combat climate change.

In short, U.S. policymakers should at least privately recognize that China's growing economic influence can be an asset when it comes to solving shared global problems. In addition to climate change, poverty and pandemics could also be dealt with more effectively through greater cooperation between the United States and China. Such cooperation will remain elusive, however, unless Washington stops viewing any win for China as a loss for the United States and vice versa.

These three rules reflect an emerging reality to which Washington must adapt: developing countries are growing more sophisticated and better able to make autonomous decisions. The United States has done itself a big disfavor by framing the world in binary terms, as divided between good and evil, democracy and autocracy. If Washington can only work effectively with like-minded governments, it will be locked out of the global South, where most people have a different view of the world.

The vast majority of developing countries are clearly willing to work and cooperate with China. As a result, any U.S. effort to reduce or counter Chinese influence in the global South is doomed to fail. The United States should stop trying to cut China off from the rest of the world and start trying to identify areas where the two great powers can work together. As for the developing countries that wish to partner with both Beijing and Washington, the United States should look to ASEAN for guidance. Its pragmatic balancing act, or something like it, is the future for the rest of the developing world. 🌐

# After the Iran Deal

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## A Plan B to Contain the Islamic Republic

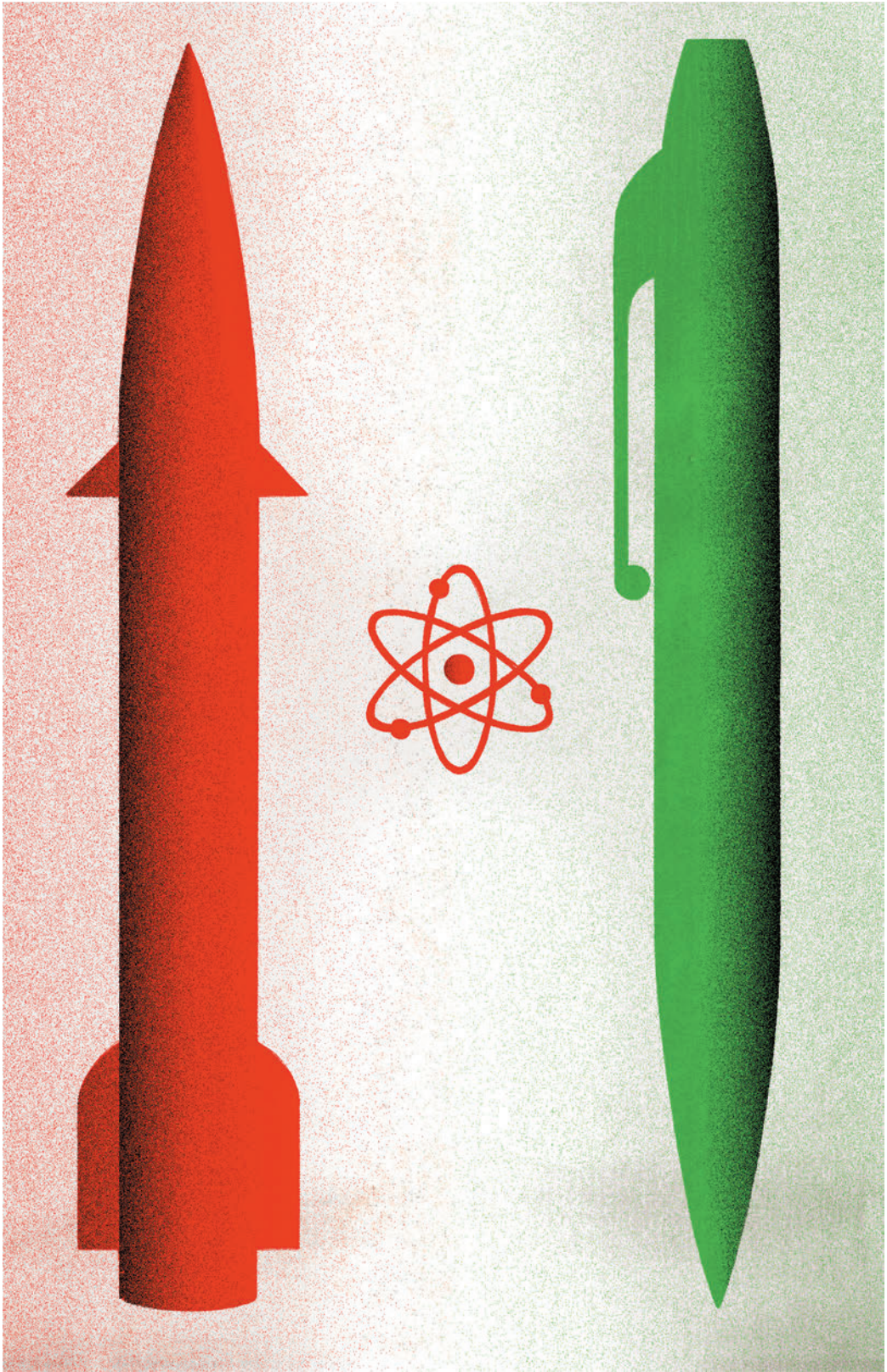
SUZANNE MALONEY

**W**hen U.S. President Joe Biden assumed office, he was determined to resuscitate the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which his predecessor, Donald Trump, had unilaterally withdrawn the United States in 2018. Biden quickly appointed a special envoy to begin negotiations with Tehran and the five great powers that remain party to the agreement: China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom. In his first speech before the United Nations, he declared that his administration was “prepared to return to full compliance” and was engaged in diplomacy to persuade Iran to do the same. Reaching a new agreement would be difficult. Senior Biden administration officials and many outside experts hoped for a “longer and stronger” deal. But Tehran had advanced its nuclear program since the Trump administration’s withdrawal and demanded a stiff price to roll that progress back.

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Biden nonetheless hoped his team could create a new understanding that would lower the risk of nuclear proliferation.

Despite the challenges, trying to salvage the deal made tremendous sense for Biden. The president was eager to shake off the United States' post-9/11 entanglements in the Middle East, and he wanted to show the world that after the tumultuous Trump era, Washington was again committed to diplomacy. Resurrecting the deal was central to Biden's plan for restoring U.S. leadership in the world—a tangible step toward undoing the reputational damage incurred by Trump's abandonment of the agreement.

But as the boxer Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until you get punched in the face." And Biden's Iran aspirations have suffered from multiple blows. The first came in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and irrevocably shattered the great-power coordination that had enabled the nuclear deal to take place. A second punch landed in August, when Iran began shipping drones to Russia, making Tehran an even more prominent and harmful nemesis. And a third blow arrived in September, when protests erupted across Iran against the government's brutality, captivating the world, undermining the regime's control, and making any agreement that would send Tehran massive new resources both dangerous and unsavory. By itself, each of these jolts was enough to keep JCPOA on the ropes. Together, they constituted a knockout.

Yet so far, the Biden administration has not seriously rethought its Iran policies. Consumed by the war in Ukraine and competition with China, the government has instead sought to navigate this new environment with purposeful ambiguity, offering symbolic support to the protesters while soft-pedaling (but not publicly disavowing) the prospect of a new nuclear accord. This strategy may temporarily prevent a crisis over Iran, but it cannot indefinitely stave off disaster. Indeed, the stalling may invite a crisis by encouraging Iranian brinkmanship or Israeli impatience.

The time has come for the Biden administration to acknowledge that the JCPOA cannot be reinstated and to craft a new strategy that addresses the totality of the Iran challenge, not just the nuclear issue. The demise of the nuclear deal marks more than the end of a particular diplomatic initiative: it represents the final failure of decades of American efforts to engage the Islamic Republic. U.S. policy toward Iran has long been predicated on the conviction that Washington can work with many other states—including adversaries—to reduce Tehran's antagonism, that the Iranian leadership is willing to seriously talk with the United States, and that the regime's grip on power is unshakable. Whatever validity those

assumptions once had, they clearly no longer apply. The moment when Washington and Europe might have tempted Tehran to moderate its behavior is lost to history. Today, the states with the most leverage over Iran are Russia and China, and they have little incentive to upset the status quo. The Iranian government may have once sought a limited truce with the United States, but the regime has now forsaken access to the West and staked Iran's future on relationships with other authoritarian states. Meanwhile, the ordinary Iranians who have confronted the regime in street protests for months despite incalculable risks are paving the way for a different future for their country.

Changing course is never easy, and Biden's political and diplomatic investment in the JCPOA makes it especially difficult to abandon the deal. But the agreement no longer offers a realistic pathway for mitigating the threats posed by Tehran. If Biden wants to secure international visibility for Iran's nuclear activities, he must rally like-minded states to ensure that the country abides by its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. And if Washington wants to stop Iran's malevolent behavior at home and abroad, it must preserve space for the protests. The mobilization of the Iranian people represents the world's best shot at bringing about positive and lasting change in the country's role in the world.

#### SORDID HISTORY

Iran has occupied a central place in U.S. foreign policy since Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the country's last shah and a strategic partner to Washington, was ousted in a 1979 revolution. The government forged in the aftermath, which refashioned itself as an "Islamic Republic," sought to upend the regional order through terror and subversion and was steeped in hostility toward the United States. As if to announce Iran's newfound animosity toward Washington and the norms of international relations, a group of militant students seized the country's embassy in November 1979. They then took 66 U.S. government personnel hostage, demanding a variety of economic and political concessions from Washington in exchange for their release.

It would take 15 months of false starts and a failed rescue mission before the United States negotiated the release of all the hostages. But almost immediately after the embassy attack, the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter created a two-track strategy that would come to define Washington's Iran policy for decades. The United States would, on the one hand, penalize Iran for its destabilizing behavior.

On the other hand, it would keep the door open for negotiations. For the next 40 years, every U.S. president followed this dual path, sanctioning and threatening Iran while also offering to speak with the country's leaders. Even Trump, who authorized the killing of a senior Iranian military official in 2020, floated the possibility of meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in 2019.

All this has been to little avail; the American track record on Iran has been modest at best. Washington and its partners have slowed Tehran's 30-year endeavor to gain the resources needed to build nuclear weapons, and they have blunted the reach of some Iranian proxies. But there have been few meaningful breakthroughs or sustained reversals in Iran's most problematic policies, and Washington's closest partners have typically proved reluctant to jeopardize their trade or diplomatic ties with Tehran. At times, U.S. actions have even helped the Islamic Republic. By eliminating Iran's principal adversary, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq significantly amplified the regime's capacity and readiness to stoke instability and violence at home and abroad.

The seeming intractability of the Iran challenge has made the country a perennial object of partisan U.S. contention, culminating with the pitched battle over the Obama administration's 2015 nuclear deal, which loosened sanctions on Iran in exchange for limits to the country's nuclear program. For its proponents, that agreement vindicated multilateral diplomacy as a tool for resolving even the toughest challenges posed by Tehran. But for critics, the fact that the deal's restrictions eventually expired represented an unthinkable capitulation. After Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018, Iran increased its regional aggression and violated many of the agreement's tenets.

The Biden administration sought to undo Trump's actions, but its efforts to resurrect the JCPOA quickly ran into trouble. Tehran refused to engage directly with U.S. diplomats, forcing Washington to negotiate through its European partners. Iran insisted that the Biden administration guarantee that no future president could withdraw from the agreement, a requirement that Biden had no power to fulfill. And whenever the two sides came close to a deal, Tehran threw up demands for additional concessions, continually postponing any settlement.

Still, for the first year of Biden's presidency, U.S. diplomats hoped that they would eventually break the logjam. The original deal, after all, had taken nearly two years to hammer out. Then came Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, upending the international

ecosystem in which the deal had survived. The original nuclear agreement depended on Western cooperation with Moscow, which had cultivated a stake in Iran's expanding nuclear infrastructure and therefore had the power to nudge, cajole, and occasionally extort Tehran to come to terms with the West. The war not only quashed Russia's appetite for coordination with the United States; it also gave Moscow an incentive to end the deal altogether. Any sanctions relief for Iran would permit the country to again sell oil on world markets, lowering Russia's oil revenue. By contrast, prolonging the Iranian nuclear crisis helps nudge Tehran more firmly into the Kremlin's orbit.

Iran's leadership appears to have made a similar calculation. Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, traveled to Moscow a few weeks before the invasion, a visit that he and other officials described as a "turning point" in the bilateral relationship. Iran has since sold Moscow thousands of unmanned aerial vehicles that Russia has used to degrade Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Iran is also helping to train Russian soldiers and transfer drone production systems to Russia, and according to the Biden administration, it may start sending Russia ballistic missiles next. In return, Moscow has promised Iran helicopters, newer air defense systems, and fighter jets. Iranian pilots are already training to operate Russian Sukhoi Su-35 combat aircraft headed to their country. Moscow has also said it will invest \$40 billion in Iran's oil and gas development (although that pledge remains speculative), and it has promised to create sanctions-proof trade corridors and financial mechanisms between the two countries.

Iran's decision to align itself with Russia's war reflects more than short-term opportunism: it is evidence of a dramatic evolution in the attitudes and interests of the Islamic Republic's ruling elite. Ten years ago, the Iranian regime considered access to Western markets and systems, such as the European-based SWIFT financial messaging service, so vital to the country's economy and the regime's stability that they overcame more than 30 years of aversion to direct negotiations with Washington. As Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself said in 2015, "The reason why we entered into negotiations and made some concessions was to lift sanctions." But today, the regime no longer sees the West as a necessary—or even viable—conduit for economic benefits. "Today, the U.S. is not the world's dominant power,"

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Today's Iranian protesters are less afraid.

Khamenei proclaimed in a speech last November commemorating the embassy seizure. “Many of the world’s political analysts believe that the U.S. is declining,” he continued. “It is gradually melting away.” He and other Iranian leaders instead see the new global locus of power shifting eastward. “Asia will become the center of knowledge, the center of economics, as well as the center of political power, and the center of military power,” Khamenei exulted. He added: “We are in Asia.”

Iranian policymakers have tried to operationalize Khamenei’s vision by forging closer ties with multiple Asian countries, especially China. Beijing and Tehran concluded a blockbuster economic deal in July 2021 valued at \$400 billion. The following year, Tehran agreed to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a group that links China, India, Russia, and several Central Asian and South Asian countries. The influential Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* celebrated this step by describing it as a newfound convergence among “the three great powers”—that is, China, Russia, and Iran. Although it’s hard to imagine that Beijing or Moscow views Iran as anything close to a peer, they see some economic and strategic benefits in tactical cooperation. Unlike the United States or Europe, Beijing and Moscow rarely condition trade or diplomatic ties on liberal norms of domestic or foreign policy. For Iranian theocrats, these are much more convenient relationships.

Emboldened by having stronger patrons, Iranian leaders have demonstrated a greater readiness to engage in malign behavior. The Iranian regime and its proxies have terrorized neighbors, especially Iraq and the Gulf states, with missiles and drones and have helped fuel insurgencies and civil wars in Syria and Yemen. According to reporting by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Iran has sought to assassinate dissidents and government officials in the United States. Such actions speak even louder than Tehran’s pugnacious rhetoric, and they do not suggest that Iran’s leadership is prepared to make a historic accommodation with its oldest adversary.

#### UNDER PRESSURE

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian, was arrested by the country’s morality police for supposedly wearing her legally mandated headscarf improperly. According to multiple reports, she was then beaten and tortured by government security forces until she lost consciousness. She was taken to a hospital in Tehran, where she spent two days in a coma before she died.



Amini's family courageously went public with the truth despite government pressure to accept an official cover-up.

Protests erupted almost immediately, and within a week the unrest had spread to 80 cities across the country. Many of the demonstrators demanded that Iran's dress code for women be abolished and the morality police disbanded. But the protests quickly escalated into calling for the downfall of the regime. As with past protests, security forces responded with a brutal crackdown, arresting more than 19,000 protesters and killing more than 500, including in a string of horrifically unjust executions meant to terrorize a deeply disaffected population. But the repression has not stopped the uprising. Since Amini's death, Iran has experienced a steady tempo of small-scale demonstrations, labor strikes, and confrontations between ordinary people and senior officials.

Longtime observers of Iran tend to be cynical about the prospects for meaningful political change. The Islamic Republic has endured seemingly every imaginable crisis—civil war, invasion, terrorism, earthquakes, drought, a pandemic, and routine episodes of internal unrest—but still, the *nezam*, or ruling system, has survived. And there are plenty of reasons why this round of unrest could fizzle out, including the lack of any defined leader, central organization, or affirmative vision for the future.

But there is something different about this latest outbreak of internal turmoil. Perhaps it's the extraordinary courage of Iranian women in challenging mandatory veiling and in galvanizing a movement, or the extraordinary participation of a wide array of ethnic groups and social classes, or the newfound unity among ideologically divergent segments of the population. Perhaps it is the protesters' nascent efforts to deploy tactics beyond demonstrations, including labor strikes and cyberattacks on state banks and media. What is clear is that today's protesters are less afraid than those of the past, returning to the streets again and again despite the certain knowledge that they risk arrest and death. Famous Iranian athletes, film directors, actors, and other cultural luminaries have also defied threats to voice support for the uprisings, even after some of their colleagues were imprisoned.

The grassroots movement has captured attention and support around the world. In November, the UN Human Rights Council launched an independent investigation into the regime's actions, and in December, the UN Economic and Social Council took the unusual step of removing Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Governments on every continent have spoken out in favor

of the demonstrations. This support is necessary and important, but it has further undermined the JCPOA. Iran's regime is more embattled than ever, and it could see its nuclear infrastructure as increasingly essential to withstanding domestic and international pressure. Overwhelmingly focused on survival, the government is unlikely to conduct much diplomacy, especially with the West. Khamenei recently said the demonstrations were "designed by the U.S., the usurping fake Zionist regime, and their mercenaries." It is difficult to see how

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The facts are the facts: the nuclear deal cannot be rescued.

a regime that blames Washington for its existential crisis would endorse any kind of agreement with U.S. policymakers.

Some U.S. and European analysts believe otherwise. In their view, Iran's domestic turmoil could actually prompt new flexibility at the negotiating table because reviving the nuclear deal would alleviate economic

pressures and could therefore buoy the government. They point to Iran's 2009 demonstrations, when people took to the streets en masse over the contested reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Then, as now, the world rallied around the Iranians' cry for freedom. Then, as now, the Iranian government blamed the United States. In the months that followed, government repression and the opposition's exhaustion won out, but the specter of popular turmoil and the intense economic pressure generated by multilateral sanctions helped persuade Iran's leaders to grudgingly embrace previously unimaginable negotiations with Washington.

The appeal of another pragmatic Iranian pivot under pressure is understandable, but the shifts within Iran and in the international system rule it out. In the past decade, factional divisions within the regime have narrowed; a hard-line consensus has ossified. The government's claim to legitimacy has been attenuated by corruption and nepotism, and its promises of a better future have been revealed as hollow. Ordinary Iranians no longer harbor any illusions of gradual reform bringing about meaningful progress. A decade ago, negotiations with the West offered Tehran the only way out of catastrophic sanctions; today, Tehran sees China and Russia as offering an attractive alternative. And without the cooperation of Beijing and Moscow, Washington cannot apply sufficient pressure on Tehran to persuade its leaders to compromise.

The protests have also raised new questions about the value of a nuclear agreement. Even if diplomacy could succeed at reviving the JCPOA, it is far from clear that the benefits of doing so would outweigh the costs. Resuscitating the deal would generate a substantial influx of resources for the regime, strengthening Iran's ruling system at the expense of its challengers in the streets. It would be viewed as a betrayal by the courageous Iranians who have risked their lives and livelihoods in the hope of effecting change. As the Iranian American human rights advocate Roya Hakkakian said in October, "the most awful thing we—the United States—can possibly do at the moment is to sit beside the very people who are shooting at the demonstrators, peaceful demonstrators, on the streets."

Indeed, reviving the JCPOA now would undermine one of the deal's own original purposes: inducing Tehran to relinquish its most malevolent policies. U.S. President Barack Obama insisted that the 2015 agreement "doesn't bet on Iran changing," but he also declared that change in Iran "is something that may end up being an important byproduct of this deal." Others were more explicit about this hope. According to Philip Hammond, the United Kingdom's foreign secretary during the final stages of the nuclear-deal negotiations, "The prize was not just the end of this nuclear arms race or any nuclear ambition by Iran. The prize was a much wider rehabilitation of the relationship between Iran and the West." An agreement today—when the regime is engaged in mass atrocities at home and helping Russia carry out a brutal assault on Ukraine by supplying Moscow with drones—would reward Tehran's transgressions and make it much harder to prevent more of them.

#### BEST-LAID PLANS

Canceling the full-court press to restore the Iran nuclear deal will not be easy for the Biden administration, in part because some of its most senior foreign policy officials were key architects of the original agreement. These officials know that at the time it was finalized, the JCPOA represented a historic achievement: the first instance of sustained, direct, high-level negotiations between U.S. and Iranian officials in decades and a rare case in which the two states came to an understanding on a vital national security issue. And to secure the deal, U.S. officials had to win a multiyear battle against opponents in Washington and several of the United States' most influential partners in the Middle East, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. For these policymakers, the fight was worth it

because the agreement promised to resolve one of the world's greatest challenges while underscoring the power of peaceful engagement.

The value of the agreement was increased by the absence of any better alternative. A military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would risk an immensely costly regional escalation and at best offer only temporary respite from the threat of a nuclear Iran. The Iranian nuclear program is too far advanced to eliminate conclusively through air strikes, with crucial facilities designed for invulnerability and situated close to major population centers. "There is no long-term sustainable solution other than a diplomatic one," Robert Malley, a National Security Council official under Obama and the current U.S. special envoy to Iran, remarked in October 2022. In December, Malley told Radio Free Europe, "Whatever happened in the last few months, we still believe that the best way to ensure that Iran can't acquire a nuclear weapon is through a nuclear deal." These sentiments are shared and echoed by Washington's European partners.

But the lack of an obvious alternative does not mean the present course is feasible. The facts are the facts: between the protests, the war in Ukraine, and Iran's general intransigence, the deal cannot be rescued. Biden has promised that Iran will not get a nuclear weapon under his watch, and if he intends to fulfill that pledge, his administration will have to find another solution.

The administration can begin by developing a consensus with France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other like-minded states on preventing Tehran from taking steps that would bring it to the brink of nuclear weaponization. These include enriching uranium to 90 percent purity, ending or seriously impeding International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of Iranian facilities, withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and resuming weaponization or weaponization-related activities, such as expanding its production of uranium metal. Together with European partners, the Biden administration should outline the compelling economic, political, and military consequences that await Iran if it goes over these lines. Those repercussions should include even more punishing trade and financial measures and the readiness of the United States and its allies and partners to use force to debilitate Iran's nuclear infrastructure. These redlines and consequences must be communicated to Tehran quietly, at the highest levels, and through multiple trusted interlocutors to reinforce this coalition's unity of purpose in preventing Iranian nuclear proliferation.

This message should be bolstered with a stepped-up pace of joint military exercises in the region involving Israel, the United States, and Arab countries that would signal a capability to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, similar to those that U.S. forces conducted with Israel in November 2022 and again in January 2023. The Pentagon should continue to bolster the nascent multilateral security planning and coordination that Israel and the Gulf states have undertaken and invest in strengthening an integrated regional air defense system as a means of underscoring the United States' readiness and willingness to follow through on Biden's stated commitment to ensure that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons.

Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States should also plan how and when to deploy the so-called snapback provision of the JCPOA, which enabled any party to the deal to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran that were suspended after the agreement came into force. A snapback risks Iranian escalation, but it would end the ambiguity over the possibility of any return to the deal, reimpose the symbolic force of UN sanctions, and prevent the scheduled expiration of the UN embargo on Iranian ballistic missile sales later this year.

The snapback provisions are not the only economic leverage these countries have over Tehran. Many other countries have viewed trade and investment in Iran as an important lever of influence and have mostly resisted sanctioning the country except during the run-up to the nuclear negotiations. The Islamic Republic has always relied heavily on trade and banking relationships with Dubai, and until late 2022, Germany retained a program of export credits and other trade promotions to incentivize, at least in theory, economic cooperation with Tehran. But Iran's destructive role in Ukraine has hardened European views of the regime, as demonstrated by the European Parliament's decision in January to declare the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization. European countries could also, for example, target the assets of Iran's *aghazadeh* class of regime crony capitalists, much as they targeted the assets of Russian oligarchs.

Iran may not be moved by the West alone, given its belief that the United States and its allies are in decline. As a result, Washington and its partners should push hard to get China, one of Tehran's self-proclaimed partners and a major buyer of Iranian oil, to cooperate. This will be uniquely challenging. Historically, Beijing has mostly



played a free-rider role in nuclear diplomacy with Tehran, and there is no reason to believe that Chinese leaders are prepared to assume greater responsibility for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, especially as tensions between Beijing and Washington reach new heights. But China is not Russia; it can still make deals with the West. And China's economy is dependent on energy from the Persian Gulf, giving Chinese President Xi Jinping a strong incentive to cooperate on any initiatives that would prevent a crisis in the region—which an Iranian nuclear weapon would likely precipitate. Beijing has played a hugely important role in sustaining the Iranian economy by importing more than a million barrels of Iranian oil per day over the last several years, in direct defiance of the JCPOA, to which China was a party. The Biden administration should persuade China to curtail those imports by making clear that Washington will enforce sanctions on Chinese companies that continue to buy Iranian oil—a step the United States has taken only sporadically and selectively.

A world without a diplomatic path toward stymieing Iran's nuclear ambitions will require much higher vigilance from the United States and its partners in Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. The new reality will frustrate the Biden administration's desire to extract the United States from the ruinous conflicts of the Middle East in order to focus on the urgent strategic challenge posed by China. But presidents don't have the luxury of disregarding brewing crises. And as the war in Ukraine shows, with foresight, skilled coordination, and leadership, even a polarized world can rally in surprisingly effective ways to confront aggression.

#### KNOW YOUR LIMITS

There is one more way the United States can help stop Iran's nuclear ambitions—and the rest of the regime's malevolence. The current Iranian government may never agree to forfeit its nuclear program or stop fueling conflicts across the world. But the Iranian demonstrators have made it clear they want a democratic government focused on the needs of its people rather than on adventurism abroad. Such a government would almost certainly be far less interested in acquiring nuclear weapons or promoting insurgencies, so Washington should do what it can to help the protesters achieve their aims.

To be sure, there are serious limits to Washington's power. The United States has only the most tangential reach into the halls of power in Iran and holds little sway in the streets. The future of Iran will ultimately

depend on Iranians themselves. But U.S. policymakers can work with allies and partners to ensure that the international community shines a spotlight on the heroic efforts of Iranian protesters, exposes Tehran's repression, and finds ways to hold the Iranian government accountable by working closely with a fact-finding mission established by the UN in November to investigate the crackdown and by pressing partners around the world to downgrade diplomatic relations with Tehran.

The United States can also assist the Iranian people by expanding their access to information and communications. The Biden administration has already stepped up its engagement with technology companies to help Iranians communicate with one another and with the outside world. It should also work with service providers to create and distribute, with U.S. government funding where necessary, a wider array of communications tools and to expand Iranians' access to virtual private networks that can keep them connected to the open Internet. Washington can similarly help by investing in Persian-language broadcasting capabilities to erode the regime's media monopoly.

Supporting the protesters does not mean the United States should close off all avenues of engagement with Iran, as some activists have suggested. Nor should walking away from the JCPOA foreclose any diplomatic contact. The Biden administration should keep talking with Iran about discrete issues on which the two countries can achieve some traction, including by continuing quiet efforts to free dual and foreign nationals held by Tehran as hostages. The United States should also do nothing to discourage the ongoing discussions between Iran and its Gulf neighbors. It is unlikely that these talks will lead to anything other than a cold peace, but the direct diplomacy might help prevent any friction from escalating into a crisis.

Ultimately, preventing crises may be the best the United States can do at this moment. For the foreseeable future, there are no transformative solutions that the West can invent or impose on Iran, and the country will remain a profound and unpredictable threat to regional stability, U.S. interests, and its own citizenry. The protests should give the world hope: for the first time in a generation, the theocracy appears to be in jeopardy. But until the regime falls, there will be no silver bullets to stop Iran's bad behavior. 🌐

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A polarized  
world can still  
rally to confront  
aggression.

REVIEW ESSAY

# The Divided Diplomat

## Ralph Bunche and the Contradictions of Liberal Order

ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY

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*The Absolutely Indispensable Man: Ralph Bunche,  
the United Nations, and the Fight to End Empire*  
BY KAL RAUSTIALA, Oxford University Press, 688 pp.

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In September 1948, Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish count serving as the UN mediator for Palestine, was shot dead on the streets of Jerusalem by the Stern Gang, a Zionist terror outfit. His American deputy, Ralph Bunche, was quickly named as his replacement. Over the next 11 months, Bunche, who had planned to be in Bernadotte's motorcade that fateful day but was absent because of a delayed flight, painstakingly negotiated an armistice between the belligerents. It was a brilliant achievement. He returned to a ticker-tape parade in New York City, and the mayor of Los Angeles declared July 17 "Ralph Bunche Day." In 1950, Bunche won the Nobel Peace Prize, the first Black person in any field to be so honored, and that same year, *Ebony* featured him on its cover with the headline "America's Most Honored Negro." In 1963, President Lyndon

Johnson awarded Bunche the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Politically, Bunche was a key figure in establishing the UN and a celebrated leader of the civil rights movement. Socially, he counted white liberals such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Black Marxists such as Paul Robeson among his wide network of influential friends. Culturally, he was feted for his accomplishments with fawning comic-book portrayals, and he appeared at the Academy Awards, where he was introduced by Fred Astaire, and announced the prize for best picture. Intellectually, he made seminal contributions to the study of African politics and went on to become the first Black president of the American Political Science Association. In his lifetime, perhaps only Martin Luther King, Jr., and W. E. B. Du Bois could be considered his peers. Despite his accomplishments,

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he is scarcely remembered today, as a new, deeply researched biography by the legal scholar Kal Raustiala makes clear. His academic contributions are rarely taught. His name is almost never included in the pantheon of American civil rights leaders. Nor is his name celebrated in the former European colonies of Africa and Asia, many of whose founding fathers once relied on him to champion their causes. Even his signature accomplishments—the Arab-Israeli armistice agreement and the founding of the UN peacekeeping force—are seldom acknowledged.

How did Bunche go from being “absolutely indispensable”—as Arthur Goldberg, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, described him in 1966—to largely unknown? Part of the answer is that his achievements have aged badly. The Israelis and the Palestinians are even further from peace than they were in the 1940s. Today’s racial justice advocates more commonly cite revolutionary figures such as Malcolm X and Angela Davis rather than perceived compromisers such as Bunche. Within academia, where Bunche’s name remains most prominent—at least in terms of buildings and centers named for him—social scientists have moved away from the ethnographic methods he pioneered toward detached analyses built on data sets. Even the UN, the institution Bunche identified with most as he worked to build the architecture of global governance, is much diminished, barely registering as a player in conflicts from Afghanistan to Ukraine. Its peacekeeping force is marred by ineffectiveness and accusations of corruption.

Attributing Bunche’s erasure to the unforgiving march of history, however,

is unsatisfying. As *The Absolutely Indispensable Man* notes, Bunche remains an awkward historical figure. As comfortable on the streets of Harlem as he was in the corridors of power in Geneva and Washington, Bunche carved his own path through the mid-twentieth century.

Charged with navigating some of the thorniest crises of the time, Bunche, in Raustiala’s favorable assessment, combined “optimism and realism” to achieve considerable success. Bunche’s diplomatic accomplishments alone are impressive enough to justify studying him today. But his enduring relevance lies in his role in the creation and operation of the liberal international order. Like so many U.S. strategists in the post-war era, Bunche strove to reconcile his country’s interests with his liberal internationalist values. Although he did not always succeed, these dueling impulses defined his career—just as they have continued to define U.S. foreign policy in the decades after he left his mark.

#### RADICAL YOUTH

Bunche was born in Detroit in 1903. He had a peripatetic childhood, moving around the Midwest before the family eventually settled in Albuquerque. Following his father’s departure from the family, in 1916, and his mother’s death from tuberculosis, in 1917, Bunche moved to Los Angeles with his grandmother and younger sister.

His success began early, at UCLA, where he studied political science. Inspired by Du Bois, that great Black American polymath, Bunche became identified with the “talented tenth,” the segment of the African American population Du Bois thought had leadership potential. Bunche graduated as valedictorian



The peacekeeper: Bunche at a UN Security Council meeting, Lake Success, New York, October 1946

of his class in 1927. Even then, his preternatural confidence in his own abilities was clear. Writing to Du Bois that same year, he proclaimed his readiness to lead: “I have set as the goal of my ambition service to my group. To some extent I am even now fulfilling that ambition.”

Bunche next headed to Harvard for graduate school, with funds raised by the local Black community. In 1928, 25 years old and having received his master’s degree, he began his doctoral studies in political science at Harvard while serving as a professor and founding head of Howard University’s department of political science.

Bunche’s dissertation examined the performance of the mandate system of the League of Nations. The mandate system, which, after World War I, assigned colonies from the defeated powers to the Western victors for administration, was devised amid a surge of global anticolonial nationalism. Bunche compared lands

the French had long ruled with those it had recently acquired under the League of Nations’ auspices, arguing that the mandate system, from the perspective of its subjects, was indistinguishable from formal empire. His dissertation went on to win multiple prizes at Harvard and foreshadowed Bunche’s later role in developing the UN Trusteeship Council as a vehicle for shepherding African colonies toward independence.

Bunche sought to situate the study of Africa within world history and global change rather than treating it as separate. In contrast to the prevailing arguments that attributed the continent’s woes to some internal, civilizational deficiency, Bunche argued in favor of Africans’ readiness for independence and against the idea that European empires were “developing” immature Africans for self-rule.

During this period, Bunche was influenced by radical Black thinkers, including Du Bois and Robeson. In 1936, Bunche



published his first book, *A World History of Race*, in which he compared racism in the United States to European colonialism. He found common cause with African intellectuals who would go on to lead their countries' anticolonial struggles, including Jomo Kenyatta, who was Bunche's Swahili instructor during his stay in London in 1937 and later Kenya's prime minister. As the historian John Kirby noted in *Phylon* (a journal founded by Du Bois) in 1974, Bunche in the 1930s was "widely regarded as a militant black political theorist and social critic."

Bunche left academia in 1941. He joined what eventually became the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA, and later left the employ of the U.S. government for the UN. In the process, he moved from the Marxist views championed by many of his Black contemporaries to Cold War liberalism. Raustiala argues that Bunche disavowed his early work on race and imperialism because of the threat of Nazism, preferring the flawed democracy of the United States to the racial totalitarianism of Hitler's Germany. Although Bunche was never blind to the flaws of the United States, he believed that, unlike its totalitarian rivals, it could be transformed through the contributions of its diverse population. His life, in many ways, served as proof of his thesis.

When World War II ended, the United States stood as the guarantor of the international order that had been formulated in response to the fascists' vision. Bunche emerged as one of the defenders of the liberal international order. Understanding that his academic writing impinged on his ambitions in U.S. foreign policy circles, he set about to prove his patriotic bona fides. As McCarthyism tar-

geted left-wing Black critics of the U.S. government, including Du Bois and Robeson, Bunche worked to escape the perceived taint of his earlier radicalism. It was a strategic calculation. "His radical past," Raustiala notes, had become "an albatross to this new Bunche, one he tried to distance himself from as much as possible." In time, he would denounce his own book on race, damning it as hastily written. "I am not at all proud of it," he wrote decades later.

#### NECESSARY COMPROMISES?

Pitched as a political biography, the book comes to life when Raustiala analyzes Bunche's diplomatic contributions. The reader follows decades of negotiations, illuminated by Raustiala's considerable knowledge of international law. In the course of his career, Bunche navigated between the demands of anxious anticolonial leaders attuned to the shifting winds of the emerging postwar order, recalcitrant European leaders mourning the collapse of their imperial fantasies, and the interests of the new superpower, which busily sought to shape this new world in line with its needs and beliefs.

Raustiala is particularly strong on Bunche's work to resolve crises on behalf of the UN. The armistice agreement that Bunche negotiated between Egypt and Israel in 1949 is discussed in detail. So, too, is his later work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Bunche served as the commander of the UN operation in the newly independent country, one of the organization's first efforts at peacekeeping.

Congo had been brutally misruled by Belgium for over 70 years when the winds of change blew through in the

late 1950s. Belgium had little choice but to concede. After Congo's independence in 1960, however, the Belgian government fomented the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga Province to ensure its continued control over Congo's vast resources. This was a blatant violation of the new nation's sovereignty. The government of Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of Congo, appealed to both the UN and the Eisenhower administration for help.

Neither party responded in the way Lumumba imagined. The UN set up a massive peacekeeping operation, which Bunche led. But despite the Belgian government's support for the secessionists, Bunche and his boss, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, regarded the conflict as a purely domestic dispute and refused to use the UN force to bring Katanga back into the fold. The United States, for its part, so feared Soviet encroachment in Africa that after Lumumba appealed to Moscow for help in uniting his country, the CIA sought to assassinate him. Nor did the UN get involved as Lumumba was arrested and killed with Belgian and U.S. complicity. His body was dissolved in sulfuric acid, and the remains—teeth and finger bones—were taken by a Belgian police officer charged with disposing of the corpse. The remains would not be returned to Congo until May 2022. Lumumba's army chief, Joseph Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko), orchestrated a coup and proceeded to misgovern the country until his overthrow in 1997, all while remaining a close ally of the United States.

Although Bunche had spent his career as an academic championing African independence, his attitude toward the

continent changed after he became a diplomat. As with his assessment of Palestinian leaders, whom he compared in his diary to "children," he tended to regard Africa's independence leaders with suspicion bordering on contempt. In 1960, for example, he privately denounced Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah as an "unprincipled demagogue." Bunche regarded Lumumba as "a madman," a "Congolese ogre," a "jungle demagogue," and an "utterly maniacal child." For Raustiala, Bunche's handling of the Congo crisis is evidence of his pragmatism when negotiating between the United States and the Soviet Union: "It was his skill at finding agreement," Raustiala writes, "that ultimately turned Ralph Bunche from a successful but largely anonymous diplomat into a national and even global star." But the episode also reveals why Bunche was criticized as a lackey of the United States by many of the same people he hoped would view him as a fair, if critical, ally. Rather than serving as evidence of his evenhandedness, Bunche's assessment of Lumumba echoed that of U.S. Undersecretary of State Douglas Dillon, who, after meeting Lumumba, dismissed him as "irrational" and "almost psychotic."

Throughout these discussions of the detailed work of international diplomacy, Raustiala presents a nuanced picture of a loyal diplomat committed to the promise of global governance, wrestling with the compromises that international diplomacy requires. Letters to his long-suffering wife, Ruth, provide a sense of the isolation that Bunche felt while away. From these letters, readers get a sense of his homesickness and the toll his work took. While in Cairo to negotiate the Arab-Israeli armistice, he wrote to Ruth that "we keep hopping

from one [country] to another like mad in our plane and often on just a few moments' notice. As soon as we land anywhere we begin to confer and leave for someplace else immediately. . . . I get practically no sleep and miss many meals." Writing from Congo in the midst of the crisis, Bunche told Ruth, "I am dreadfully tired . . . as I got less than three hours sleep last night and even that was more than the night before."

Bunche interacted with a who's who of twentieth-century political and intellectual leaders over his three-decade career as a diplomat and scholar. But outside of the galas and formal events, much of his time was spent alone in hotel rooms. Although readers learn much about his interior life, the biography does not delve much into the psyches of his family members. Readers interested in learning more about Ruth, who balanced raising the three Bunche children with her own career as a teacher and activist, must look elsewhere.

#### ON A PEDESTAL

As the highest-ranking American—not simply Black American—in the UN, Bunche was acutely aware of his role as an embodiment of the American Dream even as he remained wary of nationalism's inherent divisiveness. The tension between Bunche's unabashed patriotism and his universalist dreams—"how to balance national interest with multilateral cooperation," as Raustiala puts it—defined his life.

What emerges from this book is a portrait of a man struggling to reconcile idealism with reality. Bunche was, on the one hand, a committed internationalist and, on the other, a patriotic American seeking to prove that Black

Americans were integral to the country's success. In Congo and elsewhere, reflecting the United States' common tendency to operate against its stated values, Bunche too often appeared to sacrifice his own beliefs and those of the UN in the interest of his home country.

The great risk for those who aim to be champions of compromise is that they may, in the end, become compromised themselves. For Bunche, and many others who have followed in his footsteps, the soaring rhetoric and ambition that characterizes liberal global institutions could never be squared with the stark reality of power politics driven by the national interests that shape their actual behavior.

These challenges may explain Bunche's relative absence from our collective memory. Although Bunche did more than almost any other figure to demonstrate the promise of liberal internationalism, he was not immune to its blind spots, nor could he resolve the fundamental tension between nationalism and internationalism. Perhaps his closest analog is former U.S. President Barack Obama, whose soaring rhetoric about promoting democracy was often at odds with his continued support for Middle Eastern and African autocrats. Like Obama, Bunche aspired to be an exemplar of Black excellence in the United States, but the contradictions that that desire produced could never be synthesized with his dream of an equitable and just world order. Although Bunche failed to overcome these challenges, his contributions to a different and more inclusive global community cannot be denied. Today, as the promise of global cooperation recedes amid the rise of nationalism, Bunche's life still has much to teach everyone. 🌍

REVIEW ESSAY

# Behind Enemy Lines

## The CIA's Cold War in China

JANE PERLEZ

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*Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey and the CIA's Covert War in China*  
BY JOHN DELURY. Cornell University Press, 2022, 408 pp.

*Lost in the Cold War: The Story of Jack Downey, America's Longest-Held POW*  
BY JOHN T. DOWNEY, THOMAS J. CHRISTENSEN,  
AND JACK LEE DOWNEY. Columbia University Press, 2022, 344 pp.

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In the fall of 1952, two young CIA officers boarded an unmarked C-47 plane in Korea, bound for enemy territory in Manchuria, in northern China. Their mission: to pick up a Chinese agent who had been in China for several months. The Americans planned to fly low over the ground, release a hook that would pluck the operative from the cold and treacherous terrain, and then return to the safety of Korea. The officers and their two pilots had no cover and no exit strategy if anything went wrong. They spoke only a few words of Chinese between them. As the plane approached the pickup spot, a full moon above, a blaze of gunfire slammed into the fuselage. The C-47 crashed, killing the pilots and stranding the officers, who were swiftly captured.

A grainy photograph shows the dazed Americans, dressed in winter clothing, standing in a field as a Chinese soldier binds their hands. This failed covert mission was kept quiet for decades. The captured spies, John Downey and Richard Fecteau, spent two decades in grim Chinese jails, often in solitary confinement. Fecteau was released in 1971 and Downey in 1973. The breakthrough came thanks to the diplomacy of U.S. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the dogged campaigning of Downey's mother, Mary, who traveled to China on five occasions to visit her imprisoned son. The press, bamboozled by the U.S. government, had shown little interest in the case.

A pair of new books, *Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey*

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and the CIA's Covert War in China, by John Delury, and *Lost in the Cold War: The Story of Jack Downey, America's Longest-Held POW*, by John Downey, Thomas Christensen, and Jack Downey, tell the story of this botched secret operation and the dark and fantastical period surrounding it. Although the tale of the two imprisoned CIA agents remained a minor historical footnote even after Washington admitted who they were, it says much about the United States' approach to Communist China during the early stages of the Cold War. The memory of "losing China" to Mao Zedong was fresh in the minds of American leaders, stoking fears that Beijing was in step with the Soviet Union. Washington's liberal-minded China hands despaired at the folly of trying to take down a government in control of more than 500 million people.

Delury, a professor of Chinese studies at Yonsei University in South Korea, uses his flair for narrative and his eye for often surreal detail to describe the desperation in Washington in the wake of the Korean War and the fateful decision to use the fledgling CIA to try to undermine Mao's China. He shows that U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and members of his administration refused to believe that Mao's regime was fully in control of China, resulting in dysfunctional policymaking by officials who knew little about the government that they resolutely opposed. Downey offers a more closely cropped portrait of the era, hewing to the narrative of his long captivity, but his account is nonetheless revealing about this early chapter of U.S.-Chinese relations. Downey's brief

memoir is published for the first time in *Lost in the Cold War* alongside commentary by Christensen and a moving afterword by Downey's son, Jack.

The foundational story of American attitudes toward Communist China recounted in these two books has new relevance today, as relations between Washington and Beijing deteriorate by the month. It shows what can happen when ideological intransigence trumps rational decision-making and when policymakers are guided by implacable opposition to an adversary they do not fully understand. Implicit in Delury's tale is the United States' enduring desire to forge a democracy in the most populous country on earth. But the two books show why the urge is impractical, even unwise, when applied to a regime that derives much of its strength from opposition to the United States.

#### STIRRING DISSENT

Downey and Fecteau's ill-fated flight to Manchuria was just one of many so-called Third Force operations carried out by the CIA during the Korean War. The idea of a Third Force, which had been circulating since the 1940s, was that the right leaders for China were neither radical Communists nor the authoritarian Nationalists but a centrist alternative. By backing a Third Force, the thinking went, Washington could encourage subversion behind enemy lines and destabilize its ideological foes. Allen Dulles, then the CIA's deputy director for plans, explained the logic behind the Third Force to an advisory group at Princeton University in 1951: "You have got to have a few martyrs," he said. "Some people have





Out at last: Downey leaving China for Hong Kong after his release, March 1973

got to get killed. I don't want to start a bloody battle, but I would like to see things started. I think we have to take a few risks."

A formal U.S. strategy for stirring resistance inside China was based on a proposal by General Charles Willoughby, a hard-line anti-Communist, who had served as General Douglas MacArthur's chief of intelligence from 1940 to 1951. But Willoughby's understanding of China was limited. In 1950, he had chosen to ignore the obvious signs that China would intervene in the Korean War, even as 250,000 troops massed in Manchuria. Nonetheless, in 1951, U.S. President Harry Truman signed a document calling for subversion efforts in China.

The idea for a Third Force grew out of a desire to do "something" about China under Mao. China was closed. There was no way in or out except by

clandestine means. Policy, then, was made isolated from the facts. Eisenhower liked the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who had decamped to Taiwan. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson did not, believing Chiang to be "a lost cause." At one point, the debate in the administration veered toward engineering a coup against Chiang as a way to give the Nationalists a "fresh face." Ultimately, Washington decided against unseating Chiang, instead launching a haphazardly managed program of sabotage against Communist rule.

Hong Kong, the refuge for about one million Chinese who had fled the Communists, became the center of activity for the Third Force. The CIA-backed Fight League for a Free and Democratic China operating there recruited volunteers from among the refugees to train as anti-Communist

foot soldiers to be smuggled onto the mainland. They were sent for training in counterrevolution in Okinawa, Japan, and in Saipan, a U.S.-controlled island in the Western Pacific. To lead the effort, the Americans hired a disaffected general of Chiang's Nationalist forces, Zhang Fakui. In a memorable conversation at Hong Kong's Foreign Press Club, Zhang warned one of the American organizers, "Anyone who lands on the mainland will be captured." The Communists, he said, would outwit the foreign forces at every turn. He also contended that much of the intelligence on what was going on inside China was fake. Zhang's suspicions turned out to be correct, but he nonetheless accepted a leadership position in the American scheme.

On Saipan, the CIA trained recruits on ideological instruction, parachuting, communications, and explosives. The recruits were flown from Hong Kong to Saipan by Civil Air Transport, the CIA-owned airline founded by the American aviator Claire Chennault that later conducted operations during the Vietnam War as Air America. The airline's director of operations, Joe Rosbert, was not optimistic. "I'm disgusted with the so-called thinkers in Washington who work out these utterly stupid plans," he wrote in his diary. Rosbert, a right-wing China hand, wanted a far bigger, more aggressive, and better-funded effort.

All the while, agents were operating in China. Downey and Fecteau were sent to collect one such operative and transport him safely back to Korea. As Downey and Fecteau set out for Manchuria, the trap had been set, and their fates sealed. When the C-47 flew over

the Yalu River to pick up the agent, units of China's People's Liberation Army were expecting them. Mao had organized an all-seeing surveillance state based on tight organization of village committees and party cells. The dragnet of public security was almost impossible to escape. Mao's top-down system ensured a human spy in every corner of society, a forerunner of the high-tech, all-invasive security apparatus of today's Chinese state. Long before Downey and Fecteau left South Korea, the Communists had captured a Third Force radio operator and turned him, promising leniency if he continued to radio the Americans in Japan and reassure them that all was normal. When the C-47 appeared, the Communists were ready and waiting.

#### ABANDONED MARTYRS

Records from the CIA show that of 212 Third Force agents dropped into China during the Korean War period, 111 were captured and 101 killed. In other words, not a single one succeeded. As Delury notes, instead of fomenting a counterrevolution, the activities of the "martyrs" had the opposite effect. Mao justified enhanced surveillance and repression of the population on the grounds that Chiang and the American imperialists were ganging up on the new Communist state.

For two years, Washington believed that Downey and Fecteau had died in the crash. Surely, the CIA reasoned, if the Chinese had captured the Americans alive, they would have bragged about it for propaganda purposes. But the Chinese kept quiet. Then, on Thanksgiving Day in 1954, Mao announced that the men were alive and

were CIA agents. The news of Downey and Fecteau's imprisonment rekindled the debate in the Eisenhower administration about what to do about China, its very existence still gnawing at the Cold War warriors. The Pentagon wanted to establish a naval blockade along China's coast, capture ships and crews, and hold them as bargaining chips for the two Americans.

After the initial indignation subsided, the U.S. mission in Geneva took charge of the negotiations to release the two men. The CIA had concocted a story that Downey and Fecteau were civilian employees of the Department of Defense. If word leaked that they were in fact spies, agency brass had been prepped by their public relations assistants "to go to the top man of a news organization in order to kill a story," as Delury recounts. But the two prisoners were never a major focus of attention for reporters in Washington, who were blasé about China and Asia in the wake of the unsatisfactory end to the Korean War. It was Nixon, of all people, who told a press conference in contorted language that the Downey case "involves a CIA agent." *The New York Times* ran the headline "Nixon Acknowledges American Jailed in China Is CIA Agent," but the story was buried inside the paper.

Downey and Fecteau showed endurance almost beyond belief as they rotted in Mao's jails. Downey's son, Jack, recounts how his father was subjected to two years of merciless interrogation, long stints in leg irons, and solitary confinement in a five-by-eight-foot cell. When the judge announced a sentence of life imprisonment, his interpreter smirked and said, in English, "You could have been sentenced to death."

Downey's mother kept her son's plight in front of Washington, publicizing his confinement after each of her trips to China. Downey's family sent him food, books, newspapers, and the first issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Downey taught himself some Russian, and since his Communist guards were more than happy to allow him access to Russian literature, he read parts of a Russian edition of *War and Peace*.

In 1956, China made an offer that could have led to the prisoners' release. Beijing's proposal was to invite American journalists to China to report on the state of the country, and in exchange the American prisoners would be released. The Chinese government also demanded that Washington admit that Downey and Fecteau were indeed CIA agents. U.S. Secretary of State John Dulles, brother of Allen, refused to consider the plan: the United States would not make deals with the Communists, he said. Dulles's obstinacy meant that Downey became the longest-serving American prisoner of war in history.

By 1958, the Saipan venture was closed. The CIA had set its sights on another Third Force project, in Tibet, almost a repeat of the doomed adventure in northern China. Inexperienced American trainers inserted Tibetan freedom fighters into western China, even though the trainers did not know Tibet and had never been there. Many hundreds of U.S.-trained Tibetans were killed or captured. None of the population was liberated.

During a meeting with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971, before Nixon's arrival in Beijing, Kissinger acknowledged that Fecteau and

Downey had done things that any country would consider illegal, a hint at their real employer and enough of an admission for Zhou. Fecteau was released in December of that year. In March 1973, Downey walked to freedom across the bridge connecting southern China to Hong Kong. He returned to his beloved Connecticut, went to law school, and became a judge.

In his memoir, Downey put it bluntly: “I had been sent to fight for a country I didn’t know, to train guerrillas whose language I didn’t speak; I had been shot down on a flight I wasn’t supposed to be on and sentenced to life in prison for sticking a pole out of an airplane.” In the Oval Office, his freedom was noted as a win for the administration, nothing more. Kissinger said to Nixon, “We got a good play out of this Downey thing.”

Delury retells this remarkable episode in the history of U.S.-Chinese relations with fire and astonishment. You can almost hear him asking: How could this have been approved? Why was it so urgent to try to overturn the ruling Communist regime by such sketchy means? His mining of Communist Party sources in Shanghai and Hong Kong archives yields intimate details of conditions in Manchuria—such as the disciplined organization of society into tiny cells—that are key to understanding Mao’s first years in power. The bravery of Downey and Fecteau is a story within the story.

#### MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING

In 1969, while Downey and Fecteau remained behind bars and Washington still refused to recognize the government in Beijing, the Yale his-

torian Jonathan Spence published *To Change China*. In this book, he detailed hundreds of years of well-meaning Western-led projects to change China, from the Jesuit Matteo Ricci’s attempts to spread Christianity in the late sixteenth century to the deployment of a phalanx of American generals at the end of World War II. Delury, who was a student of Spence’s at Yale, has followed in the footsteps of his distinguished mentor with a riveting and important case study, which comes to a similar conclusion.

*Lost in the Cold War* tells what happens to an American who bears the brunt of foolish policymaking. Delury’s broader historical narrative—focused on Washington’s overarching fixation on Communist China in the 1950s and, later, the diplomacy of Nixon and Kissinger—is implicit in Downey’s story. The suffering that he and Fecteau endured was the direct result of a failure to understand, or a blind unwillingness to acknowledge, that the Communists had fully captured China. That failure went right to the top: during his presidency, Eisenhower consistently underrated Mao and overrated Chiang.

In his conclusion, Delury gets it right, arguing that the misguided policies Americans hatched some 70 years ago provide a warning of what not to do in a moment of deteriorating U.S.-Chinese relations. He writes, “The temptation of reverting to Cold War patterns of covert subversion—playing out not only on land, sea, and air but also in unseen domains from outer space to cyberspace—should give us pause in light of the history of how that went the first time it was tried.” Washington should not forget that lesson. 🌐

REVIEW ESSAY

# The Cult of Secrecy

## America's Classification Crisis

PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

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*The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America's Top Secrets*

BY MATTHEW CONNELLY, Pantheon, 2023, 560 pp.

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In August 2016, the United States suffered one of the most cataclysmic leaks of classified information in history. An anonymous entity calling itself “the Shadow Brokers” exposed an arsenal of cyberweapons that had been developed—in great secrecy—by the National Security Agency. The intelligence community sprang into damage-control mode. Because the NSA’s hackers rely on a degree of plausible deniability, the disclosure of such clandestine tools and their connection to the U.S. government meant that the agency would be forced to devise new ones. But there was also a more pressing danger: with the source code for these powerful weapons now published on the Internet, any unscrupulous actor could deploy them. It was the digital equivalent of “loose nukes.”

Practically overnight, cybercriminals repurposed the NSA’s proprietary

exploits to launch audacious ransomware attacks, ultimately shutting down millions of computers around the world and paralyzing thousands of private businesses, from an auto plant in France to a chocolate factory in Australia. Foreign governments took advantage of the tools, as well. North Korea used the NSA’s malicious code to attack the British health-care system, forcing hospitals to turn away patients. Iran used it to target airlines in the Middle East. Russia used it against Ukraine.

Even as these cyber-assaults proliferated, officials in Washington had no idea who was responsible for the breach. They did not know whether it was a foreign intelligence service that had compromised the NSA’s vaunted digital defenses or some disillusioned agency coder gone rogue. As if to compound the government’s humiliation and alarm,

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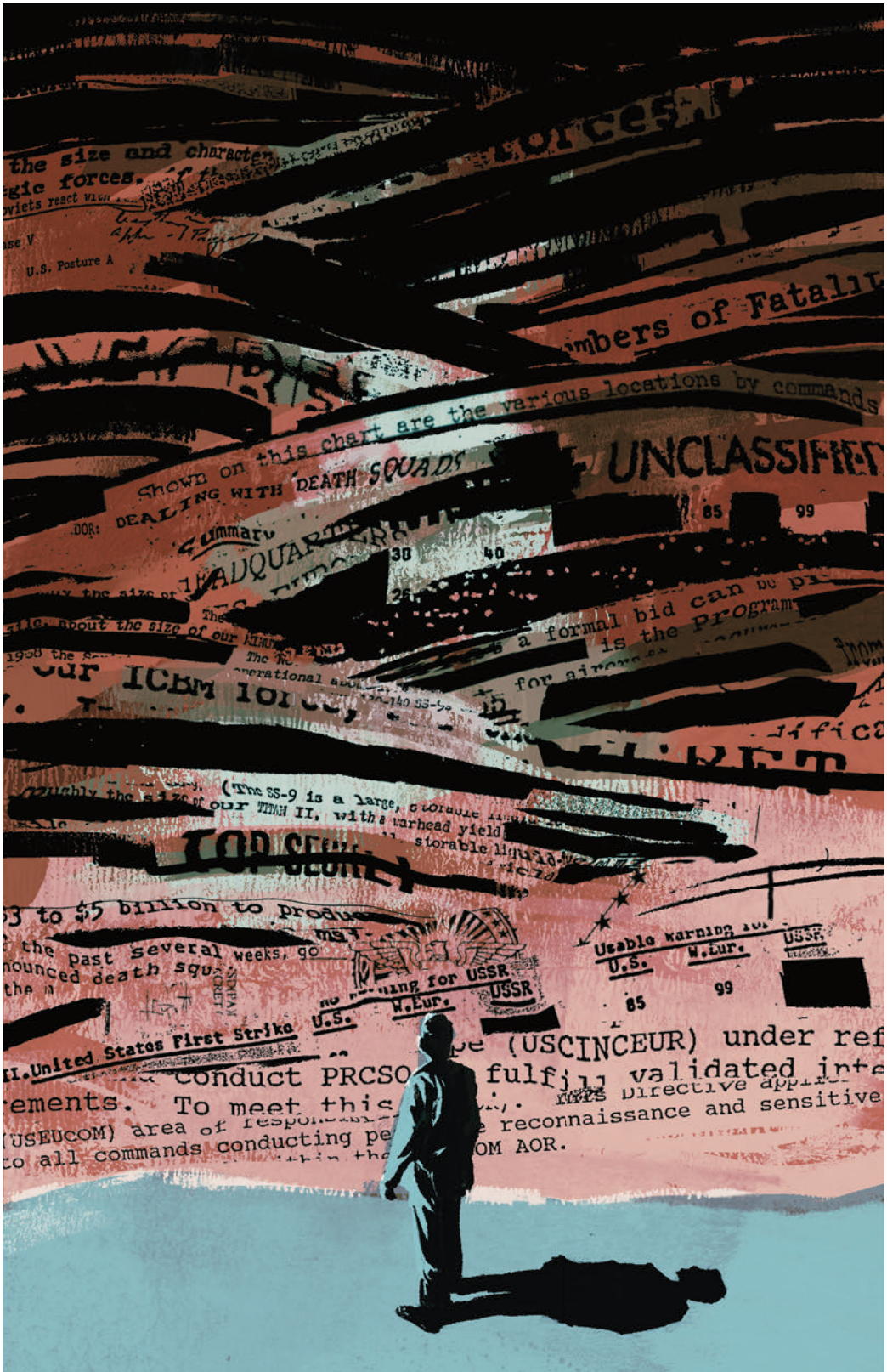


Illustration by John Lee

the Shadow Brokers taunted the agency in a series of online posts, mocking the investigation in playfully broken English: “Is NSA chasing shadowes?”

In 2017, *The New York Times* reported that after 15 months of investigation, authorities were no closer to an answer. If they have since managed to identify the perpetrator, then that, too, remains classified. But the whole debacle highlights the subtle Achilles’ heel of government classification. The NSA is famously secretive; as the old joke has it, its initials stand for “no such agency.” Yet here was a massive leak in which some of the nation’s most closely guarded secrets were spilled out for the world to see. Nor was this the only recent jumbo leak of highly classified material: there was the 2017 leak of CIA hacking tools by an agency software engineer, Joshua Schulte; the 2013 leak of surveillance programs by an NSA contractor, Edward Snowden; and the 2010 leak of cables and videos by an army private, Chelsea Manning.

This, as Matthew Connelly lays bare in his timely new book, *The Declassification Engine*, is the paradox of contemporary government secrecy. For decades, blue-ribbon panels and incoming presidents have observed with surprising unanimity that overclassification has grown out of control—and vowed to fix it. Yet every year, more new documents are marked “top secret,” and more realms of official activity are placed beyond the scrutiny of citizens, journalists, and even Congress. In 2017, the federal government spent over \$18 billion maintaining this classification system, almost double what it spent five years earlier. But precisely because so much government work now transpires behind a veil of secrecy, it is necessary to grant clearances to an

ever-larger cadre of federal employees. Some 1.3 million Americans now hold top-secret clearances, roughly double the population of the District of Columbia.

The math becomes simple. Combine the vast dimensions of the classified world with the huge numbers of people who need access to it to do their jobs, and factor in the increasing ease of copying and transferring enormous volumes of digital information, and it seems almost certain that wholesale leaks of classified data will continue. Decades of bad habits practiced by government agencies hooked on classification clearly undermine transparency and democratic accountability, and this impulse to classify indiscriminately is often justified by invoking national security. But as Connelly points out, when everything is secret, nothing is secret: the “very size of this dark state . . . has become its own security risk.”

If the dangers of excessive government secrecy are so widely acknowledged, why has nothing been done about it? One reason, Connelly suggests, is that the authority to classify has become a cherished prerogative of government power—a tool used by presidents, generals, and various chieftains of lesser fiefs to enshroud their decisions in mystery and ward off scrutiny or accountability. Reform efforts founder in the face of bureaucratic recalcitrance. But another challenge is the sheer volume of restricted documents: because the government classifies more quickly than it declassifies, the amount keeps growing every year. How do you begin to declassify all this information, and if you cannot, what becomes of the historical record? In his book, Connelly proposes what might just be an inspired solution—but only if the government takes him up on it.

OPEN AND SHUT

Connelly is a historian at Columbia University, where he runs the History Lab, a group that focuses on applying the tools of data science to the problem of overclassification. When one considers the full sweep of American history, he argues, widespread classification is not just a betrayal of the United States' founding principles but also a relatively recent anomaly. The first century and a half of the republic was characterized by "radical transparency," Connelly contends: when the nation was at war, it engaged in espionage and secrecy, but during peacetime, these practices receded. The United States had no permanent intelligence agency until the Office of Naval Intelligence was created, in 1882. As late as 1912, Woodrow Wilson could remark, while campaigning for president, "There ought to be no place where anything can be done that everybody does not know about."

Connelly demonstrates the degree to which this ideal of accountability was explicitly linked to a tradition of record keeping and publicly accessible archives. In 1853, long before President Donald Trump took to flushing official papers down a White House toilet, it was declared a felony to destroy any federal records. A century and a half before WikiLeaks published purloined State Department cables, the department began publishing such records on its own, voluntarily disclosing volumes of letters that had recently been received through embassies abroad. In one poignant anecdote, Connelly recounts that when construction began on the Pentagon, in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt anticipated that the postwar military establishment would be too

small to fill it—and would vacate the building when the fighting stopped so that it could be repurposed as an annex to the National Archives.

It did not pan out that way. Indeed, it was the rise of the permanent defense bureaucracy and the military-industrial complex in the immediate aftermath of World War II that gave birth to the juggernaut of official classification. Rather than roll back the culture and institutions of secrecy that had prevailed during wartime, the Truman administration institutionalized them with the advent of the Cold War. The creation of the CIA and other intelligence agencies and the secrecy surrounding the United States' growing nuclear arsenal accelerated the professionalization of the classified state. "Our present security system is a phenomenon of only the past decade," Senator Hubert Humphrey remarked in 1955. "We have enacted espionage laws and tightened existing laws; we have required investigation and clearance of millions of our citizens; we have classified information and locked it in safes. . . . We have not paused in our necessary, though frantic, quest for security to ask ourselves: What are we trying to protect, and against what?"

In theory, the passage of time should enable Americans to look back at the ostensible rationale offered for classifying various government activities and determine, in retrospect, whether all that secrecy was justified. This is the sort of enterprise that Connelly and his fellow scholars at Columbia are engaged in. But such a project is frustrated in practice by the slow pace of declassification. Reams of important historical documents remain classified more than half a century after the events they describe. Even as the



government spends more money classifying more documents each year, funding for declassification efforts has steadily eroded. The entire federal government now budgets only about \$100 million annually for that purpose. As Connelly dryly notes, “The Pentagon spends four times that just on military bands.”

But Connelly and his colleagues have developed an innovative solution, studying the records that the government has unsealed to see what they reveal about the dynamics of official secrecy. Over the last decade, his researchers have assembled the world’s largest database of declassified documents. Drawing on the tools of big data and machine learning, they have developed a series of techniques to analyze this archive for patterns and anomalies. When Connelly suggests that in some corners of the federal bureaucracy, the devotion to secrecy has evolved from a culture into “a cult,” it might seem hyperbolic. But consider that when he undertook this academic project—scanning the redactions in declassified documents in search of lessons about the pathologies of overclassification—the project was perceived to be sufficiently threatening that former government lawyers advised him and his team that they could be accused of violating the Espionage Act.

#### THE LEAKERS

It should come as no surprise that the gatekeepers of the classified world might feel defensive about such an inquiry. Even the staunchest critics of overclassification generally acknowledge that the government must maintain at least some secrets. Reasonable people can disagree about whether the NSA should be developing an arsenal of cyberweapons, but most observers would concede that

such an arsenal, if it exists, should not be freely accessible to the public. The same goes for sensitive details associated with nuclear weapons or the names of people spying for the United States. (In the case of covert assets’ identities, there are compelling grounds for maintaining such secrets even decades after the conduct in question, since prospective spies abroad will be less likely to betray their countries if they believe that the details of their betrayals may be automatically declassified a mere 20 years later.)

If, from the beginning, official classification had been carefully confined to these sorts of tailored categories, it would never have blossomed into such a rampant problem. But the basis for most classification is less coherent. At some point early in that postwar expansion of government secrecy, the authority to mark something classified gave rise to a bureaucratic reflex. For any government officer making a quick decision in the course of a busy workday, the penalties for underclassifying are quite salient, whereas penalties for overclassifying do not exist. One way of accounting for how the nation got to this juncture is to look at the incentive structure for that officer deciding whether to classify a single document and extrapolate outward to all the other functionaries invested with the power to deem something “secret” in all the other agencies every day of every year over the last eight decades. The problem has assumed proportions that can be difficult to comprehend. In a single year, 2012, U.S. officials classified information more than 95 million times, or roughly three times per second.

But that version of the story—in which genuine national security imperatives merged with bureaucratic path

dependence and risk aversion and simply snowballed—is the benign interpretation. For Connelly, who has scrutinized actual classification decisions made over those eight decades, the real explanation points to something more pernicious. Classification is an exertion of power, he argues, and as such, it has often been motivated not by the dictates of national security but by considerations of raw political or bureaucratic leverage.

“It turns out that, from the very beginning, what’s secret has been whatever serves the interests of the president and all those around him who are invested in executive power,” he writes. In any bureaucracy, the ability to render something secret becomes an irresistible trump card—a way to evade oversight, tout parochial priorities, and obscure shortcomings. “After conjuring the power of secrecy, and setting it loose, presidents found that it had a power all its own,” Connelly continues. “Thousands more people, many career civil servants, began creating their own secrets, and jealously protecting them, making it harder to identify and protect what mattered to the president personally. At the same time, they could leak whatever they liked, undermining the president’s ability to manage the news cycle.” Connelly is particularly scathing about the role of military leaders, such as Douglas MacArthur and Curtis LeMay, who “employed leaks and spin no less than secrecy to protect their perquisites and push their agendas,” lobbying to expand military spending and outright defying civilian authority. In 1978, he notes, the Joint Chiefs of Staff stopped preserving notes from their meetings, “as if America’s most senior military leadership were running a numbers racket, committing nothing to paper.”

In a system in which so much information ends up classified, selective leaking might come to seem like a safety valve for when certain matters of national importance need to get out. The legal scholar David Pozen has argued that the “leakiness” of the executive branch is not a sign of institutional failure but, on the contrary, a strategic adaptation to prevailing realities, one that enables an administration to send “messages about its activities to various domestic and international audiences without incurring the full diplomatic, legal, or political risks that official acknowledgment may entail.” As William Daley, President Barack Obama’s chief of staff, once admitted, “I’m all for leaking when its organized.”

Every White House has regularly leaked sensitive and often classified information to the press. Whereas penalties for rank-and-file employees who make unauthorized disclosures are often severe, consequences for deliberate leaks by highly placed officials are practically unheard of. Consider the contrast between Reality Winner, the NSA contractor who leaked an intelligence report about Russia’s interference in the 2016 election, and David Petraeus, the CIA director and four-star general who shared several notebooks full of highly classified information with his biographer (who was also his mistress) and then lied to federal investigators about it. Winner was sentenced to five years and three months in prison; Petraeus received two years’ probation and a fine. Connelly invokes a quip by Sir Humphrey Appleby, of the BBC sitcom *Yes Minister*: “The Official Secrets Act is not to protect secrets. It is to protect officials.”



LOCKED IN THE ARCHIVES

What is maddening about the lack of progress on overclassification is that anybody who has given the issue serious consideration would likely agree with the broad contours of Connelly's arguments. Nearly two decades have elapsed since the 9/11 Commission concluded that too much classification can actually jeopardize national security. "Secrecy, while necessary, can also harm oversight," the report argued, adding that the "best oversight mechanism" in a democracy is "public disclosure." But it is one thing to acknowledge the problem and quite another to do something meaningful about it. Obama came into office vowing to create "the most open and transparent administration in history," yet in the end, as Connelly points out, "he presided over exponential growth in classified information." (He also initiated more criminal prosecutions of leakers than all his predecessors combined.) When outside groups have tried to pressure the federal government into greater transparency, they have aroused staunch resistance and occasionally retaliation. Connelly relates one galling story: in the 1980s, after the National Security Archive, a nonprofit group affiliated with George Washington University, filed Freedom of Information Act requests and initiated lawsuits to uncover abuses of government power by the Reagan administration and the FBI, the FBI responded by placing the National Security Archive itself under surveillance.

Meanwhile, the daunting tonnage of classified documents has compounded every year, to the point where even those who earnestly want to do something about the problem fear that it may simply have become unmanageable.

By one estimate, it will take 250 years at the government's current processing rate to respond to the backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests at the George W. Bush Library alone. No effective system exists to automate declassification, and the relevant federal agencies lack the personnel and resources to manually review and redact billions of classified documents. "If instead these records were withheld indefinitely, or destroyed, it would be impossible to reconstruct what officials did under the cloak of secrecy," Connelly points out. Thus, a problem that on its face might seem like a dry technocratic riddle—with billions of new classified documents generated every year and no scalable method for safe and reliable declassification, what happens to the historical record?—assumes an existential urgency. If the U.S. government is "not even accountable in the court of history," Connelly writes, then "it truly is accountable to no one."

As it happens, Connelly has a solution. Because the aggregate volume of still classified information is so overwhelming, the only way to tackle it will be to employ the wizardry of big data. By scanning hundreds of thousands of declassified documents (some still redacted, others not), Connelly and his colleagues were able to search for certain words, themes, and connections to identify areas of particular sensitivity. Comparing redacted and unredacted versions of the same declassified documents from a given period, they compiled a jokey "America's Most Redacted" list of names most frequently blacked out (including Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and Iranian Prime Minister

Mohammad Mosaddeq, both targets of CIA operations). They devised a series of technological methods to rapidly sort through extensive archives and select documents that met certain criteria. If such techniques were harnessed for the declassification effort, they realized, it might be possible “to train algorithms to look for sensitive records requiring the closest scrutiny and accelerate the release of everything else.” This is the “declassification engine” of the book’s title: an ingenious technical solution to an impossible bureaucratic problem.

For the moment, the machine is still in its infancy, with a beta version concocted by the History Lab at Columbia serving as a sort of proof of concept. To date, it has only worked with material that has already been declassified. But Connelly and his team wanted to improve its capability and accuracy by pilot testing it on historical classified information, and for that, they needed government buy-in. One might suppose that this would not be difficult to obtain. After all, across the federal government, a great deal of lip service has been paid to the idea that overclassification has reached crisis proportions. Here was a way of solving it that would be cost-effective, especially as compared with engaging human reviewers to manually process old classified material before releasing it to the public.

So Connolly and his band of data scientists and mathematicians went to Washington to plead their case. They met with the State Department, the National Declassification Center, the CIA, the Public Interest Declassification Board, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. There was cer-

tainly interest. At the State Department, which produces more than two billion emails each year, one official informed them that the need for the sort of technology they were offering was “frighteningly clear.” But the department had no money to authorize a pilot program or fund their research. Someone suggested that perhaps Columbia students could be enlisted to work on the initiative and paid in course credit. “I was struck by the notion that declassification could be treated as a kind of school project,” Connelly writes.

His group ended up in a meeting at the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, which has been delegated to work with the National Archives to explore technological solutions to the problem of overclassification. After listening to their pitch, an IARPA official told the visitors that she had been trying for years to build a similar engine—not to declassify, but to classify. She found their ideas intriguing but explained that building a technology to help review and release classified documents would represent an “insufficient return on investment.”

It is a dispiriting coda to Connelly’s fascinating and urgent book, and one hopes that he and his colleagues will ultimately find other, more hospitable points of entry in the federal government that would allow them to test and improve their declassification algorithms with actual classified raw data. If you believe in the founding principles of the American form of government, then the stakes could scarcely be higher. As Connelly recalls thinking after he was shown the door at IARPA, “We cannot assign a dollar value to democratic accountability.” 🌐

REVIEW ESSAY

# Blundering Into Baghdad

## The Right—and Wrong—Lessons of the Iraq War

HAL BRANDS

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*Confronting Saddam Hussein*

BY MELVYN P. LEFFLER. Oxford University Press, 2023, 368 pp.

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**T**he whole horrible truth about the war is being revealed,” wrote the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1923, just five years after World War I had ended. “Every new book destroys some further illusion. How can we ever again believe anything?” Americans had once hoped that the Great War would make the world safe for democracy. But by the 1920s, a darker interpretation held sway. Revisionist scholars argued that the Allies were just as responsible for starting the war as the Germans were. They contended that the conflict had simply empowered one set of voracious empires at the expense of another. Most damningly, they claimed that Washington’s war was rooted in avarice and lies—that the United States had been dragged

into an unnecessary conflict by financiers, arms manufacturers, and foreign interests. “The moral pretensions of the heroes,” Niebuhr went on, “were bogus.”

In fact, the supposed revelations about World War I were not quite what they seemed. Although the origins of the conflict are endlessly contested, they were grounded primarily in the tensions created by a powerful, provocative Germany. Corporate greed did not drive Washington to war. Instead, issues such as freedom of the seas and outrage at German atrocities spurred it to enter the fight. American intervention was hardly fruitless: it helped turn the tide on the Western front and prevented Germany from consolidating a continental empire from the North Sea to the Caucasus. But amid

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the disillusion sown by a bloody war and an imperfect peace, more cynical interpretations flourished—and indelibly influenced U.S. policy.

In the 1920s, jaded views of the last war informed the United States' decision to reject strategic commitments in Europe. In the 1930s, concerns that "merchants of death" had pulled the country into war encouraged the passage of strict neutrality laws meant to keep it out of future conflicts. Leading isolationists, such as Charles Lindbergh and Father Charles Coughlin, channeled this warped interpretation of World War I when they argued that selfish minorities and shadowy interests were once again scheming to draw the United States into war. These dynamics made it harder for the United States to do much more than watch as the global order collapsed. Views of wars past invariably shape how the United States approaches threats present. In the interwar era, historical revisionism in the world's leading democracy abetted geopolitical revisionism by totalitarian predators.

When seemingly good wars go bad, Americans often conclude that those wars were pointless or corrupt from the get-go. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in 2003, many observers have viewed that conflict as Niebuhr once viewed World War I. There is now a bipartisan consensus that the war was a terrible mistake based on faulty premises, which indeed it was. But many critics go further, peddling what can only be called conspiracy theories: that the war was the work of a powerful pro-Israel lobby or a nefarious cabal of neoconservatives, that President George W. Bush deliberately lied in order to sell a conflict he was eager to wage, or that

the United States intervened out of lust for oil or other hidden motives.

These are not the rantings of a lunatic fringe. In 2002, in the run-up to the invasion, Barack Obama, then a state senator in Illinois, labeled the coming conflict a "dumb war" motivated by the Bush administration's bid to "distract" Americans from economic problems and "corporate scandals." As president, Donald Trump called the invasion the "single worst decision ever made," blaming greedy defense contractors and trigger-happy generals for U.S. military misadventures in the Middle East. Other critics have offered more judicious explanations of the war's origins. But in many quarters, "Iraq" is still synonymous with deception and bad faith.

Twenty years after the U.S. invasion, the passage of time has not obscured the fact that the war was a tragedy that took a heavy toll on the United States and an even heavier toll on Iraq. If World War I was, in retrospect, a war whose benefits surely outweighed its costs for the United States, the Iraq war was one Washington should never have fought. But as Melvyn Leffler shows in a new book, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, the war was an understandable tragedy, born of honorable motives and genuine concerns. One might add that it was an American tragedy: the war was not the work of any cunning faction but initially enjoyed broad-based, bipartisan support. Finally, Iraq was an ironic tragedy: the U.S. failure in a war often portrayed as the epitome of American hubris was ultimately a result of, first, too much intervention and, then, too little.

The United States will not have a healthy foreign policy until it properly

understands its sad, complex saga in Iraq. A generation after the march on Baghdad, not the least of the lingering challenges of the Iraq war is getting its history, and thus its lessons, right.

#### MISSION NOT ACCOMPLISHED

No serious observer can dispute one early judgment on Iraq: it was a debacle. The Bush administration decided to confront Saddam Hussein in 2002–3 to eliminate what it viewed as a growing and, after 9/11, intolerable threat to American security. The aim was to topple a brutal tyranny that was a fount of aggression and instability in the Middle East through a brief, low-cost intervention. Very little went according to plan.

Victory over Saddam's regime gave way to raging insurgency and gruesome civil war. The military and economic costs spiraled upward. Between 2003 and 2011, over 4,000 U.S. service members were killed in operations tied to Iraq and over 31,000 wounded. As for the number of Iraqis killed, no one knows for sure, but researchers have estimated a death toll between 100,000 and 400,000 over the same period. Meanwhile, the credibility of the war effort crumbled when Saddam's suspected weapons of mass destruction stockpiles turned out mostly not to exist. The U.S. reputation for competence suffered from the deficient planning and serial misjudgments—the failure to adequately prepare for a vacuum of authority after Saddam's fall, the deployment of too few troops to stabilize the country, the ill-advised disbanding of the Iraqi army, and many others—that marred the subsequent occupation and fueled the ensuing chaos. And rather than strengthening

the U.S. geopolitical position, the conflict weakened it almost everywhere.

The war intensified a sectarian maelstrom in Iraq and throughout the Middle East while freeing a theocratic Iran to expand its influence. By turning Iraq into a cauldron of violence, the invasion revived al Qaeda and the broader jihadist movement that had been pummeled after 9/11. Foreign fighters flocked to Iraq for the chance to kill American soldiers. Once there, they created new terrorist networks and gained valuable battlefield experience. The war also caused a painful rift with key European allies; it consumed American energies that might have been applied to other problems, from North Korea's nuclear program to Russian revanchism and the rise of China.

Yet critiques of the war have become so hyperbolic that it can be difficult to keep the damage in perspective. One prominent commentator, David Kilcullen, even deemed the war comparable to Hitler's doomed invasion of the Soviet Union. True, the human toll was devastating, but for the U.S. military, it amounted to roughly one-quarter of the deaths that American forces suffered in the bloodiest year of the Vietnam War. Once U.S. forces belatedly got a grip on the insurgency in 2007–8, Iraq became a death trap for the jihadists that had flocked there. Much of the worst damage to U.S. alliances had been patched up by Bush's second term or simply overtaken by new challenges. By 2013, with U.S. troops gone from Iraq, the Middle East blunder that most preoccupied many European countries was Obama's decision not to intervene in Syria after Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people.



Overall, the Iraq war dented American power but hardly destroyed it. In the early 2020s, the United States is still the world's preeminent economic and military actor, and it has more trouble keeping countries out of its unparalleled alliance network than bringing them in.

Where the war did leave a lasting mark was on the American psyche. A taxing, long-mismanaged intervention undermined domestic confidence in U.S. power and leadership. It elicited calls for retrenchment not simply from Iraq or the Middle East but also from the world. By 2014, the percentage of Americans saying that the United States should “stay out of world affairs” was higher than at any time since polling on that question began. By 2016, the year the country elected a president who revived the isolationist slogan “America First,” 57 percent of respondents in a Pew Research Center survey agreed that Washington should mind its own business. This Iraq hangover was all the more painful because it made the United States strategically sluggish just as the dangers posed by great-power rivals were growing. If Vietnam had, as Henry Kissinger put it in his memoirs, “stimulated an attack on our entire post-war foreign policy,” here, history was indeed repeating itself.

#### STEPPING BACK IN TIME

How the United States got into this mess is the subject of *Confronting Saddam Hussein*. No one is better suited to answer the question than Leffler, a widely admired diplomatic historian. His landmark study of the early Cold War, *A Preponderance of Power*, is a model of how to criticize policymakers' errors while recognizing their

achievements and comprehending the excruciating pressures they felt. Good history demands empathy—seeing the world through the eyes of one's subjects even when one disagrees with them—and Leffler's work is suffused with it.

*Confronting Saddam Hussein* is the most serious scholarly study of the war's origins, relying on interviews with key policymakers and the limited archival material that has been declassified. Leffler aims to understand, not condemn. His thesis is that the Iraq war was a tragedy, but one that cannot be explained by conspiracy theories or allegations of bad faith.

As Leffler demonstrates, before 9/11, U.S. officials believed the problem posed by an unrepentant, malign Iraq was getting worse, but they showed little urgency in addressing it. After 9/11, long-standing concerns about Saddam's weapons programs, his ties to terrorists, and his penchant for aggression intersected with newer fears that failing to deal with festering problems, particularly those combining weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, could have catastrophic consequences. Amid palpable insecurity, Bush brought matters to a head, first by threatening war in a bid to make Saddam verifiably disarm, and then—after concluding this coercive diplomacy had failed—by invading. “Fear, power, and hubris,” Leffler writes, produced the Iraq war: fear that Washington could no longer ignore simmering dangers, the power that an unrivaled United States could use to deal with such dangers decisively, the hubris that led Bush to think the undertaking could be accomplished quickly and cheaply.

Leffler's book is no whitewash. The bureaucratic dysfunction that impeded

searching debate before the invasion and competent execution thereafter is on display. So is the failure to scrutinize sketchy intelligence and flawed assumptions. The sense of purpose that motivated Bush after 9/11, combined with his visceral antipathy to Saddam—who was, after all, one of the great malefactors of the modern age—brought moral clarity, as well as strategic myopia. Bush and his close ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, “detested Saddam Hussein,” and “their view of his defiance, treachery, and barbarity” powerfully shaped their policies, Leffler notes. But none of this criticism is news in 2023, so Leffler’s real contribution is in exploding pernicious myths about the conflict’s origins.

#### CORRECTING THE RECORD

One myth is that Iraq was effectively contained circa 2001, so the ensuing invasion addressed an imaginary challenge. In truth, the Iraq problem—how to handle a regime that Washington had defeated in the Gulf War of 1990–91 but remained a menace to international stability—seemed all too real. Saddam had kicked out UN weapons inspectors in 1998; as the accompanying sanctions regime eroded, Iraq increased funding for its Military-Industrial Commission fortyfold. The regime cultivated myriad terrorist groups, in the Palestinian territories, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries. Saddam had secretly destroyed his stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons but not the infrastructure for developing them. The decadelong effort to contain Saddam was draining U.S. resources, while the supporting

U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia became an al Qaeda recruiting bonanza. The U.S. global image also suffered from exaggerated claims about the damage economic sanctions were inflicting on Iraqi citizens.

Saddam posed a growing threat, if not an imminent one. This is why, as the political scientist Frank Harvey has demonstrated, any U.S. administration would have felt pressure to resolve the Iraq problem after 9/11. It is also why any responsible critique of the war has to take seriously the perils of not removing Saddam from power—for example, the prospect that he eventually might have used force against his neighbors again or that his ambitions might have interacted explosively with those of a nuclearizing Iran.

Leffler also rebuts the “rush to war” thesis, which holds that Bush had been itching to invade Iraq before 9/11. No senior policymaker was then envisioning anything like a full-on invasion, and Bush’s attention was elsewhere. Even Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who favored a long-term effort to remove Saddam’s regime, “was not supporting a military invasion, or the deployment of U.S. ground forces” in early 2001, Leffler writes. After 9/11 dramatically increased U.S. sensitivity to all threats, Bush gradually became convinced of the need to confront Saddam, but it was only in early 2003—after Iraq continued its cat-and-mouse game with inspectors readmitted because of U.S. pressure—that he reluctantly concluded that war was inevitable.

Nor was the war the brainchild of powerful neoconservatives bent on a radical democracy-promotion agenda.



Quagmire: a U.S. Army officer posing after a battle at the Baghdad airport, April 2003

In truth, those nearest the center of decision—Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, and especially Bush himself, who rightly emerges from Leffler’s book as the key actor—were hardly neo-conservatives. Rumsfeld and Cheney might be better described as conservative nationalists. Bush himself had campaigned against nation-building missions and called for a “humble” foreign policy when running for president. Officials closer to the neoconservative movement, such as Wolfowitz, had little influence on Iraq policy. When Wolfowitz sought to focus the administration on Iraq just after 9/11, “Bush shunted his advice aside,” Leffler writes. There is no evidence, he argues, that Wolfowitz significantly influenced Bush’s view of the issue. The depiction of “an inattentive chief executive, easily manipulated by neoconservative advisers,” adds Leffler, is simply wrong. True,

the idea that democratizing Iraq would have a constructive regional effect was a reinforcing motive for war, and one that Leffler underplays. But Bush didn’t pursue democracy promotion because the neocons wanted it—he did so because the traditional U.S. strategy for defanging defeated tyrannies is to turn them into pacific democracies.

Of course, the challenge Iraq posed was less severe than Bush believed because Saddam had quietly divested himself of chemical and biological weapons stockpiles in the mid-1990s. Yet the “Bush lied, people died” critique falls flat: as Leffler shows, every major U.S. policymaker sincerely believed that Saddam’s weapons programs were more advanced than they were because this was the consensus of the intelligence community. (Moreover, the stockpiles were not totally nonexistent, although they were far smaller and less potent than the intelligence community

believed. U.S. forces in Iraq ultimately discovered roughly 5,000 chemical warheads, shells, and bombs, all made before 1991.) As two official investigations concluded, the intelligence was flawed because of bad analysis—and Saddam’s effort to deter his enemies by pretending to possess weapons he did not have—rather than deliberate politicization. Bush and his aides were overzealous in presenting the available evidence, but they were not lying.

Nor did they need to. What is often forgotten now is just how popular a more assertive Iraq policy was. During Bill Clinton’s presidency, the Iraq Liberation Act, which made it U.S. policy “to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein,” passed Congress in 1998 with overwhelming support. In 2002, the authorization for war won 77 votes in the Senate and 296 in the House. “We have no choice but to eliminate the threat,” Senator Joe Biden declared at the time. “This is a guy who is an extreme danger to the world.” The Iraq war was not foisted on the country by ideological cliques or conflict-craving zealots. It was a war the United States chose in an atmosphere of great fear and imperfect information—and one that, for all its horrors, might have yielded a winning outcome after all.

#### AMERICA WALKS AWAY

War, the French statesman Georges Clemenceau remarked, is a series of catastrophes that results in a victory. Indeed, if the invasion of Iraq was a mistake, that does not mean the war was lost from that point on. Leffler’s account ends with the botched handling of the initial occupation. But

after three years of catastrophe, in late 2006, the Bush administration finally came to grips with the chaos engulfing Iraq, fashioning a new counter-insurgency strategy and supporting it with the deployment of roughly 30,000 badly needed troops.

As detailed empirical work by the scholars Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro demonstrates, this “surge” provided security in key areas and bolstered an uprising of Sunni tribes against jihadists that had overrun their communities. Violence plummeted; al Qaeda in Iraq was brought to the verge of defeat. There was political progress, with the emergence of cross-sectarian electoral coalitions. Had events stayed on this trajectory, they might have resulted in an Iraq that was a relatively stable, democratic, and reliable potential U.S. partner in the broader war on terror; Americans might now view the conflict as a costly victory rather than a costly defeat.

Yet sustaining that trajectory would have required sustaining the U.S. presence in Iraq. Bush’s successor had made his name opposing the war, had long argued that the conflict was lost, and had campaigned on a promise to end it, in part so his administration could focus on the “necessary war” in Afghanistan. Once in office, Obama did not immediately withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq. But after the failure of a desultory effort to negotiate an agreement that would keep a modest stabilization force there beyond 2011, U.S. personnel withdrew in December of that year. Even before that, the Obama administration had pulled back from intensive, hands-on management of Iraq’s complex political scene.

The diplomatic and legal intricacies of the episode were considerable, but studies by journalists, scholars, and participants show that Obama probably could have had a longer-term U.S. presence had he wanted one. Withdrawal had devastating consequences. The pullout removed shock absorbers between Iraqi political factions and left Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki free to indulge his most sectarian instincts. It helped a nearly vanquished al Qaeda in Iraq reemerge as the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) while denying Washington the intelligence footprint that would have provided greater early warning of the threat. It ultimately contributed to a catastrophic collapse of Iraqi security and a terrorist rampage across a third of the country, which led to another U.S. military intervention and caused many of the same baleful consequences—distraction from other priorities, revitalization of the global jihadist movement, increased Iranian influence in Iraq, global doubts about Washington's competence and judgment—that Obama rightly argued Bush's war had caused.

As ISIS advanced to within an hour's drive from Baghdad in 2014, another angry debate erupted over whether the U.S. withdrawal was to blame. It is impossible to say with certainty, and even an educated guess depends on the size and composition of the force one assumes the United States would have left behind. Yet it seems likely that a force of 10,000 to 20,000 troops (the number that U.S. and Iraqi officials considered plausible when negotiations began), combined with greater political engagement to dampen

sectarian tensions after Iraq's disputed elections in 2010, would have had several constructive effects. It would have shored up Iraqi capabilities, buoyed the self-confidence of Iraqi forces, mitigated the politicization of the country's elite Counter Terrorism Service, and provided a combination of reassurance and leverage in dealing with the difficult Maliki. If nothing else, a U.S. presence of that size would have given Washington the ability and foreknowledge required to carry out counterterrorism strikes before ISIS had gained critical momentum.

What is undoubtedly true is that by pulling back from Iraq, militarily and diplomatically, the United States lost its ability to preserve the fragile but hopeful trends that had emerged there. The conviction that Iraq was a dumb war, a lost war, helped deprive the United States of a chance to win it.

#### IRAQ'S LONG SHADOW

What lessons should the United States draw from its Iraq saga? Obama offered the pithiest answer: "Don't do stupid shit." Washington should avoid wars of regime change and occupation, limit military involvement in the Middle East, and accept that hard problems must be managed rather than solved. That is the same message conveyed, less colorfully, in the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, released in October 2022.

At first glance, who can argue? The Iraq war shows the difficulties associated with toppling hostile regimes and implanting democratic alternatives. The complexities of such missions are often greater, and the price higher, than they initially seem.



Indeed, the arc of U.S. involvement in Iraq—invading the country, then underinvesting in its stabilization, then withdrawing prematurely after things had turned around—may show that these missions require a mix of patience and commitment that even a superpower struggles to muster.

The trouble is that the same maxim, if applied in earlier eras, would have precluded some of the United States' greatest foreign policy successes, such as the post-World War II transformation of Japan and Germany. In the same vein, a long-term nation-building program, underpinned by U.S. troops, helped produce the South Korean miracle; post-Cold War interventions in Panama and the Balkans succeeded far more than they failed. Ambitious military campaigns do not always end in sorrow. Some have backfired; some have helped produce the remarkably vibrant, democratic world we inhabit today.

The “no more Iraqs” mindset carries other dangers, as well. In an ideal world, Washington would surely love to abandon an unstable Middle East. Yet it cannot because it still has important interests there, from counterterrorism to ensuring the smooth functioning of the global energy market. A stubborn resistance to Middle Eastern wars might help avoid future quagmires. Or as Obama discovered, it might lead to episodes in which violent upheaval builds, U.S. interests are threatened, and Washington intervenes later, from a worse position and at a higher price.

The truth is that stupid comes in many flavors. It includes unwise interventions and hasty withdrawals, too little assertiveness as well as too

much. If the Iraq war teaches anything, it is that U.S. strategy is often a balancing act between underreach and overreach and that there is no single formula that can allow the United States to avoid one danger without courting the other.

The war also teaches the importance of learning and adapting after initial mistakes. It is not unusual in the U.S. experience: the real American way of war is to start slowly and make lots of deadly errors. When debacles turn into victories, as was the case in the U.S. Civil War, both world wars, and many other conflicts, it is because Washington eventually masters a steeper learning curve than the adversary while gradually bringing its tremendous might to bear. The nice thing about being a superpower is that even the most tragic and harmful blunders are rarely fatal. How one recovers from mistakes that inevitably occur in war thus matters a great deal.

But learning any lessons from Iraq requires taking the messy history of that war seriously. Accusations that neoconservatives, the foreign policy “blob,” or the Israel lobby are to blame for American misadventures are echoes of the charges that bankers, merchants, and the British drew Washington into World War I. These arguments may be ideologically convenient, but they do not reveal much about why the United States behaves as it does—and how intelligent, well-meaning policymakers sometimes go so badly astray. Good history offers no guarantee that the United States will get the next set of national security decisions right. But bad history surely increases the odds of getting them wrong. 🌐

# Recent Books

## Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

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*Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Today's Culture Wars*  
By Azar Gat. Oxford University Press, 2022, 352 pp.

Only a few decades ago, some observers saw “the end of history” in the triumph of Western liberalism and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, however, the clash of ideologies has returned with a vengeance. In this deeply probing study, Gat explains why ideology is a necessary and deeply fraught feature of the human condition. Philosophers and scientists have long argued that humans cannot fully grasp objective reality. Ideology helps people understand the world, providing a frame inside which the mind can produce a picture of reality. Gat reaches back to the ancient past but dwells mostly on the “secular religions”—liberalism, socialism, and fascism—that came to the fore with the rise of industrial modernity. These ideologies sought to help people come to grips with a fast-changing world and

offered them a blueprint for dealing with the opportunities and miseries of modernity. The abiding appeal of ideologies rests in how they present a grand narrative of where the world is going. Like the classical religions, they grant a glimpse of salvation. But, Gat warns, ideology is a double-edged sword: it is a necessary tool to navigate the uncertainties and complexities of modern life, but it can easily become a dangerous “fixation” and a tool of political warfare.

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*The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism*  
BY FRITZ BARTEL. Harvard University Press, 2022, 440 pp.

Why did the West win the Cold War? In this powerful new interpretation, Bartel argues that the struggle between democracy and communism was fundamentally a contest over which system of government could best harness industrial modernity to improve the lives of its people. The fateful moment came in the 1970s, when economic and energy crises forced leaders in both the West and the East to shift from the “pursuit of plenty” to painful policies of

austerity and fiscal discipline. In these new circumstances, capitalism and state socialism competed over which system could best navigate the disappointment of citizens. In Bartel's view, the Cold War ended because the Soviet system was simply unable to legitimate itself in an era of broken promises, whereas Western leaders were able to gain support for their austerity moves under the banner of neoliberalism. The book's originality lies in how it weaves together Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's program of reform, known as perestroika, and the conservative economic turn under U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Bartel demonstrates that the Cold War was defined not just by military power and security competition but also by less visible struggles within the opposing camps to renegotiate their versions of the social contract.

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*Reclaiming Human Rights in a Changing World Order*

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER SABATINI. Brookings, 2022, 386 pp.

The rise of the post-World War II international human rights regime is one of the great achievements of the modern era. But today that regime—rules, processes, and institutions anchored in the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—is in trouble. Sabatini, the editor of this impressive volume of essays, argues that this regime has been strikingly resilient, surviving the Cold War, the unipolar dominance of the United States, and the

current rise of the global South. Today, however, that regime faces threats from all directions. China and Russia have worked to undermine the global civil society groups that are the backbone of the human rights movement. The U.S.-Chinese rivalry has also sharpened the ideological divide over the definition of human rights and spilled into various UN venues. Populist politics in countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, Uganda, and even the United States have weakened the commitment of these states to human rights norms. The authors offer an extensive set of recommendations for how to push back, insisting that the protection of human rights can improve the lives of people everywhere.

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*Racism, Diplomacy, and International Relations*

BY KO UNOKI. Routledge, 2022, 282 pp.

Traditional theories of world politics have mostly avoided or suppressed discussions of race and racism, focusing instead on concepts such as power, interests, sovereignty, and the nation-state. Unoki argues that without considerations of race, the field is incomplete. Race and racism have always lurked in the shadows of diplomacy and war. He argues that racist ideas were deeply embedded in the rise of the Western great powers and the modern state system, as well as in the writings of influential political figures and intellectuals. Across the world, race has defined identities, political boundaries, and social hierarchies.

The West did not invent empire or imperialism, but Unoki makes the case that race was an elemental feature of Western imperialism in Asia and Africa. Since the politics of the modern world has been so fundamentally influenced by race and racism, Unoki finds it curious that academic theorists do not give it more weight in their research and teaching. The book's most instructive example of the role of race in international affairs is the long U.S. relationship with Japan, revealing the complexities and limits of racism as a driving force. Although Americans often viewed Japan negatively, through a prism of Christianity and white supremacy, they also recognized the interests and political values they shared with Japanese people.

## Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

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*Global Discord: Values and Power  
in a Fractured World Order*

BY PAUL TUCKER. Princeton  
University Press, 2022, 552 pp.

**T**he Biden administration's October 2022 National Security Strategy identified China as a strategic competitor. That designation motivated Washington's ban on exports to China of advanced semiconductor designs and equipment, a measure that seems at odds with American values of economic liberalism and open international

trade. Tucker's book, completed before the release of that document, asks how democracies should deal with illiberal states while upholding their own political and economic values. He argues for cooperation among liberal states and for maintaining economic distance from states on the other side of the ideological divide. Concretely, this means "friend shoring": that is, relying on like-minded countries for imports and finance. Tucker argues that the legitimacy of an international economic system must ultimately rest on shared values and on the responsiveness of its institutions to the priorities of states that uphold those values. He urges the reform of the World Trade Organization, which currently operates through the dictates of all-powerful judges; of the International Monetary Fund, which has weakened its legitimacy by straying from its core mission of supporting countries with weak finances; and of the Bank for International Settlements, which continues to extend privileged access to the titans of global finance.

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*The Long Shadow of Default:  
Britain's Unpaid War Debts to the  
United States, 1917–2020*

BY DAVID JAMES GILL. Yale  
University Press, 2022, 416 pp.

In this thought-provoking book, Gill recounts the forgotten history of the United Kingdom's 1934 default on its World War I debts to the United States. One of the largest payment suspensions in history, this episode is typically omitted from scholars' lists

of sovereign debt defaults because it was soon overtaken by World War II. Gill explains why the United Kingdom was the last country to suspend payments, explaining that it would have been difficult for the British government to stop meeting its debt service obligations while insisting that British households and firms keep repaying their debts. A default would also have created diplomatic difficulties at a time when the country was cultivating its relations with the United States. But the British default happened anyway, with significant consequences. Under the provisions of the Johnson Act of 1934, which banned U.S. lending to governments in arrears, London lost access to U.S. securities and money markets. This, in turn, weakened the United Kingdom's ability to wage war against Germany. In 1945, the U.S. Congress terminated Lend-Lease, its World War II-era program of military and economic aid to allies, early because of lingering U.S. resentment over the British default. The issue resurfaced in 1973, when members of Congress sponsored a bill instructing the Treasury Department to pursue repayment of the World War I-era debt. Gill makes a cogent case, as he puts it in his title, that this history casts a long shadow.

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*The Cashless Revolution: China's Reinvention of Money and the End of America's Domination of Finance and Technology*

BY MARTIN CHORZEMPA.  
PublicAffairs, 2022, 320 pp.

Chorzempa charts the rise and fall of economic reformers in the Chinese Communist Party through the lens of financial technology. The upstart e-commerce and social-media companies Ant and WeChat developed payment "super-apps" Alipay and WeChatPay, respectively, as central elements of their business models. Reform-minded officials, such as central bank governor Zhou Xiaochuan, saw these innovations as a way of freeing the Chinese economy from the dead hand of the banks. These super-apps combined making payments with other services; their universal adoption brought vast power to their parent companies and vast wealth to their founders. Eventually, that power and wealth, together with the rise of the economic traditionalist Chinese leader Xi Jinping, sparked a backlash. Officials cracked down on the founders and their creations and even appropriated their technology and data. For instance, local governments used Alipay's location data and algorithms to determine who was at risk of COVID-19 exposure; authorities used the super-app to send the dreaded "red code" that mandated a two-week quarantine. Chorzempa suggests that China's commitment to issuing a central bank digital currency should be understood as an effort to replace these private payments platforms altogether and put tracking and predictive power in the hands of the central government.



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*The United States vs. China: The Quest for Global Economic Leadership*  
BY C. FRED BERGSTEN. Polity,  
2022, 384 pp.

Many observers despair of the prospects for broad economic cooperation between the United States and China. Not Bergsten. He offers a vision of “conditional cooperation” between the two countries, in which their governments jointly lead the global economic order. Washington would acknowledge Beijing’s co-leadership; in return, China would accept the responsibilities accompanying such a position. The two countries could then collaborate on issues of systemic importance, such as maintaining an open global economic order. Doing so will require decoupling the economic dimension of their relationship from other, more contentious subjects, such as security. Bergsten recommends that the countries join one another’s regional trade arrangements and rehabilitate the World Trade Organization and advocates that China be granted a louder voice in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The two countries can best work together in areas where no clear rules and institutions exist, including climate change, cybersecurity, and international investment. Some readers may dismiss these recommendations as unrealistic in the present geopolitical climate. But Bergsten makes a compelling case that the risks associated with a leaderless global economy, or worse, one where China and the United States are at each other’s throats, should get the two governments to pursue his agenda.

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*Chip War: The Fight for the World’s Most Critical Technology*  
BY CHRIS MILLER. Scribner,  
2022, 464 pp.

At once edifying and entertaining, Miller’s book traces the history of the global semiconductor industry. Early on, firms producing semiconductors depended on demand for their products from the U.S. defense and military establishment. Now, by contrast, that defense establishment depends on the chip industry for critical strategic and battlefield capabilities. Over time, the decisions of charismatic entrepreneurs and less charismatic government officials combined to produce the current international division of labor, whereby advanced chip design is carried out in the United States; essential manufacturing equipment is produced in Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States; and over a fifth of all chip fabrication happens in Taiwan—a place that, as a result, has become an economic and geopolitical flash point. “Chip war” now characterizes the U.S.-Chinese rivalry, with Beijing seeking to build up design and manufacturing capabilities and Washington hoping to slow China’s progress. Miller is a fluent narrator, but he finalized the book before recent shifts in U.S. policy, which seek to deny China advanced chip-making technology. He delivers no verdict on whether U.S. export controls will succeed in containing the rise of China’s semiconductor industry or whether they will only spur China to further support the industry and maybe even lead it to move aggressively against Taiwan.

## Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

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*Armada: The Spanish Enterprise and England's Deliverance in 1588*

BY COLIN MARTIN AND GEOFFREY PARKER. Yale University Press, 2023, 768 pp.

*Convoys: The British Struggle Against Napoleonic Europe and America*

BY ROGER KNIGHT. Yale University Press, 2022, 416 pp.

**T**wo new books chronicle British naval successes against foreign adversaries. Martin and Parker's superb account of the ill-fated Spanish effort to invade England in 1588 is remarkable in its level of detail, drawing on naval archeology and manuscripts to provide a full and vivid history. Readers can follow the decision-making of the Spanish King Philip II and grasp the complexity of his motivations, his deep religious conviction entangled with geopolitical and dynastic imperatives. The Spanish monarch wanted to overthrow his English counterpart, Queen Elizabeth, and return England to Catholicism. To do so, he planned to move his armada of roughly 130 ships into position in the English Channel to escort an invading force of 30,000 troops gathered by the Duke of Parma in Flanders. Almost from the start of the expedition, the armada faced stormy weather. It managed to reach the Channel and face off with

the English fleet, but English tactics prevailed. Instead of boarding enemy ships, as the Spanish sought to do, the English bombarded their opponents at close range, helped by their ability to quickly reload guns midbattle. English attacks scattered the armada, which was driven into the North Sea and then obliged to return to Spain, suffering numerous shipwrecks and catastrophic losses.

During the Napoleonic Wars in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Royal Navy had to protect the United Kingdom's overseas trade in order to keep the country supplied and able to wage war against France. Knight's focus is not on the great naval battles such as Trafalgar, in 1805, but instead on the work of convoys, the large fleets of merchant and naval vessels that traveled across the world to and from British ports and were essential to the British military victory. It is a fascinating story well told, for Knight is not only impressed by the commitment, discipline, and seamanship that made the convoys possible but also under no illusion about the misery of life on these ships and the rancor between ship owners, the Royal Navy, and their insurers. The losses were heavy and constant, with ships regularly seized and their sailors killed or taken prisoner. But as with the armada, the weather was the main killer; storms battered ships and often drove them onto rocks.

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*Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*  
BY PAUL SCHARRE. Norton,  
2023, 496 pp.

*Information in War: Military Innovation, Battle Networks, and the Future of Artificial Intelligence*  
BY BENJAMIN M. JENSEN,  
CHRISTOPHER WHYTE, AND  
SCOTT CUOMO. Georgetown  
University Press, 2022, 266 pp.

Artificial intelligence, also known as AI, is not an easy topic to write about. The technology is developing at a rapid pace in ways that lay audiences struggle to understand. Two new books ably take up the challenge. Scharre is a thoughtful, knowledgeable, and capable guide. He explains why AI matters and charts the areas that will determine which country gets the most out of its investments, focusing on data collection, computing power, talent, and the institutional structures able to harness AI technology to real-world applications, including those in military tactics and strategy. Artificial intelligence is now considered to be one of the most important areas of competition between the United States and China, one in which the United States currently has a lead. That advantage cannot be taken for granted; Scharre urges more cooperation among democracies and recommends export controls to limit Chinese technological development. In this respect, AI poses a test of two systems: the more chaotic and disaggregated U.S. model against the centralized Chinese model. The Chinese government wants to use AI to better engineer social control, and Scharre asks

Western AI specialists to avoid becoming complicit in that project.

Jensen, Whyte, and Cuomo's thought-provoking book is less about the promise of the military uses of AI and more about why that promise may not be realized. They argue that new technologies succeed when they fit into existing institutional structures and when they have advocates who can explain how they might make possible new forms of warfare. The authors' analysis rests on full studies of information technologies that have been adopted unevenly by different countries and different military branches. For instance, the United Kingdom successfully deployed radar in time for World War II because it had the right mix of personalities and a clear strategic need for the technology; France and the United States did not. The construction in the 1950s of the semiautomatic ground environment network, or SAGE, to manage U.S. defenses against a bomber attack faced few institutional barriers. The studies on the revolution in military affairs of the 1990s and the development of the "Global Battle Network," which combined intelligence sensors with armed remotely piloted aircraft, explore the mixed results of the experimentation of recent times, with the U.S. Army getting higher marks for innovation than the Marine Corps.

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*Atomic Bill: A Journalist's Dangerous Ambition in the Shadow of the Bomb*  
BY VINCENT KIERNAN. Three Hills,  
2022, 312 pp.

Bill Laurence, a science reporter for *The New York Times*, was asked to join the Manhattan Project in its final months,

through the July 1945 Trinity Test and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, to help draft the project's official press communiqués. Thereafter, he traded on his reputation as both an eyewitness to and the first chronicler of these momentous events. He has not been fortunate in his biographer. Kieran's research was meticulous, and he finds much to deplore in Laurence's behavior: the journalist's zeal for speculative scientific breakthroughs that led him to ignore skeptics; his exaggerated prose and occasional plagiarism; and most of all, his loss of objectivity from getting too close to power. Laurence did not tell the whole story about the bomb, including the effects of radiation. The indictment is compelling, although reporting during a war, as any frontline correspondent could testify, is always full of ethical traps.

## The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

*G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century*  
BY BEVERLY GAGE. Viking,  
2022, 864 pp.

*The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism*  
BY LERONE A. MARTIN. Princeton University Press, 2023, 352 pp.

**T**wo new books explore the life and times of J. Edgar Hoover. The FBI director was a font of contradictions, posing an unusual challenge for a biographer.

For decades, he was one of the most admired men in the United States, but within a few years of his death became one of its most disgraced. His career at the top of a major government agency spanned an incredible eight presidents—four Republicans and four Democrats—but he was more than just a masterful bureaucrat. He was a skilled leader and an institution builder who virtually created the FBI, modernized and professionalized it, and never gave less than total dedication to his work. On the other hand, his personal life did not come close to meeting the standards he insisted on for the thousands who worked for him. Although he preached devotion to the law, the revelations of the Senate's Church Committee showed that he freely ignored due process and regularly ordered his agents to commit illegal acts. He was openly racist but was known for many years as a protector of civil liberties. He had many triumphs against gangsters, Nazis, and especially communists, contributing enormously to the country's security. But when his primary attention turned to the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests, he allowed personal grudges to become obsessions and turned increasingly to sordid acts of secret surveillance, infiltration, manipulation, and distortion, perhaps most egregiously in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. Gage deftly treads this shifting ground, covering the key events of an unparalleled career and making full use of newly available archival material.

Martin adds an important new aspect to Hoover's story, also based largely on newly released material,

showing how he played a large role in the rise of conservative, white, male, Christian nationalism—what the FBI director called “Americanism.” The FBI’s purpose, in his words, was to “defend and perpetuate the dignity of the Nation’s Christian endowment.” He used a stable of FBI agents on the public payroll to write and to ghost-write for him essays that ran as lead articles in Billy Graham’s *Christianity Today* (a journal whose readership far exceeded that of William F. Buckley’s *National Review*). These writings were preached, sometimes verbatim, from pulpits. Hoover had them reprinted on Department of Justice letterhead—embossed with the FBI emblem and the notation “Reprinted from *Christianity Today*,” fusing the three institutions—and distributed by the tens of thousands. Preachers and the public wrote to the FBI for both religious and political guidance, and received answers. In training, FBI agents took a pledge that began, “I shall, as a minister, seek to supply comfort, advice and aid.” Martin argues that the pervasive use of a government agency over many decades to promote this particular brand of evangelicalism has had lasting effects on national politics. It explains in part why evangelical leaders have valued pragmatism and power over morality, and it left the FBI unprepared for the threat that manifested in the January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. Whereas the Department of Homeland Security had recognized “white supremacist extremism” as the chief domestic terrorist threat a year earlier, as a result of the decades under Hoover, “white, Christian nationalism has a home within the FBI.”

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*The Aftermath: The Last Days of the Baby Boom and the Future of Power in America*

BY PHILIP BUMP. Viking, 2023, 416 pp.

*Generation Gap: Why the Baby Boomers Still Dominate American Politics and Culture*

BY KEVIN MUNGER. Columbia University Press, 2022, 216 pp.

*Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America*

BY STEPHEN BULLIVANT. Oxford University Press, 2022, 272 pp.

Three books chart significant portentous demographic trends underway in the United States. Bump and Munger both deal with the tectonic demographic shift embodied in the departure from the scene of the baby boom generation even as it retains unprecedented political, economic, and cultural power. Bullivant writes about a quite different demographic change, the rapid rise of so-called nonverts, individuals raised in some religion who now identify as having “no religion.” All three authors make a convincing case that the consequences of these shifts are likely to touch most aspects of American life.

Baby boomers, the most dominant generation in American history, were born between 1946 and 1964 and today make up 23 percent of the population. They have passed their peak in terms of raw numbers, but their power continues to grow. Today, they constitute 38 percent of voters and 43 percent of homeowners and own more than 50 percent of the country’s wealth. Among them



are four of the country's 46 presidents (Joe Biden is too old to count as a boomer) and 58 percent of members of Congress. (The average age of lawmakers in both houses is currently the oldest in history.) Boomers control all the country's major institutions (except technology companies), the two main political parties, and the mass media. Boomers are predominantly white, making age and race inseparable factors and a source of confusion in analyses of the changes in progress.

Both Bump and Munger foresee significant generational conflict in coming years with the smaller Generation X population, born between 1965 and 1980, and the much larger cohort of Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996. Bump argues that the discrepancies in wealth and political opinion among them are "simply unsustainable." Munger emphasizes the tension between the world boomers grew up in and the penetration of revolutionary information technology that "changes all the rules." Both books include many graphs, some quite complex, some staggering in their impact. Death is certain: beyond that the coming changes can only be sketched. Among the more definite problems ahead is the question of how boomers' jobs will be filled as the number reaching retirement age peaks near the end of this decade.

Growth or decline in religious observation generally occurs over generations. Something else is occurring in the United States. The increase over the last 30 years of the number of those who have converted from some religion to none—now one in six Americans—is "wholly unprecedented." Nearly all were brought up in a Christian denomination. "Nones" now account for 30 percent of American adults and 44 percent of those aged 18 to 29.

Why this rapid shift is happening is unknown, as are its likely consequences. It would be odd, Bullivant believes, if a segment of the U.S. "religious market" should suddenly expand so enormously and so rapidly "without it playing havoc" with the areas of American life shaped by religion including, to name a few, family, morality, identity, marriage, sex, race, ethnicity, and community. It should change, as well, the national self-image, from its earliest days, as a "Christian nation."

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*The Great Displacement:  
Climate Change and the Next  
American Migration*

BY JAKE BITTLE. Simon & Schuster, 2023, 368 pp.

Bittle has overcome the great difficulty in writing about environmental crises: in many cases, the story becomes so depressing that readers turn away in despair. In this valuable, well-written book, which breaks new ground, he seamlessly blends an expert, policy-level treatment of the causes and consequences of the displacement of Americans being driven by climate change with a narrative of the often heart-rending impacts on particular individuals. Although the book's subtitle uses "migration," he notes that that word implies an intentional movement from one place to another, whereas what is happening is a diffuse movement in many directions that is unpredictable and chaotic. Driven by fire, floods, and heat, this "shambling retreat from mountain ranges and flood-prone riverbeds, back from the oceans, and out of the desert" will "reshape the demographic geography" of the United States, pushing even more Americans

into metropolitan areas, in which around 80 percent of the country already lives (and making the U.S. Senate even less reflective of the country than it already is). The economic impacts beyond the housing market will be felt in enterprises from meatpacking to outdoor theme parks. Bittle shows where government policy and the shortcomings of private markets have made a now unavoidable problem worse, and he addresses some of the changes that need to be made, especially in the mortgage and insurance markets, and the urgent need for a national plan for adapting to (as opposed to slowing) climate change.

## Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

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*Tainted Democracy: Viktor Orban and the Subversion of Hungary*

BY ZSUZSANNA SZELENYI. Hurst, 2022, 352 pp.

**H**ungary's trajectory in the past decade under President Viktor Orban illustrates how right-wing populist nationalism can erode liberal democracy from within. Szelenyi describes that slide with balance, detail, and compelling authority, for she began her political career in the 1980s as a leading member of Orban's own Fidesz Party—which at the time offered a liberal democratic alternative to communism in Hungary. By the early 2010s, however, Szelenyi had turned against Orban. The Hungarian president is following what she terms a “twenty-first century autocratic playbook” aimed at

centralizing and maintaining political power. He has packed the supreme court, rewritten the constitution, given government officials more discretion, nationalized substantial portions of the economy, and eroded human rights, fair elections, and checks and balances. Rampant corruption favors Orban's cronies, and Fidesz controls, directly or indirectly, nearly 80 percent of the national media. Orban justifies his power grab through criticisms of “the deep state,” praises “illiberalism” and President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and deploys virulently anti-EU, anti-immigrant, and anti-gay rhetoric. Missing from Szelenyi's analysis is a convincing description of how and why this extreme-right mix of electoral manipulation, media control, and economic inducements has been so uniquely effective in Hungary. But for readers seeking a balanced analysis of Hungary's recent political evolution, this is the one.

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*Winston Churchill:*

*His Times, His Crimes*

BY TARIQ ALI. Verso, 2022, 448 pp.

Ali is a legendary figure on the British left: born in Lahore, Pakistan, he rose to prominence in the United Kingdom of the 1960s, which he spent preaching Marxism and hanging out with John Lennon and Mick Jagger. Since then, he has published around 50 books, mostly radical critiques of the conservative establishment. In this one, he shows that Winston Churchill's brave resistance as British prime minister in World War II was an exception. The rest of Churchill's half century in public life involved advocating reactionary and often foolhardy policies. He militantly

defended the British Empire, which led him to massacre national liberation fighters in places as disparate as India, Ireland, and Kenya. He justified such atrocities by explicitly espousing white supremacy. He admired the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and coddled the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. He bombed German civilians and advocated a nuclear first strike, not just against Japan in World War II but against the Soviet Union in peacetime. He ignored pleas from his own government to address humanitarian crises, such as the Bengal famine of 1943, in which three million people perished. He abhorred social democratic values, resisted the social welfare state, and used the army to repress striking workers. All this is well known, yet Ali's examination remains an important corrective to the hagiographic praise that Churchill receives to this day.

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*Cyprus: An Ancient People, a Troubled History, and One Last Chance for Peace*

BY LAWRENCE STEVENSON AND  
GLYNNIS STEVENSON. Sutherland  
House, 2022, 280 pp.

Cyprus is home to a frozen conflict. The country's civil war flared hot and then cooled for a half century, leaving the island divided into one half that sits inside the EU and another that remains under increasing Turkish influence. United Nations peacekeepers have now been there for almost 60 years. The authors of this book—two Canadians, one having logged two tours as a UN peacekeeper in Cyprus, and the other, his daughter, a professional historian—bring unique experience and extensive interview data to the issue. Rather than taking sides,

they evenhandedly explain how this conflict unfolded, and why the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU, and the UN have not been able to resolve it. They propose a confederal solution, whereby Cyprus unifies under a decentralized government, with absolute guarantees of minority rights. To break the current logjam, they argue, the UN must threaten to leave in six months and then impose a choice on Greek Cypriots between confederal unity or independence for Northern Cyprus. Risky, perhaps, but if such a decentralized arrangement works for Canada, why not Cyprus?

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*Scotland: The Global History, 1603 to the Present*

BY MURRAY PITTOCK. Yale  
University Press, 2022, 512 pp.

To understand why so many in Scotland support independence today, one must understand the nation's history. In this book, a distinguished Scottish historian offers a vivid, if perhaps overly detailed, account of the remarkable successes Scots have enjoyed through the centuries in science, literature, art, business, and soldiering. He attributes this record of achievement mostly to Scotland's superb education system. Yet to use their knowledge, most of its well-trained graduates had to emigrate from their economically stagnant homeland. Two hundred years ago, Scots composed a quarter of Britons and a fifth of Americans, and they could be found in substantial numbers elsewhere. Today, however, the country has declined demographically and been surpassed by other countries in educational excellence. Scots remain attached to their past: the romantic history, vivid

landscape, and distinctive regional traditions. The book's conclusion expresses the hope that this attachment will be enough to make independence viable and attractive, yet it offers few concrete reasons to believe it will be.

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*EU Industrial Policy in the Multipolar Economy*

EDITED BY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE DEFRAIGNE, JAN WOUTERS, EDOARDO TRAVERSA, AND DIMITRI ZURSTRASSEN. Edward Elgar, 2022, 446 pp.

In today's global economy, high-tech rivalries, the transition to a green economy, and security concerns have encouraged more and more countries to expand government intervention in industry. Although many observers focus on the United States and China, the EU is economically comparable in size to both countries. In an increasingly multipolar world, the policies Europeans adopt may be decisive for the future of the global economy. Most analysts are pessimistic, given that the member states of the EU have failed to create the effective, centralized institutions they would need to manage such a policy at a continental scale. But these authors point to a silver lining. Centralized subsidy policies no longer really work, except where governments buy the output—as happens in the areas of transport, energy, and military arms production. Instead, key European interventions take the shape of the imposition of antitrust policy, regulatory standards, coordinated trade policy, and supply chain management—and here the EU wields much geo-economic power. It remains to be seen whether Europe's

regulatory clout can help it become an independent global competitor, a junior partner in a transatlantic alliance, or the object of manipulation by China and the United States. This book's survey is a good starting point to understanding Europe's current efforts to secure a place in the future global economy.

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*The Lost Future: And How to Reclaim It*  
BY JAN ZIELONKA. Yale University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

This book argues that the world faces unprecedentedly rapid and complex change that existing political institutions are too slow and too weak to manage effectively. Politics simply protects parochial and backward-looking interest groups and opinions. Zielonka tries to transcend this familiar trope through an engaging, if sometimes meandering, reflection on “space and time,” written in the style of business journalism and peppered with political cartoons. In it, he summarizes several generations of scholarly thinking about the difficult task of governing swift social and technological change. Yet the book ends with no more than a few pages of what he wryly terms “half-hearted” proposals for the future, which amount to something very much like the international system that has existed since 1945: nation-states would remain the primary actors, linked by international networks of governance rather than strict hierarchies. If such familiar forms of politics can and should be made more enlightened, cosmopolitan, and farsighted—and are to prevail over the vested interests the author rightly condemns—another book must explain how.

## Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

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*Somewhere We Are Human: Authentic Voices on Migration, Survival, and New Beginnings*  
EDITED BY REYNA GRANDE AND SONIA GUIÑANSACA. HarperVia, 2022, 376 pp.

*Solito: A Memoir*  
BY JAVIER ZAMORA. Hogarth, 2022, 400 pp.

*You Know Who You Are: Recent Acquisitions of Cuban Art From the Jorge M. Pérez Collection*  
CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION AT EL ESPACIO 23. El Espacio 23, 2022.

Every day, desperate, determined Latin Americans attempt to cross the United States' southern border in search of economic opportunity and political security. Three recent books reveal how such migrants are making their voices heard in literature and the visual arts.

*Somewhere We Are Human* is an extraordinary anthology of short, largely autobiographical essays by undocumented and formerly undocumented immigrants, mostly from Latin America and the Caribbean. The stories add to a rapidly expanding body of literature that explores the stresses and opportunities of the migrant experience. Many accounts record the psychological trauma experienced at the hands of the muddled, understaffed, and often cruel U.S. immigration system. Hiding in the shadows of illegality, the authors

experience rejection, isolation, and dreadful anxiety; some developed a lasting hostility toward U.S. society and institutions. As arrestingly portrayed in several vignettes, even those immigrants who successfully climb the career ladder may harbor a great deal of guilt and shame and feel that they have never fully belonged to the United States. Contributors also often have contradictory feelings about their homelands: they remember the warmth of family but also recall debilitating poverty and demeaning social hierarchies. A few return to these countries only to discover that time has erased the homes and communities frozen in their memories.

Zamora's deeply moving, highly personal memoir details his arduous, heroic trek, at age nine, over seven long weeks in 1999, from El Salvador through Guatemala and Mexico to Tucson, Arizona. A top student at a good Catholic school, Zamora was not among the poorest of the poor; rather, he journeyed to the United States to reunite with his parents, who lived undocumented in California. He undertook his treacherous odyssey more or less on his own and most likely would not have survived without the loving compassion of other migrants who took him under their wings. In this Homeric epic, Zamora graphically describes the many daunting obstacles migrants must overcome, including the extreme, blistering weather of the Sonoran Desert; the corrupt, brutal Mexican military; and the pitiless U.S. border patrol agents (the "Migra"). The overcrowded, degrading detention centers are especially traumatizing. The professional



smugglers (“coyotes” and *polleros*, or “chicken herders”) work with businesslike efficiency in Guatemala and Mexico but prove to be less reliable at getting their cargo across the U.S. border; Zamora had to attempt multiple crossings. He makes no effort to analyze U.S. immigration policies, but his American readers will surely feel that there must be better, more humane ways to safeguard the southern border.

As evident in *You Know Who You Are*, the catalog of an extensive exhibition at the Espacio 23 museum in Miami, Cuban artists have long explored the trials and promise of migration. Standout works include Abel Barroso’s humorous wooden sculptures wryly satirizing the Kafkaesque U.S. immigration system. René Francisco Rodríguez and Luis Cruz Azaceta contemplate the mortal dangers encountered by migrants braving the Florida Straits. With stark simplicity, Julio Larraz captures the duality of the blue seas, as both path and barrier, while also suggesting the nostalgia of the departed and the longings of those who remain. Enrique Martínez Celaya, Iván Capote, and William Osorio visualize the pathos of family separation and of memories fragmented over space and time. Other noteworthy paintings are by Wifredo Lam, justifiably renowned for blending exuberant tropical motifs with European cubism and surrealism, and by Belkis Ayón, who dramatically explores gender, race, and Afro-Caribbean rituals. The exhibition amply demonstrates the technical virtuosity and revelatory insight of a host of graduates of top-tier Cuban arts academies who have gone on to work both on the island and abroad.

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*The Chile Project: The Story of the Chicago Boys and the Downfall of Neoliberalism*

BY SEBASTIAN EDWARDS. Princeton University Press, 2023, 376 pp.

At the height of the Cold War, the far-right economics department of the University of Chicago, with the support of the U.S. government, recruited students from then democratic Chile. When General Augusto Pinochet seized power in 1973, he hired these “Chicago boys” to apply their extreme free-market fundamentalism to the Chilean economy. Remarkably, the left-of-center democratic governments that succeeded Pinochet’s regime after 1990 maintained many of those market-friendly prescriptions. Edwards, a Chilean-born economist with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, narrates a fascinating insider intellectual history of the policies and personalities behind Chile’s economic development in recent decades. But he struggles to explain the unanticipated popular uprising in 2019 against this doctrinal “neoliberalism” with which he largely sympathizes. Although the economic model had generated strong growth, reduced extreme poverty, and expanded the middle class, Edwards now finds that many policymakers neglected stark, persistent inequalities; corporate collusion had eroded free-market competition; and public policy may have gone too far in interjecting market competition into education, health care, and retirement pensions. Looking forward, Edwards suggests that Chile may yet find a more sustainable middle road as a

European-style social democracy, with less spectacular economic growth but greater social cohesion.

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*Banzeiro Okoto: The Amazon as the Center of the World*

BY ELIANE BRUM. TRANSLATED BY DIANE WHITTY. Graywolf, 2023, 408 pp.

A Brazilian investigative journalist and a 2021 winner of the prestigious Maria Moors Cabot Prize for journalism in Latin America, Brum comes out guns blazing in this sardonic, polemical work. She denounces the dark forces annihilating the Amazon Basin and its remaining Indigenous peoples: industrial and commercial capitalism, white patriarchy, big mining companies, hydroelectric projects, and predatory, reactionary Brazilians as exemplified by former President Jair Bolsonaro. Critical of “European ways” of thinking and what she perceives as the flaws of Enlightenment reasoning, Brum has relocated to an Amazonian city and embraced what sometimes comes across as a romanticized animism. She never spells out what it would mean, in concrete policy terms, to place the Amazon at “the center of the world.” But Brum is a powerful, poetic voice for those environmental activists struggling to resist, before it is too late, the further degradation of her life-affirming Amazon.

## Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

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*The Empress and the English Doctor: How Catherine the Great Defied a Deadly Virus*

BY LUCY WARD. Oneworld, 2022, 352 pp.

By 1980, the global smallpox vaccination campaign had resulted in the complete eradication of the deadly disease. Ward’s captivating and informative book relates events that took place two centuries earlier and laid the foundation of this unique achievement. In 1768, the Russian Empress Catherine the Great invited the English doctor Thomas Dimsdale to Russia to inoculate her and her teenage son, the heir to the throne. Catherine was the first monarch to be inoculated against smallpox, at a time when none of her European peers were willing to take the risk. (Smallpox killed five reigning European rulers in the eighteenth century.) Both Catherine and her doctor were ardent proponents of the Enlightenment; both believed in science and valued persuasion over coercion; and both worked tirelessly to overcome people’s prejudices and superstitions. Catherine used the power of her own example to encourage inoculation across her empire. The doctor, inspired by a vision of the wholesale eradication of smallpox, published treatises to popularize his methods and campaigned to extend smallpox inoculation to the poor. Catherine granted him the

hereditary title of baron and showered him with gifts. They remained friends even after he returned to England. In 1781, Catherine brought him back to Russia to inoculate her two young grandsons.

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*Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*

BY MARK GALEOTTI. Osprey, 2022, 384 pp.

Galeotti compiles an encyclopedic study of the Russian armed forces. Based on meticulous research, which he says includes “some 30 years of interacting with soldiers,” he traces the evolution of the Russian military from its steep decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent humiliation of the first Chechen war (fought between 1994 and 1996) through the military reforms carried out during Russian President Vladimir Putin’s rule. Those keen on martial matters will appreciate the in-depth examination of Russia’s military doctrine; the dissection of various armed branches and services, including those in charge of covert and subversive operations; the study of kit and armaments; and much more. Galeotti also tells the story of Putin’s bid to rebuild, rearm, and modernize the military as a way of restoring Russia’s global stature. These efforts bore fruit in the second Chechen war (actively fought between 1999 and 2000) and in later operations aimed at asserting Russia’s interests beyond its borders in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria. But the debacle of his 2022 invasion of Ukraine suggests that 20 years of high-spending military reform was wasted. Galeotti forecasts that the war in Ukraine will be a long, ugly slog.

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*The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*

BY SHEILA FITZPATRICK.  
Columbia University Press,  
2022, 256 pp.

Fitzpatrick, a doyenne of Soviet historians, offers the lay reader a concise, chronological account of the Soviet Union premised on the notion that accidents, rather than inevitabilities, drive human history. In 1917, Vladimir Lenin’s takeover of the Russian Empire came as a surprise even to the Bolsheviks. Just as unexpected was the Soviet Union’s end, a dissolution that embarrassed the Sovietologists who failed to predict it. Following Marxist precepts, the Bolsheviks declared they were building a dictatorship of the proletariat, but their state quickly evolved into the dictatorship of the Communist Party. This arrangement remained unchanged until the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempt to relax the party’s grip on society promptly destroyed the state itself. Stalin’s nearly 30-year rule, in the first half of the twentieth century, was built on mass violence, but as soon as the bloody dictator died, his henchmen stepped forward with an immediate program of radical reform—a development often recalled today by optimistic observers who seek a post-Putin Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a cause for rejoicing in the West, in Eastern Europe, and in some of the Soviet republics, but not in Russia. The Soviet Union’s disappearance, Fitzpatrick writes, “inflicted a trauma on the Russians that has few equals, even in the trauma-filled twentieth century.”

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*The Zelensky Effect*

BY OLGA ONUCH AND HENRY E. HALE. Hurst, 2022, 224 pp.

Onuch and Hale artfully combine Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's biography and a chronicle of Ukraine's postcommunist development, rich with empirical data and rigorous research. The highly readable narrative includes excerpts from Zelensky's routines as a comedian, his prior career, as well as from his more recent political speeches, revealing that in both pursuits, Zelensky has dwelt on the same themes of civic duty and belief in Ukrainian statehood. Replete with numerous references to Ukrainian songs and quotes from Ukrainian poetry, the book depicts the country's amazing resistance to Russian aggression as a joint achievement of the Ukrainian people and their leader. Zelensky, in this portrayal, is a Ukrainian "everyperson" who has "embraced, embodied, and affirmed" Ukrainianness as, first and foremost, a civic identity. They chronicle Zelensky's indefatigable work to unite his nation, his masterful use of social media, and his extraordinary ability to connect with people. Given Zelensky's bravery and unique leadership qualities demonstrated over the many months since the Russian invasion, it is hardly surprising that the book reads like a panegyric. But looking ahead, the authors fear the possible return of the country's past ills, including corruption, a politics of divide-and-rule along ethnocultural lines, and a tolerance for autocrats.

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*How the Soviet Jew Was Made*

BY SASHA SENDEROVICH. Harvard University Press, 2022, 368 pp.

Senderovich's book may be read as an attempt to challenge Yuri Slezkine's broadly acclaimed work *The Jewish Century*, which sought to explain the rise and disproportionate prominence of Jews among the Soviet political, academic, and cultural elites. Senderovich, a literary scholar, looks instead at "simple Jews" who, unlike Slezkine's protagonists, did not shed their Jewish cultural heritage. His interest lies in literary characters who undergo a complicated and ambivalent transition from their traditional way of life to Soviet modernity. Senderovich focuses on the texts of several Jewish writers of the early Soviet period that depict the experience of Jews from shtetls who found themselves under Bolshevik rule. His subtle literary analysis takes in novels, short stories, and films. In one novel, Jews are ambivalent about the new Bolshevik authorities during the civil war that broke out after the Bolshevik takeover, in 1917. The Bolsheviks are expected to protect Jews after the pogroms that roiled imperial Russia, but Jews fear that the pogroms will return. Besides, some Bolsheviks are antisemitic themselves. Another novel takes place in a traditional Jewish family's courtyard, charting how the forces of modernization, such as the electric grid, urban railways, and the cinema, led to the disintegration of the old Jewish customs.

## Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

*Educating Egypt: Civic Values and Ideological Struggles*

BY LINDA HERRERA. American University in Cairo Press, 2022, 264 pp.

A collection of studies conducted over the last 30 years by the preeminent American scholar of education in Egypt, this book paints an evocative portrait of the educational philosophies, institutions, and practices that have so poorly equipped Egyptian young people for the world they encounter as adults. In the process, she reveals how decades of failure to invest in education created perverse incentives for teachers, families, and, most important, generations of children. Herrera's inquiry ranges from a girls' middle school in Cairo in the early 1990s, where discipline was more important than learning, to the private Islamist schools that proliferated later in the decade to the underpaid teachers and desperate families that have conspired to support a system of private after-school tutoring that makes a mockery of the notion of free public education. Overcrowding in schools led Ministry of Education bureaucrats to falsify year-end exam results, giving students passing grades to make room for incoming classes. Herrera ends on a note of cautious optimism, hoping the technologically minded strategies of Minister of Education Tarek Shawki will bear fruit; his departure in the summer of 2022 suggests, however, that big problems remain.

*Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization*

BY KIAN TAJBAKHSH. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 304 pp.

In this unusually revealing account of decentralization efforts in Iran, Tajbakhsh provides a deeply researched and often moving account of how contemporary politics in Iran actually works. Deploying a remarkable mix of personal memoir and professional expertise—Tajbakhsh was a student, an urban planner, a government adviser, and ultimately a political prisoner in Iran—he endeavors to make sense of his work there, notably the failure of an initiative to decentralize local government by authorizing elections for local government councils. In the late 1990s and the first decade of this century, reformists promoted decentralization as a way of making local government more responsive to the needs and desires of citizens. Technocrats framed such efforts as integral to the strengthening of local administration. And ruling Islamists supported decentralization as an opportunity for public mobilization in support of the regime. The reformists lost, partly because of developments on the national and international stage but also, as Tajbakhsh persuasively suggests, because of flaws in their understanding of decentralization itself, which they often equated with democratization. Tajbakhsh shows how local governments were, in fact, deprived of taxing authority, which kept local policy tightly linked to central government largess. Candid, rueful, scholarly, and reflective, this book opens a revealing window onto everyday politics in Iran.



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*Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East*  
BY JONATHAN WYRTZEN. Columbia University Press, 2022, 336 pp.

The conventional wisdom about the impact of World War I on the Middle East is that in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, European perfidy carved up the region and determined its future. Wyrzten argues against this orthodoxy, insisting instead that World War I really started in 1911 with the Italian invasion of Libya and the French and Spanish occupation of Morocco—and did not end until the mid-1930s, after the upheavals of the Arab revolt in Syria, the Turkish independence struggle, the Saudi conquest of the Hejaz, the uprisings in Kurdistan, the Rif rebellion in Morocco, and the Sanusi resistance in Libya. These events may have been erased from the standard textbook histories of the region, but they continue to burn bright in local memory. They were as influential in shaping contemporary politics as were any imperial European efforts to manipulate local sentiment or draw regional boundaries. Indeed, many of the sites of conflict in the 1920s still play host to violent contests today, including the 2016 rebellion in Morocco's Rif, the ongoing Libyan civil war, and the continuing struggles over Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and elsewhere.

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*The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People*  
BY WALTER RUSSELL MEAD. Knopf, 2022, 672 pp.

By turns lyrical and dyspeptic, Mead explores the role that Zionism and Israel have played in the American imagination and in U.S. foreign policy. He attributes Washington's steadfast support for the Jewish state and the American fascination with Israel to a sometimes bewildering combination of culture and politics. Protesting, perhaps too much, that pro-Israel lobbying is perceived to be more influential than it truly is, he looks instead to forces such as religious conviction and realpolitik to explain the U.S.-Israeli relationship. His account of the embrace of Israel by Christian evangelical movements in the United States is subtle and revealing in explaining the substantial influence of Christian Zionists in U.S. policy debates about the Middle East. Mead suggests that the interminable peace process, in which everyone genuflects to an ever-receding mirage of concord, has been a hard-nosed strategic choice, useful to virtually all parties to the conflict. Although the peace process has inhibited full-blown war, it has also built and sustained troubling local power holders (notably an emboldened Israeli right wing and a feckless Palestinian Authority), provided a rationale for continuing U.S. arms sales to both Israel and the oil-producing Gulf countries, and guaranteed that the United States remains the uncontested global power in the Middle East.

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*Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and Eternal Actors After the Spring*

EDITED BY LISA BLAYDES, AMR HAMZAWY, AND HESHAM SALLAM. University of Michigan Press, 2022, 488 pp.

An unusually strong collection, this volume showcases writing by some of the best scholars working on politics in the Arab world today, all of them at the top of their game. These essays together offer a thorough and sophisticated examination of the political change and contestation that has shaped the decade after the uprisings in 2011, from Algeria to Sudan. The authors focus on three themes: the persistence of political mobilization among populations that are young, dissatisfied, technologically adept, and unreconciled to autocracy; the adaptations of regimes that are also increasingly tech-savvy and equally determined not to surrender their power and privileges; and the ever more visible importance of international and local actors in the dynamics of domestic conflict across the region. The authors puzzle over the unwillingness of many of the protest movements to develop more coherent institutional forms, skeptical as they are of conventional organizations such as political parties, ideological commitments such as Islamist or nationalist dogmas, and, it sometimes seems, authority of any kind. Still, the book's contributors make a convincing case that the Arab world will see continued activism and growing regime ruthlessness in the face of discontent.

## Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

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*The Dalai Lama's Special Envoy: Memoirs of a Lifetime in Pursuit of a Reunited Tibet*

BY LODI GYALTSEN GYARI. Columbia University Press, 2022, 800 pp.

For a quarter century, Lodi Gyari was the Dalai Lama's special envoy in Washington and his personal representative to the Chinese government, including in nine rounds of formal negotiations from 2002 to 2010. Gyari, who died in 2018, was recognized in infancy as a *rinpoche*, or reincarnated lama, and this fascinating memoir reveals the spiritual side of his work. But the long, frank accounts of how he developed influence in Washington and managed contacts with China also show him to be a hard-headed politician and diplomat. Rejecting the pro-independence position of the Tibetan Youth Congress—which Gyari had helped found earlier in his career—the Dalai Lama sought what he called “genuine autonomy” within the Chinese state, involving the unification of the entire Tibetan Plateau under Tibetan administration, the exclusion of Chinese troops from that vast territory, and other conditions that proved unacceptable to Beijing. Gyari worked to overcome the ethnic, religious, and political jealousies that divide the Tibetan community in exile. But in the end, he implies, political rivals forced him to resign.

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*On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea*  
BY GREGORY B. POLING. Oxford University Press, 2022, 336 pp.

As the world worries about whether China will attack Taiwan, Poling shows that Beijing has already decisively changed the balance of power in Asia without an effective U.S. response, by establishing military bases on seven enormous manmade islands in the South China Sea and crowding out the navies and fishing fleets of regional neighbors. He charts a masterful course through the history and politics of the region, and the tortured history of the law of the sea, to explain the origins of the territorial disputes that China has now effectively resolved by force. The stakes today involve not just control of undersea oil and gas reserves, fisheries, and commercial sea-lanes but also the viability of the troubled U.S.-Philippine alliance and even the global legal principle of freedom of the seas. Stepped-up U.S. "freedom of navigation" operations by the U.S. Navy have not effectively defended any of these interests. Poling proposes that the United States build a coalition to press China to compromise on fishing rights, joint management of the environment, and measures to avoid accidents among crowds of armed ships. But he acknowledges that it is unlikely that China will see any reason to cooperate.

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*Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples: A Cultural Cartography of Empire*  
EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY LAURA HOSTETLER AND WU XUEMEI. Brill, 2022, 641 pp.

In 1751, the Qianlong emperor commissioned an illustrated roster of some 300 ethnic groups living around the periphery of his direct rule, including those as far away as Switzerland and England and a couple of hundred living in places that are parts of today's China, such as Gansu, Guangdong, and Yunnan Provinces. He viewed them as tributaries, peoples who bowed to the universal moral authority of the Chinese ruler. This beautiful book, skillfully translated from a set of scrolls in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, reproduces extraordinary color portraits of a male and female figure of each group in native costume and provides a short description of each group's distinctive way of life. The A'zhe Luoluo from Yunnan Province, for example, "are foolish, but diligent. . . . Men go barefoot. Women wear shoes. At weddings they use cattle as bride price. The groom carries the bride home on his back by himself." Implicitly indexing the groups as more or less acculturated into Han Chinese culture, the scrolls expressed the assimilating mission of Confucian China as it gradually absorbed most of the groups into the dominant Han ethnicity. Today, China has only 55 officially recognized "national minorities," including the Tibetans and the Uyghurs, and it is working hard to eliminate what remains of their distinct cultural identities.

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*Dictatorship and Information: Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China*  
BY MARTIN K. DIMITROV. Oxford University Press, 2023, 496 pp.

Dimitrov brings to light the lesser-known techniques of mass surveillance in Leninist party-states—not the Internet surveillance and facial recognition cameras that are obvious to everyone, but secret information gathering through three institutional channels: the party organization, the state security apparatus, and the internal reports of official media. Comparing China and Soviet-era Bulgaria, with long side glances at other authoritarian regimes, including Cuba, East Germany, and the Soviet Union, he shows in remarkable detail how such governments obsessively collected information on dissenters, not just to target them but to preempt protest by focusing the delivery of economic largesse in restive areas. Regimes can head off some protests, keep some small, and disarm others with concessions—what Dimitrov calls “a low-repression equilibrium”—but only as long as they command sufficient economic resources, which the Bulgarian regime eventually did not. In China, despite its unprecedentedly sophisticated intelligence-gathering systems, small-scale protest is chronic. “Time will tell how long such a system based on routine disruptive contentious episodes can persist,” Dimitrov concludes.

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*China's Quest for Financial Self-Reliance: How Beijing Plans to Decouple From the Dollar-Based Global Trading and Financial System*  
BY DIANA CHOYLEVA AND DINNY MCMAHON. Wilson Center, 2022, 203 pp.

In this lucid and data-rich analysis, the authors show how the use of the dollar in China's trade transactions exposes Beijing to exchange rate risks it does not control and to potential financial sanctions. The use of its own currency would tie economic partners more closely to China, making imports of energy, food, and other commodities more secure. But making the renminbi a truly global currency will be a hard (and perhaps even impossible) task. Because so many dollars flow through the international economy, traders pay the lowest fees to borrow, convert, remit, and otherwise transact in that currency. Despite sophisticated efforts to increase the international use of the renminbi, including the partial opening of China's domestic markets to foreign investors, the creation of its own cross-border interbank payments system, and the launch of a digital yuan, China faces a dilemma: it is hard to saturate the world with renminbi when it remains relatively expensive for merchants and bankers to use them.

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*Under the Gun: Political Parties and Violence in Pakistan*

BY NILOUFER A. SIDDIQUI.  
Cambridge University Press,  
2022, 272 pp.

Political violence between parties is endemic to Pakistan, both during and between election cycles. In the sprawling, multiethnic megacity of Karachi, which is flooded with guns from the period of the Soviet-Afghan war, both the Awami National Party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement have engaged in assassinations, extortion, and violent protests in recent years to protect the physical and economic turf of their ethnic constituencies. In the same city, the Pakistan People's Party let an ethnic militia do its dirty work. In Punjab, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz campaigned alongside leaders of a violent sectarian group in order to get more votes. And in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, the same Awami National Party that used violence in Karachi has run for office peacefully. Through resourceful case studies, Siddiqui teases out the differences among these four parties. She looks at how local authorities variously struggle to keep the peace. Where state capacity is weak, parties will use violence when they have the support of an ethnic, religious, or ideological constituency that tolerates or even rewards them for doing so. Finally, a party's organizational strength explains whether it may deploy its own supporters to attack rivals or get help from sectarian militias or criminal gangs.

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*How Asia Found Herself: A Story of Intercultural Understanding*

BY NILE GREEN. Yale University Press, 2022, 472 pp.

Europeans created the concept of Asia as a name for the huge swath of territories running from the Mediterranean to the Pacific Ocean. But around the mid-nineteenth century, Asians began to explore each other's cultures for themselves, aided by new techniques in the printing of Asian languages that had been developed by Christian missionaries and often motivated by the desire to counteract Christian proselytizing with missionizing of their own. In this fascinating and original study, Green explores sources in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and other languages to see how Bahai, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Zoroastrian travelers, merchants, and polemicists tried to understand and influence the societies and cultures of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. What they found was "the illusion of Asia"—a region characterized by enormous diversity and mutual ignorance. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that *The Analects of Confucius* appeared in Arabic and Urdu and the Koran in Japanese and Chinese, through translations of European versions of these texts. The rise of "Asianism," whether as a claim of Indian centrality or as an ideology of Japanese expansionism, was based on a myth of a culturally coherent Asia.



## Africa

NICOLAS VAN DE WALLE

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*The Invention of Green Colonialism*

BY GUILLAUME BLANC.

TRANSLATED BY HELEN

MORRISON. Polity, 2022, 180 pp.

In this scathing polemic, Blanc traces the origins of the international conservation movement to the colonial era and argues that conservation organizations have exhibited a complete disregard for the welfare of people in Africa. Instead, they focus on protecting what they imagine to be a threatened, pristine natural world, bedeviled by local populations. Blanc argues that local populations live in harmony with nature and should be left alone to do so. The strength of the book lies in the historical material he marshals, which often casts the conservation movement in an embarrassing light—from its amateurish and self-serving use of bad data to its support for authoritarian colonial practices designed to save animals (creatures Blanc does not believe need saving). A lack of nuance and a disregard for counterarguments and countervailing evidence weaken the book, as does the absence of any specific policy recommendation beyond familiar bromides about the need to involve local populations in decision-making.

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*Revival and Reconciliation:  
The Anglican Church and the  
Politics of Rwanda*

BY PHILLIP A. CANTRELL II.

University of Wisconsin Press,  
2022, 248 pp.

This history of the Anglican Church in Rwanda combines compelling archival historical research and a probing analysis of the church's tendency to hew closely to those in power. The church abetted the German and then the Belgian colonial administrations of the territory, the Hutu-dominated governments of independent Rwanda between 1962 and 1994, and, since 1994, the Tutsi-dominated authoritarian rule of President Paul Kagame. Throughout its history, the church hierarchy has felt insecure about its minority status relative to the more dominant Catholic Church in Rwanda, a perception that led the Anglicans to form closer relations with the government. Cantrell argues convincingly that this habit encouraged the church to uncritically accept many of the ethnic prejudices of successive governments. As a result, he suggests, the Anglican Church did little to anticipate or prevent the 1994 genocide, for which it shares at least some responsibility. Cantrell shows that after the 1994 genocide, the church quickly adopted the official rhetoric of the new government under Kagame, and he worries it will one day regret its acquiescence to the government's flawed narratives about the country's recent past that politicize the 1994 genocide and censor all discussion of the subsequent, awful human rights record of the regime.

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*WhatsApp and Everyday Life in West Africa: Beyond Fake News*

EDITED BY IDAYAT HASSAN AND JAMIE HITCHEN. Zed Books, 2022, 208 pp.

How is social media changing West Africa? This first-rate collection of essays focuses on the end-to-end encryption messaging software WhatsApp, taking on such disparate topics as its adoption by political parties in Gambia, Ghana, and Nigeria; WhatsApp usage among elderly Nigerians; and the fashion industry's use of the software for marketing. Contributors note that the software has become an integral part of electoral campaigning but does not yet appear to have resulted in significant changes in political messaging. Others observe that WhatsApp has proven popular because it is particularly cheap to use, and its end-to-end encryption means that it can provide a specific community with a ready tool for relatively private dialogue. A fascinating chapter by Naima Hafiz Abubakar discusses how WhatsApp has affected women voters in the northern Nigerian city of Kano. She finds that the software gives women the sense of belonging to a safe community, which allows them to share information and exchange political views. The chapter argues that WhatsApp enhances their sense of political empowerment but offers no data as to whether, for instance, its use has resulted in greater female participation in voting.

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*Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*

BY SIDDHARTH KARA. St. Martin's Press, 2023, 288 pp.

Kara provides a thorough and insightful investigation of the cobalt industry in the southeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. He sheds light on the complex and highly decentralized organization of cobalt mining in this region, in which a large number of actors mine over two-thirds of the cobalt used in the world's production of lithium-ion rechargeable batteries that power smartphones, laptops, and electric vehicles. The technology giants that produce these sleek electronic consumer goods argue that they observe the necessary regulations with respect to local labor practices and environmental protection. In fact, the book astutely shows how lax enforcement by a weak and corrupt Congolese state has allowed shocking abuses in the working conditions and treatment of miners, as well as the degradation of the environment in the region with appalling health consequences for locals. Kara also reveals a system of intermediary agents that connects individual miners to a diffuse array of buyers, depots, concessionaires, processors, and refining industries that all take in a share of the value of the mined cobalt. At the other end of this sequence of actors are the battery producers under contract with the global technology corporations, which can plausibly plead ignorance about the many abuses occurring at the far end of the chain.

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*The Tragedy of Madagascar:  
An Island Nation Confronts the  
Twenty-first Century*

BY NATHANIEL ADAMS. Chronos  
Books, 2022, 416 pp.

Adams's general introduction to a country that remains largely ignored by English-language scholars and journalists is welcome. The first half of the book covers the country's political history, with a focus on the decades-long conflicts between the three heavyweights of postcolonial Malagasy politics: Didier Ratsiraka (president from 1975 to 1993 and 1997 to 2002), Marc Ravaloma-

nana (president from 2002 to 2009), and Andry Rajoelina (president from 2009 to 2014 and currently in power since 2019). As Adams makes clear, electoral politics in the country have been dominated by intra-elite personal conflicts and successive governments have been self-serving and ineffective. The book improves once Adams turns his gaze to the country's long unaddressed economic and social problems. An excellent final chapter focuses on the southern half of the island, which faces a looming environmental disaster thanks to a combination of global warming and the central government's persistent neglect. 🌍

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April 1941

## “War by Radio”

JOHN B. WHITTON

*In 1941, John B. Whitton, a professor of politics at Princeton University, considered how radio was shaping the ongoing world war. Earlier, radio propaganda had mostly been the preserve of totalitarian states, he wrote. But during the war, all belligerents were making “radio propaganda integral parts of their war machines.” Today, disinformation about one’s enemy is spread through other media—namely, social networks—yet its potency persists.*

The miracle of radio has made it much easier than before to spread propaganda in enemy territory. The methods formerly used, such as dropping leaflets from airplanes or free balloons, were very limited in range and influence. Radio, however, penetrates the enemy frontier without difficulty—in fact, it circles the earth seven times in a single second. The Nazis early prohibited Germans from listening to foreign stations. The British did not; indeed, the British newspapers very obligingly noted the hours when the famous Lord Haw Haw [an English-language propagandist for the Nazis] could be heard. Lately in England, however, such listening has been discouraged as “unpatriotic.” Incidentally, each side announces over the radio the names of newly captured prisoners of war in order to encourage

people in the enemy territory to listen to its broadcasts. In the campaign against enemy morale, enemy civilians are told of the corruption of their leaders in peace and their inefficiency in war. Thus the BBC told the Germans: “And now, about Goebbels. . . . You know that modest way of his? This probably accounts for the fact that he has told you too little about his castle . . . on the Bergensee, the walls of which are decorated with marble, and also a country house . . . on the Langensee, and also a 50-room mansion in Berlin.”

Similar opulence was charged against Goering, Himmler, Ley and Ribbentrop, who, it was alleged, were making a rather broad interpretation of the Lebensraum slogan. The effort to sow doubt, confusion and dissension in enemy territory—what might be called dissolvent propaganda—is attempted by all the belligerents. 🌐



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