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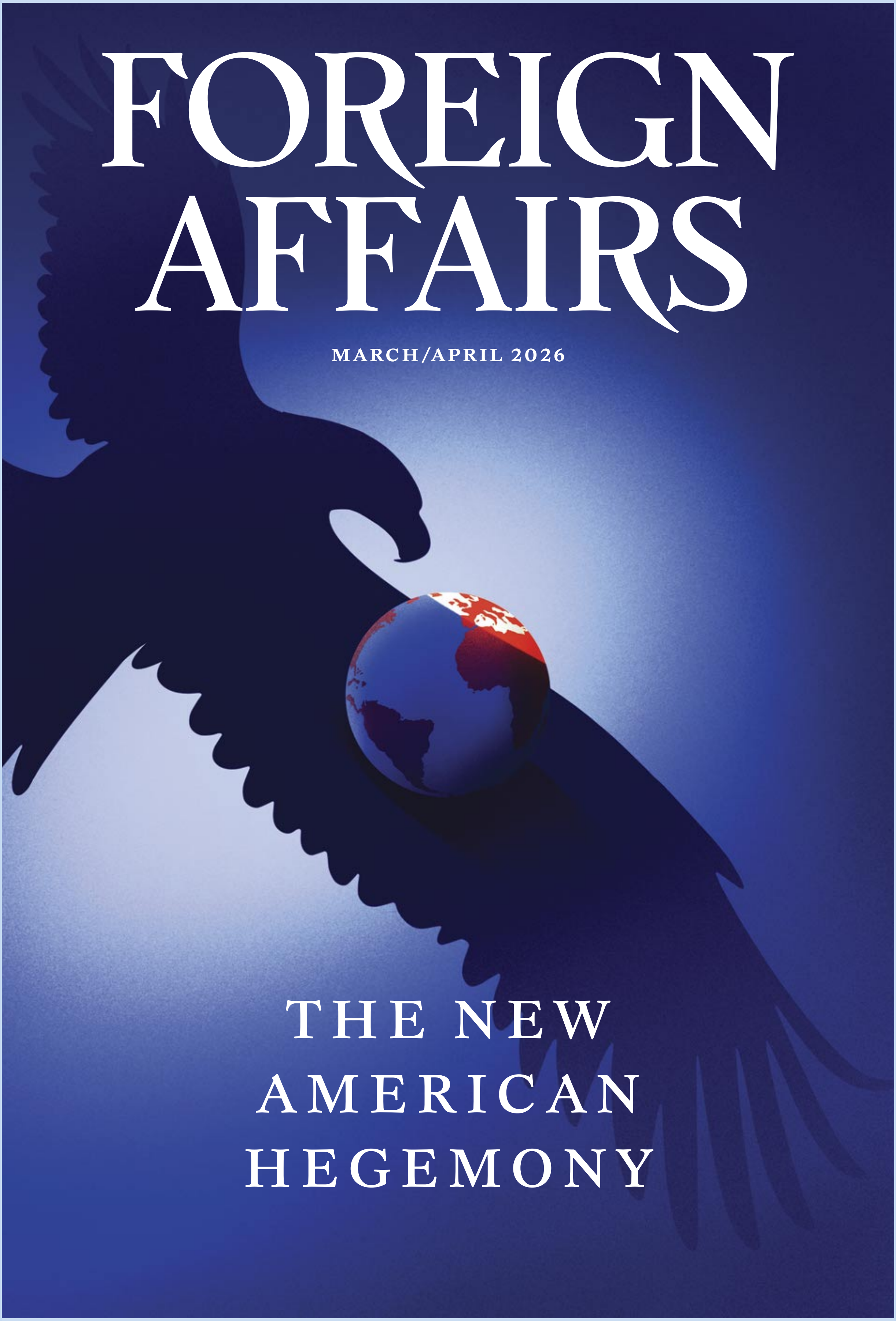

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Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2026 · VOLUME 105, NUMBER 2

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

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800-829-5539 U.S./Canada | 845-267-2017 All other countries | P.O. Box 324, Congers, NY 10920

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Foreign Affairs is a member of the Alliance for Audited Media and the Association of Magazine Media.
GST Number 127686483RT, Canada Post Customer #4015177 Publication #40035310

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The Predatory Hegemon

How Trump Wields American Power

STEPHEN M. WALT

Ever since Donald Trump first became U.S. president, in 2017, commentators have searched for an adequate label to describe his approach to U.S. foreign relations. Writing in these pages, the political scientist Barry Posen suggested in 2018 that Trump's grand strategy was "illiberal hegemony," and the analyst Oren Cass argued last fall that its defining essence was a demand for "reciprocity." Trump has been called a realist, a nationalist, an old-fashioned mercantilist, an imperialist, and an isolationist. Each of these terms captures some aspects of his approach, but the grand strategy of his second presidential term is perhaps best described as "predatory hegemony." Its central aim is to use Washington's privileged position to extract concessions, tribute, and displays of deference from both allies and adversaries, pursuing short-term gains in what it sees as a purely zero-sum world.

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Illustration by Adam Maida

Given the United States' still considerable assets and geographic advantages, predatory hegemony may work for a time. In the long run, however, it is doomed to fail. It is ill suited for a world of several competing great powers—especially one in which China is an economic and military peer—because multipolarity gives other states ways to reduce their dependence on the United States. If it continues to define American strategy in the coming years, predatory hegemony will weaken the United States and its allies alike, generate growing global resentment, create tempting opportunities for Washington's main rivals, and leave Americans less secure, less prosperous, and less influential.

APEX PREDATOR

Over the past 80 years, the broad structure of world power has gone from bipolarity to unipolarity to today's lopsided multipolarity, and U.S. grand strategy has shifted along with those changes. In the bipolar world of the Cold War, the United States acted as a benevolent hegemon toward its close allies in Europe and Asia because American leaders believed their allies' well-being was essential to containing the Soviet Union. They used American economic and military supremacy freely and sometimes played hardball with key partners, as President Dwight Eisenhower did when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt in 1956 or as President Richard Nixon did when he took the United States off the gold standard in 1971. But Washington also helped its allies recover economically after World War II; created and, for the most part, followed rules intended to foster mutual prosperity; collaborated with others to manage currency crises and other economic disruptions; and gave weaker states a seat at the table and a voice in collective decisions. U.S. officials led, but they also listened, and they rarely tried to weaken or exploit their partners.

During the unipolar era, the United States succumbed to hubris and became a rather careless and willful hegemon. Facing no powerful opponents and convinced that most states were eager to accept American leadership and embrace its liberal values, U.S. officials paid little attention to other states' concerns; embarked on costly and misguided crusades in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other countries; adopted confrontational policies that drove China and Russia together; and pushed to open global markets in ways that accelerated China's rise, increased global financial instability, and eventually provoked a domestic backlash that helped propel Trump to the White House. To be sure, Washington sought to isolate, punish, and undermine several hostile regimes during this period and sometimes paid scant attention to other states' security fears. But both Democratic and Republican officials believed that using American power to create a global liberal order would be good for the United States and for the world and that serious opposition would be confined to a handful of minor rogue states. They were not averse to using the power at their disposal to compel, co-opt, or even overthrow other governments, but their malevolence was directed at acknowledged adversaries and not toward U.S. partners.

Under Trump, however, the United States has become a predatory hegemon. This strategy is not a coherent, well-thought-out response to the return of multipolarity; in fact, it is exactly the wrong way to act in a world of several great powers. It is instead a direct reflection of Trump's transactional approach to all relationships and his belief that the United States has enormous and enduring leverage over nearly every country in the world. The United States is like "a big, beautiful department store," said Trump in April 2025, and "everybody wants a piece of that store." Or as he said in a statement shared by White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt, the American consumer is "what every country wants that we have," adding, "To put it another way, they need our money."

During Trump's first term, more experienced and knowledgeable advisers such as Defense Secretary James Mattis, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster kept Trump's predatory impulses in check. But in his second term, his desire to exploit other states' vulnerabilities has been given full rein, empowered by a cadre of appointees selected for their personal loyalty and by Trump's growing if misplaced confidence in his own grasp of world affairs.

DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION

A predatory hegemon is a dominant great power that tries to structure its transactions with others in a purely zero-sum fashion, so that the benefits are always distributed in its favor. A predatory hegemon's primary goal is not to build stable and mutually beneficial relations that leave all parties better off but to ensure that it gains more from every interaction than others do. An arrangement that leaves the hegemon better off and its partners worse off is preferable to an arrangement in which both sides gain but the partner gains more, even if the latter case yields larger absolute benefits for both parties. A predatory hegemon always wants the lion's share.

All great powers engage in acts of predation, of course, and they invariably compete for relative advantage. When dealing with rivals, all states try to get the better end of any deal. What distinguishes predatory hegemony from typical great-power behavior, however, is a state's willingness to extract concessions and asymmetric benefits from its allies and adversaries alike. A benign hegemon imposes unfair burdens on its allies only when necessary, because it believes that its security and wealth are enhanced when its partners prosper. It recognizes the value of rules and institutions that facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation, are perceived as legitimate by others, and are enduring enough that states can safely assume that those rules will not change too often or without warning. A benevolent hegemon welcomes positive-sum partnerships with states that have similar interests, such as keeping a common foe in check, and may even allow others to reap disproportionate gains if doing so would leave all participants better off. In other words, a benign hegemon strives not only to advance its own power position but also to provide what the economist Arnold Wolfers called "milieu goals": it seeks to shape the international environment in ways that make the naked exercise of power less necessary.

By contrast, a predatory hegemon is as likely to exploit its partners as it is to take advantage of a rival. It may use embargoes, financial sanctions, beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies, currency manipulation, and other instruments of economic pressure to force others to accept terms of trade that favor the hegemon's economy or to adjust their behavior on noneconomic issues of interest. It will link the provision of military protection to its economic demands and expects alliance partners to support its broader foreign policy initiatives. Weaker states will tolerate these coercive pressures if they are heavily dependent on access to the hegemon's larger market or if they face still greater threats from other states and must therefore depend on the hegemon's protection, even if it comes with strings attached.

Because a predatory hegemon's coercive power depends on keeping other states in a condition of permanent submission, its leaders will expect those within its orbit to acknowledge their subordinate status through repeated, often symbolic, acts of submission. They might be expected to pay a formal tribute or be called on to openly acknowledge and praise the hegemon's virtues. Such ritual expressions of deference

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discourage opposition by signaling that the hegemon is too powerful to resist and by portraying it as wiser than its vassals and therefore entitled to dictate to them.

Predatory hegemony is not a new phenomenon. It was the basis for Athens's relations with weaker city-states in its empire, a dominion that Pericles himself, the preeminent Athenian leader of his time, described as a "tyranny." The premodern, Sinocentric system in East Asia rested on similar relations of dependence, including the payment of tribute and ritualized subservience, although scholars disagree about whether it was consistently exploitative. The desire to extract wealth from colonial possessions was a central ingredient in the Belgian, British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonial empires, and similar motives influenced Nazi Germany's one-sided economic relations with its trading partners in central and eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's relations with its Warsaw Pact allies. Although these cases differ in important ways, in each one a dominant power sought to exploit its weaker partners to secure asymmetric benefits for itself, even if its efforts did not always succeed and if some clients cost more to acquire and defend than they provided in wealth or tribute.

In short, a predatory hegemon views all bilateral relations as inherently zero-sum and seeks to extract the greatest possible benefits from each one. "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is negotiable" is its guiding credo. Existing agreements have no intrinsic value or legitimacy and will be discarded or ignored if they do not yield sufficient asymmetric benefits. Some predatory efforts may fail, of course, and there are limits to what even the most powerful states can extract from others. For a predatory hegemon, however, the overriding objective is to push those limits as far as possible.

UPPING THE ANTE

The predatory nature of Trump's foreign policy is most evident in his obsession with trade deficits and his attempts to use tariffs to redistribute economic gains in Washington's favor. Trump has repeatedly said that trade deficits are a "rip-off" and a form of looting; in his view, countries that run surpluses are "winning" because the United States pays more to them than they pay to Washington. Accordingly, Trump has either imposed tariffs on those countries, ostensibly to protect U.S. manufacturers by making foreign goods more expensive (even though the cost of a tariff is mostly paid by Americans who purchase imported goods), or threatened such tariffs to force foreign governments and firms to invest in the United States in exchange for relief.

Trump has also used tariffs to force others to alter noneconomic policies that he opposes. Last July, he levied a 40 percent tariff on Brazil in a failed attempt to pressure its government into pardoning former President Jair Bolsonaro, a Trump ally. (In November, he lifted some of those tariffs, which had contributed to higher food prices for U.S. consumers.) He justified raising tariffs on Canada and Mexico by claiming that they were not doing enough to halt fentanyl smuggling. And in October, he threatened Colombia with higher tariffs after its president criticized the U.S. Navy's controversial strikes on more than two dozen boats in the Caribbean, which, according to the Trump administration, had been targeted for smuggling illegal drugs.

Predatory hegemony contains the seeds of its own destruction.

Trump is as likely to coerce traditional U.S. allies as acknowledged adversaries, and the on-again, off-again quality of his threats underscores his desire to extract as many concessions as possible. Trump believes unpredictability is a powerful bargaining tool, and his endlessly shifting set of threats and demands is intended to force others to keep searching for new ways to accommodate him. Threatening to impose a tariff costs Washington very little if the target caves quickly, but if the target stands firm or if markets are spooked, Trump can defer action. This approach also keeps attention riveted on Trump himself, helps the administration portray any subsequent agreement as a victory regardless of its precise terms, and creates obvious opportunities for corruption that benefit Trump and his inner circle.

To maximize U.S. leverage, Trump has repeatedly linked his economic demands to allied dependence on U.S. military support, largely by raising doubts about whether he would honor alliance commitments. He has insisted that allies should pay for American protection and suggested that the United States might leave NATO, refuse to help defend Taiwan, or abandon Ukraine completely. But his goal is not to make U.S. partnerships more effective by getting allies to do more to defend themselves—and, in fact, drastically increasing tariff levels will damage partners' economies and make it harder for them to meet higher defense spending targets. Instead, Trump is using the threat of U.S. disengagement to extract economic concessions. This strategy has paid some short-term dividends, at least on paper. In July, EU leaders accepted a one-sided trade deal in the hope of convincing Trump to keep backing Ukraine, and Japan and South Korea got their tariff levels lowered, in deals signed in July and November, respectively, by pledging to invest in the U.S. economy. Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, and Ukraine have all sought to solidify U.S. support by offering the United States access to or partial ownership of critical minerals located in their territory.

A predatory hegemon prefers a world where, in Thucydides's famous phrase, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." That is why such a country will be wary of norms, rules, or institutions that might limit its ability to take advantage of others. Not surprisingly, Trump has had little use for the United Nations; has been happy to tear up agreements negotiated by his predecessors, such as the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal; and has even reneged on agreements that he negotiated himself. He prefers to conduct trade talks bilaterally rather than deal with institutions such as the EU or the rules-based World Trade Organization because dealing one-on-one with individual countries further enhances U.S. leverage. Trump has also sanctioned top officials of the International Criminal Court and launched a furious assault on an emission pricing scheme developed by the International Maritime Organization. The IMO proposal sought to slow climate change by encouraging shipping companies to use cleaner fuels, but Trump denounced it as a "scam" and deliberately sabotaged it. After his administration threatened tariffs, sanctions, and other measures against those who supported the measure, the vote on its formal approval was postponed for a year. The U.S. delegation was "behaving like gangsters," one IMO delegate said in October. "I've never heard anything like it at an IMO meeting."

No discussion of Washington's predatory hegemony would be complete without mentioning Trump's expressed interest in territory that belongs to other states and his willingness to intervene in other countries' domestic politics in violation of international law. His repeated desire to annex Greenland, and his threats to impose punitive tariffs on European states that oppose this action, is the most visible example of this impulse. As Danish military intelligence warned in its annual threat assessment, released in December, "The United States uses economic power, including threats of high tariffs, to enforce its will, and no longer rules out the use of military force, even against allies." Trump's musings about making Canada the 51st state or reoccupying the Panama Canal zone suggest a similar degree of geopolitical avarice and opportunism. His decision to kidnap Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro—an act that sets a dangerous example for other great powers to follow—reveals a predator's disregard for existing norms and a willingness to exploit others' weaknesses. The predatory impulse even extends to matters of culture, with the administration's National Security Strategy declaring that Europe is facing "civilizational erasure" and that U.S. policy toward the continent should include "cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations." In other words, European states will be pressured to embrace the Trump administration's commitment to blood and soil nationalism and its hostility to nonwhite and non-Christian cultures or religions. To a predatory hegemon, no issue is off-limits.

Trump is also using the United States' privileged international position to obtain benefits for himself and his family. Qatar has already gifted him a plane, which will cost U.S. taxpayers several hundred million dollars to refurbish and may end up at his presidential library after he leaves office. The Trump Organization has signed multimillion-dollar hotel development deals with governments seeking to curry favor with the administration, and influential figures in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere have purchased billions of dollars of tokens issued by Trump's World Liberty Financial cryptocurrency operation—around the same time that the UAE secured special access to high-end chips that are normally subject to strict U.S. export controls. No president in American history has managed to monetize the presidency to anywhere near the same extent or with such obvious disregard for potential conflicts of interest.

Like a Mafia boss or an imperial potentate, Trump expects foreign leaders seeking his favor to engage in demeaning shows of deference and grotesque forms of flattery, much as members of his cabinet do. How else can one explain the cringeworthy behavior of NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who told Trump that he "deserves all the praise" for getting NATO members to increase their defense spending, even though such increases were well underway before Trump was reelected, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine was at least as important in spurring this shift? Rutte also declared, in March 2025, that Trump had "broken the deadlock" with Russia over Ukraine (which was manifestly not true); lauded U.S. airstrikes on Iran in June as something "no one else dared to do"; and likened Trump's peace efforts in the Middle East to the actions of a wise and benevolent "daddy."

Rutte is not alone: other world leaders—including in Israel, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Senegal—have publicly endorsed awarding Trump the Nobel Peace Prize, with the president of Senegal tossing in gratuitous praise for Trump's golf game. Not to be outdone, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung gifted Trump with an enormous gold crown during his recent visit to Seoul and capped off an official dinner by serving him a dish labeled "Peacemaker's Dessert." Even Gianni Infantino, the president of soccer's global governing body, has gotten into the act, creating a meaningless "FIFA Peace Prize" and naming Trump as its first recipient at a gaudy ceremony in December 2025.

> Trump cannot bully great powers the way he has bullied weaker states.

Demanding shows of fealty is not solely a product of Trump's apparently limitless need for attention and praise; it also serves to reinforce compliance and discourage even minor acts of resistance. Leaders who challenge Trump get a dressing down and threats of harsher treatment—as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has experienced on more than one occasion—while leaders who shamelessly flatter Trump get gentler handling, at least for the moment. In October 2025, for example, the U.S. Treasury extended a $20 billion currency swap line to bolster Argentina's peso, even though Argentina is not an important U.S. trading partner and was supplanting U.S. soybean exports to China (which had been worth billions of dollars before Trump launched his trade war). But because Argentine President Javier Milei is a like-minded leader who openly praises Trump as his role model, he got a handout instead of a list of demands. Even convicted drug traffickers, including former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, can win a presidential pardon if they appear to be aligned with Trump's agenda.

Efforts to curry favor by flattering Trump are akin to an arms race, as foreign leaders compete to see who can dish out the most praise in the least time. Trump is also quick to hit back at leaders who depart from the script. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi learned this when, weeks after he rejected Trump's claim to have halted border clashes between India and Pakistan, India was hit with a 25 percent tariff (later raised to 50 percent to punish India for purchasing Russian oil). After Ontario's provincial government broadcast a TV advertisement criticizing

Trump's tariff policy, Trump promptly raised the tariff rate on Canada by another ten percent. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney soon apologized, and the ad immediately vanished from the airwaves. To avoid such humiliations, many leaders have chosen to bend the knee preemptively—at least for now.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Trump and his supporters see these acts of deference as evidence that playing hardball brings the United States significant tangible benefits. As Anna Kelly, a White House spokesperson, put it in August, "The results speak for themselves: the president's trade deals are leveling the playing field for our farmers and workers, trillions of dollars in investment are flooding into our country, and decades-long wars are ending. . . . Foreign leaders are eager for a positive relationship with President Trump and to participate in the booming Trump economy." The administration appears to believe it can prey on other states forever, and that doing so will make the United States even stronger and further increase its leverage. They are mistaken: predatory hegemony contains the seeds of its own destruction.

The first problem is that the benefits touted by the administration have been exaggerated. Most of the wars Trump claims to have ended are still underway. New foreign investment in the United States falls well short of trillions of dollars and is unlikely to fully materialize. Apart from data centers fueled by the mania over artificial intelligence, the U.S. economy is not booming, partly because of the headwinds created by Trump's economic policies. Trump, his family, and his political allies may be benefiting from his predatory policies, but most of the country is not.

Another problem is that China's economy now rivals the United States' in many respects. China's GDP is smaller in nominal terms but larger in terms of purchasing power parity, its growth rate is higher, and it now imports nearly as much as the United States does. Its share of global goods exports has risen from less than one percent in 1950 to roughly 15 percent today, whereas the U.S. share has fallen from 16 percent in 1950 to just eight percent. China has a lock on the market for refined rare-earth elements on which many others, including the United States, depend; it is rapidly becoming a leading player in many scientific fields; and many other actors, including U.S. farmers, want access to its markets. As Trump's recent decisions to suspend the trade war with China and to shelve plans to sanction China's Ministry of State Security for a cyber-espionage campaign targeting U.S. officials have demonstrated, he cannot bully other great powers the way he has bullied weaker states.

Moreover, although other states still want access to the U.S. economy and its wealthy consumers, it is no longer the only game in town. Shortly after Trump raised the tariff rate on Indian goods to a draconian 50 percent, in August 2025, Modi flew to Beijing to participate in a summit meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. In December, Putin visited Modi in New Delhi, where the Indian prime minister described his country's friendship with Russia as "like the North Star" and the two leaders set a target of $100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030. India wasn't formally aligning with Moscow, but Modi was reminding the White House that New Delhi has options.

Because rearranging supply chains and trade arrangements is costly and time-consuming, and habits of cooperation and dependence do not vanish overnight, some countries have chosen to appease Trump in the short term. Japan and South Korea convinced Trump to lower tariff rates by agreeing to invest billions in the U.S. economy, but the pledged payments will be strung out over many years and may never be fully realized. In the meantime, Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean officials held their first trade negotiations in five years in March 2025, and the three countries are considering a trilateral currency swap intended to "bolster the region's financial safety net and deepen economic cooperation amid U.S. President Donald Trump's trade war," according to the *South China Morning Post*. Over the past year, Vietnam has expanded its military ties with Russia, reversing previous efforts to move closer to the United States. "The unpredictability of Trump's policies has made Vietnam very skeptical about dealing with the United States," according to one analyst quoted in *The New York Times*. "It's not only trade but the difficulty of reading his mind and actions." Trump's vaunted unpredictability has a clear downside: it encourages others to look for more reliable partners.

Other states are also working to reduce their dependence on the United States. Carney has repeatedly warned that the era of ever-closer cooperation with the United States is over, set a goal to double Canada's non-U.S. exports within a decade, signed his country's first-ever bilateral trade deal with Indonesia, is negotiating a free trade pact with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and made a fence-mending visit to Beijing in January. The European Union has already signed new trade deals with Indonesia, Mexico, and the South American trading bloc Mercosur, and as of late January was close to finalizing a new trade pact with India. If Washington keeps trying to take advantage of other states' dependence, such efforts will only accelerate.

BUY NOW, PAY NEVER?

U.S. allies tolerated a certain amount of bullying in the past because they were highly dependent on American protection. But such tolerance has limits. The level of predation practiced in Trump's first term was limited, and U.S. allies had reason to hope that his time in office would be an isolated episode that would not be repeated. That hope has now been shattered, especially in Europe. The administration's National Security Strategy, for example, is openly hostile to many European governments and institutions. Together with Trump's renewed threats to seize Greenland, it has raised additional doubts about NATO's long-term viability and shown that European leaders' efforts to win Trump over by accommodating him have failed.

Moreover, threats to withdraw American military protection will cease to be effective if they are never implemented, and they cannot be implemented without eliminating U.S. leverage entirely. If Trump keeps threatening to disengage but never actually does so, his bluff will be called and will lose its power to coerce. If the United States does withdraw its military commitments, however, the leverage it once had over its former allies would evaporate. Either way, using the promise of American protection to extract a never-ending series of concessions is not a sustainable strategy.

Neither is bullying. Nobody enjoys being forced to engage in demeaning acts of fealty. Leaders who share Trump's worldview may relish the opportunity to sing his praises in public, but others undoubtedly find the experience galling. We will never know what foreign leaders forced to kiss Trump's ring were thinking as they sat mouthing flowery platitudes, but some of them undoubtedly resented the experience and went away hoping for an opportunity to deliver a little payback in the future. Foreign leaders must also reckon with public reaction back home, and national pride can be a powerful force. It is worth remembering that Carney's electoral victory, in April 2025, owed much to his anti-Trump "elbows up" campaign and to voter perceptions that his Conservative Party rival was Trump lite. Other heads of state, such as Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, have seen their popularity soar when they defied Trump's threats. As humiliation builds, other world leaders may find that pushing back can make them more popular among their electorates.

Predatory hegemony is also inefficient. It eschews reliance on multilateral rules and norms and instead seeks to engage with other states on a bilateral basis. But in a world of nearly 200 countries, relying on bilateral negotiations is time-consuming and certain to produce hasty and poorly designed agreements. Moreover, imposing one-sided deals on dozens of other countries encourages shirking because they know it will be difficult for the hegemon to monitor compliance and enforce all the agreements it has reached. The Trump administration appears to have belatedly realized that China never purchased all the U.S. exports it agreed to buy in the Phase One trade deal it signed with the United States in 2020, during Trump's first term, and launched an investigation into the matter in October. Multiply the task of monitoring compliance across all of Washington's bilateral trade arrangements, and it's easy to see how other states can promise concessions now but renege on them later.

Finally, renouncing institutions, downplaying common values, and bullying weaker states will make it easier for U.S. rivals to rewrite the global rule book in ways that favor their interests. Under Xi, China has repeatedly tried to portray itself as a responsible and unselfish global power seeking to strengthen global institutions for the benefit of all mankind. The confrontational "wolf warrior" diplomacy of a few years ago, which saw Chinese officials routinely insult and bully other governments to no good purpose, is out. With rare exceptions, Chinese diplomats are now an increasingly energetic, active, and effective presence at international forums.

China's public declarations are obviously self-serving, but some countries see this posture as an appealing alternative to an increasingly predatory United States. In a survey of 24 major countries, published by the Pew Research Center last July, majorities in eight countries held a more favorable opinion of the United States than they did of China, whereas respondents from seven countries viewed China more favorably. The two powers were viewed similarly in the remaining nine. But the trends are in Beijing's favor. As the report notes, "Views of the U.S. have become more negative while views of China have turned more positive." It is not hard to see why.

The bottom line is that acting as a predatory hegemon will weaken the networks of power and influence on which the United States has long relied and which created the leverage that Trump is now trying to exploit. Some states will work to reduce their dependence on Washington, others will make new arrangements with its rivals, and more than a few will yearn for a moment when they have an opportunity to get back at the United States for its selfish behavior. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but a backlash could come with surprising swiftness. To quote Ernest Hemingway's famous line about the onset of bankruptcy, a consistent policy of predatory hegemony could cause U.S. global influence to decline "gradually and then suddenly."

A LOSING STRATEGY

Hard power is still the primary currency in world politics, but the purposes for which it is used and the ways it is wielded are what determine whether it is effective in advancing a state's interests. Blessed with favorable geography, a large and sophisticated economy, unmatched military power, and control over the world's reserve currency and critical financial nodes, the United States has been able to build an extraordinary array of connections and dependencies and gain considerable leverage over many other states during the past 75 years.

Because exploiting that leverage too openly would have undermined it, U.S. foreign policy was most successful when American leaders exercised the power at their disposal with restraint. They worked with like-minded countries to create mutually beneficial arrangements, understanding that others would be more likely to cooperate with the United States if they did not fear its appetite. No one doubted that Washington had a mailed fist. But by cloaking it in a velvet glove—treating weaker states with respect and not trying to squeeze every possible advantage out of others—the United States was able to convince the world's most consequential states that aligning with its foreign policy was preferable to partnering with its main rivals.

Predatory hegemony squanders these advantages in pursuit of short-term gains and ignores the long-term negative consequences. To be sure, the United States is not about to face a vast countervailing coalition or lose its independence—it is too strong and favorably positioned to suffer that fate. It will, however, become poorer, less secure, and less influential than it has been for most living Americans' lifetimes. Future U.S. leaders will operate from a weaker position and will face an uphill battle to restore Washington's reputation as a self-interested but fair-minded partner. Predatory hegemony is a losing strategy, and the sooner the Trump administration abandons it, the better.

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The Age of Kleptocracy

Geopolitical Power, Private Gain

ALEXANDER COOLEY AND DANIEL NEXON

Analysts have long struggled to characterize U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policy. Because Trump pointedly rejects liberal-internationalist sensibilities, many have associated him with some form of realism, understood as the pursuit of the national interest defined entirely in terms of power. During his first term, after his 2017 National Security Strategy invoked "great-power competition," the foreign policy community treated the phrase as the decoder ring by which they could rationalize his maneuvers. More recently, many have claimed that, to the contrary, Trump clearly favors a world in which great powers collude to carve up the world into spheres of influence. Throughout, the only constant interpretation has been that Trump has a

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Illustration by Ellie Foreman-Peck

"transactional" approach to international politics—the "art of the deal" as grand strategy.

But these assessments all rest on a category error. They begin from the premise that the Trump administration's primary goal is, as its 2025 National Security Strategy insists, to advance the United States' "core national interests." Indeed, U.S. debates about foreign policy, national security, and grand strategy take it for granted that leaders design policy to serve the public good—even if those leaders' view of the public interest is flawed—rather than to enrich themselves or inflate their personal glory. This is why so many foreign policy analyses argue that the "United States" or "Washington" ought to adopt a particular policy. They assume that the United States has interests that transcend party and that officials occupy their positions as a public trust.

Trump wants to disable the government's foreign policy apparatus.

The Trump administration, however, has destroyed this premise. Especially in his second term, Trump has instead wielded U.S. foreign policy principally to increase his own wealth, bolster his status, and personally benefit a small circle of his family members, friends, and loyalists. U.S. foreign policy is now largely subordinate to the private interests of the president and his retainers. These interests may, from time to time, align with some plausible understanding of the public good. Much more often, however, the Trump administration invokes U.S. national interests to deflect from its self-dealing by eroding the distinction between its private interests and those of the American people.

Many news reports on how Trump's foreign dealmaking will line his supporters' pockets still treat such arrangements as side payments, not as the main purpose of his statecraft. But if the administration's foreign policy were not fundamentally kleptocratic, it would not be systematically attempting to subvert the independence of—or simply disable—the institutions that have long made U.S. foreign policy, including the National Security Council, the State Department, and the Defense Department. This de-institutionalization will almost surely undermine U.S. policymaking for at least a decade. It would not be relying on a practice that could be called "transactional bundling," which intentionally collapses conflict resolution, economic bargains, and arrangements that benefit Trump cronies into grandiose megadeals that are hard or impossible to scrutinize. And it would not have systematically dismantled decades of bipartisan efforts to combat international corruption.

It is tempting to view Trump's corrupt dealings as less important than his administration's embrace of far-right ideology. After all, the reactionary right does have a vision of the national interest, albeit a fascistic and destructive one. But under Trump, kleptocracy and ideology are inextricably intertwined. And that makes it more likely that kleptocratic governance—in both domestic and foreign policy—will endure even after he leaves office.

ROGUE WAVE

The political scientists Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein argue that Trumpism is part of a global "patrimonial wave," one that has also swept through countries such as Hungary, Israel, Russia, and Turkey. In all these countries—albeit with varying degrees of success—leaders have sought to rewire modern, bureaucratic, and often democratic states into extensions of their personal authority or that of their political parties. These "neopatrimonial" regimes retain the appearance of impartial procedures and the trappings of a professional bureaucracy. But their leaders appoint cronies to specialized policy positions, subvert the independence of the civil service, and repurpose the gears of administration to reward supporters and punish rivals.

In a neopatrimonial system, corruption can be a means to an end—a way to maintain loyalty, build coalitions, and consolidate power. But Trump's disposition is not merely patrimonial; it is kleptocratic. In kleptocracies, corruption is the end; the point of holding and keeping office is to enrich a ruler and his inner circle. Regulation, law enforcement, public procurement, and even diplomacy all become means of self-dealing—of extracting resources, controlling streams of income, and diverting wealth to family, friends, and allies.

American political history is replete with examples of corruption. But over time, the United States constructed robust protections against outright kleptocracy, especially at the national level, including independent courts and legislative oversight. The landmark 1883 Pendleton Act limited the spoils system by instituting a meritocratic civil service. Over time, additional reforms—such as strict rules for government procurement, financial disclosure requirements, and the creation of inspectors general—further reduced opportunities for graft.

The United States did not establish a modern, unified Foreign Service until 1924, when it required that applicants pass a comprehensive exam. Over time, this professionalized Foreign Service expanded its infrastructure for training officers in foreign languages and technical matters. As senior officials passed along their knowledge and expertise to junior ones, the United States accumulated unrivaled diplomatic capital.

The United States nonetheless remained an outlier among other consolidated democracies: American presidents routinely appointed wealthy political donors to ambassadorial posts and staffed more leadership positions with political appointees. Still, for decades before Trump's second term, Washington relied on a highly institutionalized foreign policy apparatus, in part to try to ensure that U.S. strategy abroad reflected national interests. Although the president enjoyed wide latitude to define those interests, he could not simply dictate them. Presidents exceeded the limits of their authority, of course, but both Republican and Democratic lawmakers considered it their duty to guard congressional prerogatives against the encroachments of an imperial presidency.

Foreign policy was developed by a variety of bureaucratic agencies, such as the State Department, the Defense Department, the CIA, and the National Nuclear Security Administration. All these agencies were staffed primarily by professional civil servants and military personnel. The agencies' output drew on the expertise of career officials who specialized in topics or specific countries or regions. Experts deliberated in a system coordinated by the National Security Council. Although it could be cumbersome, this arrangement had many benefits, such as maintaining the policy continuity across administrations that allowed the United States to credibly commit to long-term treaties. It also empowered nonpartisan civil servants to raise concerns about whether proposed deals serve the public good, ask questions about their feasibility or legality, or blow the whistle on unethical conduct.

Trump officials claim they want to root out a "deep state" intent on sabotaging the president's policy initiatives. But in truth, the administration wants more than a merely pliant staff. It wants to disable the government's foreign policy apparatus entirely. This fact was made most evident by the complete dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, which for decades oversaw and ran

Washington's foreign aid programs. But the effort has been broader. In 2025, within the State Department, over 1,350 career employees and foreign service officers were dismissed in the name of fighting bloat. The administration has shrunk the National Security Council even more aggressively. It gave Secretary of State Marco Rubio control of the institution rather than having it operate independently. In July, *Politico* reported that "fewer than 100 people" were working at the NSC, down from around 350 during President Joe Biden's tenure, and that the NSC was hosting far fewer interagency meetings. In late December, the State Department announced a mass recall of U.S. ambassadors, all of whom were career Foreign Service officers, falsely depicting this move as normal procedure.

PACKAGE BOMBS

Such maneuvers have made room for a foreign policy run by a handful of the president's friends and backers. Consider Trump's de facto top diplomat, Steve Witkoff. Most presidents tap a longtime foreign policy professional or high-level politician to serve as their chief envoy (usually, the secretary of state). Trump chose Witkoff, a New York real estate baron with no government or diplomatic experience. What he did have was years of personal friendship with Trump, and for this president, that was credential enough. Trump dispatched Witkoff to negotiate with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Hamas and Israel, and Russia and Ukraine—often by himself.

Trump's other main envoys are also personal connections. He often sends his son-in-law Jared Kushner on diplomatic trips. He appointed Massad Boulos, his daughter Tiffany's father-in-law, as senior adviser for Arab and African Affairs, senior adviser to the president on Arab and Middle Eastern Affairs, and senior adviser for Africa all at once, tasking him with brokering peace between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwandan-backed rebels. These envoys are given nebulous titles and mandates that do not trigger the kind of financial disclosure requirements typically demanded of senior officials—statements that reveal their personal investments, business interests, and potential conflicts of interest. Without such disclosures, it is difficult to know whether the December 2025 deal Boulos helped broker—involving a bilateral strategic partnership agreement between Washington and Kinshasa that grants U.S. firms preferential access to Congolese critical minerals—created conflicts of interest for him, Trump, or other administration insiders. Boulos said that the deal would not be "private or secretive in any way." But at the signing ceremony, Trump openly celebrated a potential windfall, promising that "everybody's going to make a lot of money."

Such deals more closely resemble interpersonal arrangements than binding agreements among sovereign states. They are often deliberately vague—some aspects are announced publicly while others are unveiled later or obscured altogether. They are also typically bundled transactions, wrapping a variety of demands, investments, business bargains, private side payments, and defense agreements into a single package.

Foreign policy, of course, has always been transactional: states make concessions in return for benefits, and previous U.S. presidents sought investment pledges and economic commitments alongside diplomatic agreements. But these arrangements were negotiated through established institutional channels with built-in legal oversight and a clear separation between the national interest and the negotiators' personal business affairs. In Trump's distinct method, the touting of enormous total dollar amounts overwhelms scrutiny of the specifics, as does the practice of rolling together different kinds of deals rather than disclosing them separately, making it much harder to know whether any one of them came about after a company offered a Trump insider a cut of the profits. Trump officials describe all the components as windfalls that will benefit the American worker, even as profits are channeled toward courtiers or firms that have backed the president. The resulting packages are designed not merely to enable corruption but to systematically obscure it.

The transactional bundles that the administration announced following Trump's May 2025 tour of the Middle East illustrate this pattern. The administration trumpeted a Saudi commitment to invest $600 billion in the U.S. economy, although the investments on the White House's fact sheet fell short of this figure and some initiatives began under Biden. By November, that investment total was ratcheted up to $1 trillion. Although large arms sales—such as the sale of F-35s, which Riyadh had long coveted and which Washington had previously blocked on national security grounds—are clearly part of the exchange, the bargain's full scope remains murky. The White House similarly heralded an arrangement with Qatar that aggregated a $96 billion order by Qatar Airways for Boeing aircraft (the largest order of wide-body Boeing planes in history), $42 billion in defense deals involving companies such as Raytheon and General Atomics, and a $38 billion modernization of the Qatari air base that hosts U.S. forces.

Bundled with these arrangements are deals that obviously benefit Trump and his family personally. Last May, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth revealed that Qatar had gifted a Boeing luxury jet to Trump, which will cost American taxpayers an estimated $1 billion to retrofit and which Trump intends to keep after he leaves office. The Trumps are part of brand-leasing agreements and a luxury golf resort connected to Qatari Diar, a real estate company backed by the country's sovereign wealth fund. Alongside Washington's official UAE deals, the Trump Organization has expanded its footprint in the sheikhdom through new real estate megaprojects; in April 2025, Trump's son Eric announced plans for an 80-story Trump Tower in Dubai.

Trump's deals not only enable corruption but systematically obscure it.

Witkoff's deals similarly appear to blend national and personal interests. He shepherded an agreement to lift U.S. restrictions on the export of high-end semiconductors to a technology firm chaired by Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE's national security adviser. U.S. officials had previously blocked such a sale, believing it would help China get its hands on the technology. At around the same time, MGX, an investment firm chaired by Tahnoon, bought $2 billion worth of stablecoin, a form of cryptocurrency, from World Liberty Financial, whose co-founders include Witkoff, his two sons, Trump, and Trump's three sons. (The White House said that Witkoff did not directly participate in brokering the chips deal. "Steve Witkoff has never used his government position to benefit World Liberty Financial," the company said in a statement.) This arrangement formed part of a three-way deal in which MGX invested the stablecoin in Binance, a cryptocurrency firm whose founder, Changpeng Zhao, was serving a prison sentence in the United States for violating U.S. anti-money-laundering regulations.

Trump's approach even turns conflict resolution into an opportunity for rent extraction. Extensive reporting in *The Wall Street Journal* strongly suggests that both Witkoff and Kushner—who have helped lead negotiations over the war in Ukraine—are interested in the business opportunities that could emerge from a grand U.S. bargain with Russia, such as accessing $300 billion in frozen Russian central bank assets for joint U.S.-Russian projects in space exploration, arctic mineral deals, and energy development.

Even if neither Kushner nor Witkoff is intentionally mixing his personal business with negotiations that could permanently alter the foundations of U.S. and European security, the fact that they are leading such negotiations creates a permissive environment for political allies to profit. The businessman Ronald Lauder, a personal friend of Trump, has pushed the U.S. president to acquire the Danish territory of Greenland and, during Trump's first term, offered to serve as a "secret envoy" to Denmark, according to *The New Yorker*. In December, the Danish newspaper *Politiken* reported that Lauder has invested in a Greenlandic mineral water company co-owned by a local official. (Lauder did not reply to a request for comment the newspaper sent him via associates.) And in January, Ukraine awarded the mining rights to one of its largest lithium deposits to a consortium that includes Lauder. "By cultivating ties with investors connected to [Trump] and his administration, Kyiv is positioning itself favorably with the American leader just as it seeks its backing in peace talks with Russia," *The New York Times* noted in a report about the deal. (Lauder did not respond to the *Times*' request for comment.)

CONTROLLED DEMOLITION

Those whose support for the Trump administration outweighs their distaste for public corruption find ways to excuse its attacks on the rule of law. They spin fables about a heroic disrupter, a crusader rooting out the corruption of the deep state and its freeloading civil servants. Trump's own rhetoric also numbs the public: in his business affairs as well as his political life, Trump himself has long equated complying with rules as "getting ripped off," reframing self-dealing and tax evasion as savvy bargaining.

But the Trump team's kleptocratic approach to foreign policy has in fact unraveled Washington's critical, albeit incomplete, efforts to counter the metastasizing problem of global corruption. Over the last three decades, policies designed to spur growth by facilitating capital mobility have enabled kleptocrats and oligarchs to launder money and park it offshore. That wealth then became a vector for malign foreign influence in the public policy and electoral politics of consolidated democracies. Substantial reporting suggests that Russian money contributed to the success of the 2016 Brexit referendum, whose outcome undermined the United Kingdom's prosperity. In 2022, the U.S. Justice Department indicted the Russian oligarch Andrey Muraviev for illegally funneling $1 million through U.S. proxies to influence the 2018 midterm elections.

Such challenges demanded the creation of tools such as the 2012 Magnitsky Act, which authorized asset freezes and travel bans on foreign officials credibly accused of large-scale corruption. During Trump's own first term, Washington made countering corruption a key part of its criticism of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Despite opposition from Trump, Congress kept up its anticorruption efforts by passing the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (which bolstered Washington's ability to target and sanction corrupt officials in Iran, North Korea, and Russia) with a veto-proof majority. The 2020 Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act imposed sanctions on entities involved in human rights abuses and permitted freezing the assets of sanctioned Chinese officials. The 2021 Corporate Transparency Act required anonymous shell companies to identify their beneficial owners.

The Biden administration made it a national security priority to combat the "strategic corruption" pursued by China and Russia, using a phrase coined in these pages in 2020 by the former George W. Bush administration officials Eric Edelman, Philip Zelikow, and their co-authors. It backed alternative initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, which emphasized standardized procurement procedures and sought to avoid the debt-trap dynamics of Chinese infrastructure lending. In March 2022, shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. Department of Justice formed an interagency "KleptoCapture" task force to find and seize the U.S.-based assets of Russian oligarchs; the U.S. government also coordinated global efforts to freeze their international assets.

In his second term, however, Trump has decisively reversed this trajectory. In February 2025, the administration stopped enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the United States' signature antibribery law. Although the administration claimed that problematic implementation of the act had harmed "American economic competitiveness," the move freed U.S. companies to engage in bribery abroad without fear of federal prosecution. Then in March, Trump's Treasury Department hollowed out the Corporate Transparency Act by suspending its enforcement for U.S. businesses.

The White House also gutted oversight of cryptocurrency, an industry that reaps significant profits from facilitating money laundering. In February 2025, the Securities and Exchange Commission dropped or settled many of its ongoing actions against cryptocurrency entities. Then, in April, the administration disbanded the Department of Justice's National Cryptocurrency Enforcement Team and ordered its Market Integrity and Major Frauds Unit to cease investigating the sector.

Trump has used his pardon power to dismantle U.S. anticorruption norms even more brazenly. Recipients include people directly involved in activities that the administration hypes as existential threats to the U.S. public, such as drug trafficking. Ross Ulbricht, the operator of Silk Road, the dark web marketplace that served as a hub for the sale of illegal drugs, and former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who had been convicted for large-scale drug smuggling into the United States, were both granted pardons. Last October, Trump pardoned Zhao, the Binance founder; when Zhao pleaded guilty in 2023, the Department of Justice released a statement by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen that Binance had "allowed money to flow to terrorists, cybercriminals, and child abusers through its platform."

BROTHERHOOD OF THIEVES

One of the best reasons to staff bureaucracies with professionals—and to choose knowledgeable people to hammer out peace agreements—is to ensure precise language with actionable implications and to build the kind of intergovernmental infrastructure that is necessary for successful implementation. Rushed and vague agreements tend to fail. Indeed, the June 2025 cease-fire agreement in Congo that left Trump gloating did not halt advances by the M23 rebel forces, which continued to seize key Congolese cities. In October, Trump was eager to take credit for the "peace accord" inked by Cambodia and Thailand. But this agreement was merely a joint declaration that left important border demarcation issues unresolved and monitoring mechanisms underspecified; unsurprisingly, a few weeks later, cross-border clashes resumed.

The Trump administration's bundled transactions resemble the arrangements China has pursued with countries all over the world—deals that Trump aggressively criticized during his first term. These combine government investments with private deals for Chinese companies. And often, the bundles are less publicly supplemented with further side deals for Chinese elites and their local political clients—as when Beijing agreed to inflate the cost of its infrastructure projects in Malaysia in order to funnel money to the country's corrupt and collapsing sovereign wealth fund.

But despite its significant contributions to global corruption, China has not turned its back on the rules-based international order altogether. Beijing continues to closely engage with both older multilateral institutions and its own burgeoning alternative ecosystem of organizations. China also continues to place some value in technocratic governance and expert oversight, investing substantial resources into higher education and research and development—a stance that made it the leader of the world's clean energy transition.

Corruption abroad feeds corruption at home.

The Trump administration, by contrast, is actively trying to undermine any sense of order at all with its extrajudicial killings in international waters and its tariff regimes' flouting of U.S. treaty obligations. It is doing its best to sabotage many of the advantages—including a rock-solid alliance network, an effective and respected foreign assistance program, and an association with good governance—that it once expected to help it prevail in a rivalry with China. If the kleptocratic instincts Trump and his circle act on were the only problem, then his exit from the stage in early 2029 might be a source of comfort. But the de-institutionalization of U.S. foreign policy will likely undermine U.S. policymaking for at least a decade.

Kleptocracy's fusion with far-right extremism will also make corruption more enduring. This union, in the United States, now transcends a mere alliance between Trump and right-wing provocateurs. Those most likely to pick up Trump's torch—people such as Vice President JD Vance and Homeland Security Adviser Stephen Miller—do have a vision of the national interest, an ethnonationalist one premised on the restoration of "traditional" race, class, and gender hierarchies. They are also committed to entrenching oligarchic concentrations of wealth and expropriating rents from purportedly inferior countries.

The partnership between kleptocratic foreign policy and right-wing extremism is no surprise. Most people dislike political corruption, so kleptocrats need scapegoats to justify stealing from the public. Ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities serve as convenient others to blame. True reactionary ideologues, for their part, are generally happy to serve as a kleptocrat's political "shock troops" in exchange for a powerful ally in their war against their true enemies: liberals, moderates, and pluralistic democracy. Because they are fundamentally utopians, right-wing extremists tend not to worry about shredding institutions and political arrangements.

All this makes it easier for kleptocrats abroad to prey on the United States, a phenomenon that is unlikely to stop when Trump leaves the White House. Already, the transformation of U.S. foreign policy into an instrument of corruption is creating a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle. Instead of trying to curtail foreign corruption, Washington is encouraging it. In turn, corruption abroad feeds corruption at home.

This is why the countries of the European Union, along with other key members of the post–World War II U.S. alliance system, need to treat the Trump regime as a grave and immediate danger to their own political systems. They need to move much faster to fix the gaps in their own regulatory systems that facilitate international corruption. They need to stop using offshore wealth from oligarchs, kleptocrats, and rentier regimes to subsidize their own underinvestment. Rule-of-law democracies cannot afford to back down in the face of U.S. threats of retaliation. The Trump administration clearly prefers other neopatrimonial regimes to European democracies, and figures such as Vance are moving to boost European right-wing parties that enjoy the support of kleptocratic wealth.

Given that Congress is unlikely to use its powers to end these practices, the damage to the security and prosperity of the American public will continue to accelerate. But there is one thing foreign policy observers can do: stop obfuscating the reality of Trump's foreign policy by calling it realism, great-power competition, or mere transactionalism. Trump's foreign policy constitutes an existential threat not only to the possibility that a constitutional republic can be rebuilt in the United States but also to the survival of democracies abroad. Each effort to normalize Trump's foreign policy, each assessment of its "grand strategy" that sidelines its explicit and implicit logic, only exacerbates the danger.

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The Globalist Delusion

Why America Must Build a New Operating System

NADIA SCHADLOW

Power shifts are never easy. A major one is now underway, not between rival states, but between competing approaches to international order. Call it a clash of two operating systems. One view holds that the most pressing issues of the day can be addressed only through a framework of global and supranational institutions and multilateral rules. The other insists that the nation-state remains the foundation of legitimate authority and effective action, and that outcomes ultimately depend on the decisions, capacities, and accountability of individual states.

For much of the post–Cold War era, what one can call a "global first" approach dominated international thinking. Governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental actors shared the assumption that challenges to do with security, economic disruption, migration, pandemics, and climate change required global

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Illustration by Rob Dobi

solutions. The collapse of the Soviet Union and China's accession to the World Trade Organization accelerated economic globalization, reinforcing the belief among leaders in the United States and elsewhere that global institutions were best suited to manage complexity and preserve peace. For decades, these institutions (and the governments and the phalanx of nongovernmental organizations that supported them) advanced a common creed: that only global bodies could tackle the defining problems of the age.

Devotion to global process replaced attention to outcomes.

Yet the results of this global-first model have been uneven at best. Despite decades of negotiations, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, and no major economy is on track to meet the targets set by the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change. Record numbers of people have been displaced, migration has destabilized domestic politics in many countries, and armed conflicts are more numerous and protracted than at any point since the end of the Cold War. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed failures in global health governance, while progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals has fallen dramatically short of ambitions.

At the same time, China rose rapidly within this global order, accumulating economic, technological, and military power while selectively exploiting international rules and arrangements. Today, China is mounting the most serious strategic challenge the United States has faced since the end of the Cold War, discrediting the notion that deeper integration and multilateral engagement would produce a more cooperative and stable international system.

Instead of assessing why decades of global efforts have failed, many leaders dig in their heels. The current UN secretary-general, António Guterres, frequently laments that multilateralism is "under fire," warning that there is no path forward except through "collective, common-sense action for the common good." What this view leaves largely unexamined is the possibility that the fault lies in the limitations of the global-first approach itself.

In the 2010s, long-simmering doubts about the post–Cold War global order rose to the surface. The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in 2016, as well as mounting impatience in Europe and elsewhere with supranational institutions, had already begun to erode many of the assumptions that shaped the policies of Western governments after 1991. U.S. President Donald Trump accelerated this shift when he assumed office in 2017, but he did not start it.

In his second term, Trump argued in his September 2025 address to the United Nations that despite the organization's "tremendous, tremendous potential," it was not "coming close to living up to that potential." The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy states that "the world's fundamental political unit is and will remain the nation-state." Trump's withdrawal from dozens of international organizations, his call in January for a "Board of Peace" that would bypass the UN Security Council, his cuts to international aid, and his challenges to trade and immigration orthodoxies have been widely denounced, but the president's actions reflect a broader rejection of global-first pieties. His clear priority, in places such as Iran and Venezuela, is to act on the basis of national interest and collective defense without first deferring to global bodies.

Beneath Trump's theatrics, however, lies a coherent claim: only states generate problems (their industries pollute), experience those problems (their citizens suffer), and hold the means to address problems (through revenues, infrastructure, and services). Only states acting to advance their own interests—whatever the implications for so-called international order and norms—can solve problems that global institutions and processes have so far failed to fix.

The global frame functions much like the passive voice in English: it conveniently detaches agency from problems and obscures true causes. It also produces elaborate organizational processes that impede real progress. Even advocates of global approaches acknowledge that international negotiations often entangle officials in dense webs of meetings, procedures, and rules. These layers of complexity slow action or prevent it altogether.

Disagreements over these competing operational approaches matter. They are straining alliances, complicating partnerships, and fueling accusations of isolationism, while leaving many of the world's most vulnerable populations no better off. By challenging failing global frameworks, a state-centric approach could produce truly positive change—and place states back at the center of practical action.

THE GROWTH OF THE GLOBAL

The United States both shaped and was shaped by the rise of the global order in the twentieth century. The horrors of World War I, in which industrialized warfare killed an estimated 20 million people, severely undermined faith in the nation-state as the foundation of international order. The League of Nations emerged just afterward as the first major supranational experiment in collective security. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson described the league as a "community of power," arguing that states must yield freedom of action to a common council to preserve peace. The novelist H. G. Wells went further, arguing that "there can be no great alleviation of the evils that now blacken and threaten to ruin human life altogether, unless all the civilized and peace-seeking peoples of the world are pledged and locked together under a common law and a common world policy."

But the league failed to prevent the chaos of World War II, and it is doubtful that it would have succeeded even had the United States joined. After that war, countries again sought to build a more durable peace. The United States emerged as the principal architect of the post-1945 international system, using its unmatched economic and military power to forge new global institutions. It led the creation of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which governed global trade for nearly five decades before the creation of the World Trade Organization.

Over time, member states ceded elements of their sovereignty—authorizing the UN Security Council to define threats to peace, empowering the WTO to adjudicate trade disputes and authorize retaliatory tariffs, and allowing the IMF to lend large sums to states with balance-of-payment problems—in exchange for the promise of a more stable world. State power would be constrained not only by domestic constitutions but also by international law and the rules of international institutions.

In Europe, where nationalism had fueled some of the twentieth century's most devastating conflicts, pressure grew to find alternatives to the power of the nation-state. The European Economic Community, founded in 1957 and later broadened into the European Union, rested on the belief that economic interdependence could tame conflict. By deepening integration and limiting national

sovereignty, European leaders argued, war could be made not only undesirable but implausible.

Over time, transnational and supranational efforts to move beyond the nation-state gained ground, and international institutions steadily widened their authority. The UN now encompasses dozens of funds, programs, and specialized agencies. The IMF evolved from a narrow focus on balance-of-payments support into a far broader role in macroeconomic surveillance, crisis lending, and structural reform, while the WTO grew into an expansive regime governing services, intellectual property, and dispute settlement. At the same time, many of these bodies became less accountable to states. Donor states are often frustrated that UN development agencies consider themselves to be autonomous from the governments that fund them, even when those governments ask for audits of how their money is spent. Member states exercise tenuous control over the World Bank. As staff, budgets, and mandates expanded, these institutions increasingly evolved from instruments of states into bodies with their own agendas.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War contributed to the widespread belief that a new international community was emerging and that the ascendancy of the United States as the sole superpower would usher in a system of collective security and an ever-growing democratic zone of peace. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, U.S. President George H. W. Bush hailed the arrival of a new era. Later, after the United Nations condemned Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he observed that countries could now "seize the opportunity to fulfill the long-held promise of a new world order, where brutality will go unrewarded and aggression will meet collective resistance."

China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 rested on a similar set of assumptions. U.S. and European policymakers believed that integrating China into global markets and institutions would encourage the country's economic liberalization, expose Beijing to international rules and norms, and gradually temper its strategic ambitions. As China grew wealthier and more embedded in the global economy, many expected it to become a responsible stakeholder in the liberal international order. That did not happen; China instead used its access to the world economy to grow rich and threaten that order.

This global mindset was also reinforced by the rise of multinational corporations, increasingly treated as global actors. Although formally subject to national laws, their scale and reach often allow them to shape state behavior. Technology firms influence regulatory outcomes on taxation, privacy, and market access; energy companies negotiate directly with governments over investment, sanctions, and climate policy; and financial firms, whose assets often exceed the GDP of many countries, exert influence through capital allocation and engagement with regulators and central banks.

All the while, global groupthink deepened. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan popularized the idea of "problems without passports," arguing that many challenges were too diffuse for individual states to address alone. The UN's 2000 Millennium Declaration framed hunger, poverty, conflict, and social injustice, for example, as global problems, a vision embodied in its 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. Although the UN now concedes that many targets will not be met, it largely avoids questioning whether its original ambitions were realistic. Most recently, the organization has promoted global approaches to managing the risks of artificial intelligence.

A global mindset seized much of civil society and the commentariat. By the 1970s, an informal global governance movement had emerged alongside formal institutions, arguing that interdependence required stronger multilateral cooperation or "common management," the phrase employed by the Trilateral Commission, one of the transnational bodies established in that era. By the 1990s, such ideas had hardened into dogma. Influential commentators such as Thomas Friedman hailed globalization as the dominant force shaping domestic politics and foreign relations, and thousands of nongovernmental organizations became formally linked to the UN, embedding nonstate actors into global institutions.

The global frame has found its way into many U.S. and European initiatives. The Biden administration's Build Back Better World initiative was rooted in "a unified vision for global infrastructure development." The European Union's Global Gateway project aims to tackle the "most pressing global challenges," including climate change, pandemics, and the security of global supply chains. A powerful global architecture came to define the post–Cold War order. Yet this order turned out to be as fragile as it was ambitious.

THE LIMITS OF THE GLOBAL

More than 75 years since the post–World War II push toward global approaches, the optimism that animated support for these institutions has given way to a more sobering reality. The architecture of global governance expanded, but that governance did not become more effective. The global order was supposed to generate collective strength: countries, working together, could do more and make resources go further. In practice, however, it created layers of bureaucracy that siphoned resources away from addressing the problems at hand. Devotion to process replaced attention to outcomes.

Tackling climate change has been approached primarily through global, multilateral frameworks for more than three decades under the auspices of the UN. Despite the constant warnings about the existential threat of climate change, global emissions of carbon dioxide had reached their highest level on record in 2025. All G-20 countries are off track to meet the 2015 Paris accords' goal of limiting global warming to below two degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The global approach to reducing carbon emissions is clearly not working.

In the realm of human rights, multilateral responses have too often proved ineffective or counterproductive. The willingness of international institutions, particularly the UN, to treat authoritarian regimes as legitimate participants has insulated these countries from reproach and censure. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in the UN Human Rights Council, which has been regularly co-opted by some of the world's worst human rights violators. While the council issues resolutions and hosts dialogues, Iran kills and imprisons civilians with impunity and China subjects Uyghur Muslims to a harsh regime of arbitrary detention and surveillance. Multilateral human rights mechanisms have often shielded perpetrators rather than constrained them.

In development, increasingly ambitious yet abstract agendas advanced by international institutions often overlook the socioeconomic conditions that determine whether aid truly works. Despite wide variation in state capacity and local circumstances, initiatives such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals rest on the premise that "all countries and all stakeholders" can deliver any number of outcomes, from ending the AIDS epidemic to eradicating extreme poverty by 2030. Yet hundreds of millions of people still lack reliable access to electricity, food insecurity has worsened, and water stress continues to intensify across many regions. While the United Nations highlights the global decline in poverty between 1990 and 2015, it also concedes that a substantial share of the world's population will remain poor well beyond 2030. Similarly, the World Bank acknowledges that progress on poverty reduction has stalled and that, at current rates, lifting everybody above even a modest threshold of roughly six dollars per day would take more than a century. It is unclear how recommitting to those same global processes, such as additional summits and greater international coordination, would produce better outcomes.

After the Cold War, it was widely assumed that free trade would alleviate global poverty. Liberal commerce would lift all boats, and a supranational rule setter, the WTO, would ensure an ever-rising tide. In practice, however, the WTO struggled to make trade genuinely free. Persistent distortions, such as China's subsidies and unfair trade practices and the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (which shields European producers through subsidies and price supports), highlight the WTO's inability to curb entrenched protectionism. These weaknesses are compounded by the WTO's failure to clearly distinguish between state-owned and private firms, a flaw most evident in cases involving China, in which the line between state and market is blurred.

> The remedy for the shortcomings of global institutions is the nation-state.

Migration has become a central flash point in the clash between global and national approaches. Migrants increasingly try to enter countries as asylum seekers even when their motivations are largely economic. This dynamic has strained asylum systems and roiled the politics of many receiving countries. Yet rather than confronting whether the system is working as intended, its defenders call for increased funding for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, reinforcing a model that expands humanitarian administration without resolving the underlying drivers of displacement.

In the realm of nonproliferation and direct threats to the United States and its allies, global approaches have repeatedly fallen short. For decades, the UN, other multilateral bodies, and ad hoc coalitions relied on diplomacy, inspections, and economic pressure to constrain the nuclear ambitions of states such as Iran and North Korea. In both cases, agreements and UN resolutions slowed aspects of these programs at times but failed to halt their underlying momentum.

In Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action temporarily constrained elements of the country's nuclear program without dismantling its enrichment capabilities or the infrastructure needed to resume progress. In North Korea, successive agreements, talks, and sanctions failed to prevent Pyongyang from advancing its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, allowing it to cross the nuclear threshold. In both cases, regimes used negotiations to buy time, relief, or legitimacy while continuing to expand their capabilities. Meaningful disruption of Iran's nuclear trajectory occurred only through direct U.S. and Israeli military action—measures that invariably drew international condemnation—while the absence of comparable enforcement against North Korea allowed Pyongyang to emerge as a de facto nuclear-armed state. Together, these cases suggest that insisting on multilateral consensus and global approval has not prevented proliferation and has often enabled it by prioritizing process over outcomes.

Across these and other areas, many leaders confronted with today's cascading crises come to the same diagnosis: too little global cooperation. Instead of considering alternative approaches, supporters of the global frame insist that the clear remedy is to reinforce existing institutions by affording them more authority, funding, and effort.

In economic policy, a 2023 IMF report warned that geoeconomic fragmentation undermines shared goals and argued that restoring trust requires a "robust global financial safety net with a well-resourced IMF at its center." This logic, however, conflates coordination with institutional centralization, overlooking the limits of centralized authority. The same reflex appears in security, often at the expense of U.S. interests. As conflicts have multiplied, calls to revitalize collective security have focused on strengthening the UN Security Council, despite decades of paralysis caused by the politicized use of the veto and great-power rivalry. From Syria to Ukraine to Gaza, UN deadlock has neither deterred aggression nor protected U.S. allies, forcing Washington to rely on ad hoc coalitions and unilateral action. Global security mechanisms frequently fail to safeguard American interests, but many policymakers argue that they simply need to be empowered further.

A similar pattern characterizes climate policy. Missed targets have prompted demands for more ambitious pledges and financing instead of serious reassessment of whether consensus-driven frameworks can deliver results amid divergent national priorities. The pattern repeats in global health, where failures exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic led to demands for a stronger World Health Organization when scrutiny of the performance of centralized global processes in major crises was more warranted.

These cases point to a broader tendency: when global frameworks underperform, their advocates refuse to change course. Yet cooperation has often advanced more effectively through regional arrangements, bilateral agreements, and policies aligned with the capacities of particular states. The question is not whether cooperation is necessary—of course, it is—but whether reinforcing the same global approaches again and again protects vital interests or merely mistakes process for progress.

SOLID STATE

A new operating system is worth a try. The remedy for the shortcomings of global institutions is not greater deference to them but a return to square one: the nation-state. A state-anchored approach recognizes that it is states, not global institutions, that are directly accountable to citizens. In democracies, governments face political consequences when they fail, a chain of accountability weakened when authority is delegated to international organizations. States also possess the capabilities to solve problems. Although global bodies can convene debates and issue resolutions, the power to fund, regulate, and fight resides with sovereign governments. A state-first approach thus strengthens both accountability and effectiveness.

Effective cooperation is best pursued through coalitions of the willing, not through frameworks that diffuse authority across multilateral forums with divergent interests. Collective action works when participating states agree on means and ends. Insisting that decision-making include actors with conflicting objectives often produces paralysis, not progress. A state-based approach accepts that cooperation cannot be presumed, especially with rivals or adversaries, and that broad, consensus-driven arrangements are unlikely to deliver meaningful outcomes. Instead, it prioritizes practical collaboration among allies and partners through intelligence sharing, coordinated policy, and shared capacity, grounded in real power, compatible political systems, and aligned national interests.

A state-anchored approach also acknowledges that time is a decisive dimension of success in any policy domain. When countries become trapped in prolonged multilateral negotiations, time becomes a liability, delaying action while problems compound. Global processes move slowly, if at all. States offer a better chance of acting with speed and flexibility and of delivering results.

The actions of states could be more effective than those of global bodies in various areas. Consider climate policy. A state-anchored approach could better align climate objectives with the realities of countries' needs for energy security, growth, and technological development. Emerging energy options such as geothermal and nuclear fission and fusion will mature only when national governments provide the regulatory frameworks, financing, infrastructure, and policy commitments to support their advancement. The economic historian Daniel Yergin has written in these pages that the energy transition will unfold differently in different parts of the world, at different rates, with varied mixes of fuels and technologies, shaped by governments establishing their own paths. In practice, a state-anchored approach to climate change recognizes where responsibility, authority, and capacity truly reside.

Global planning produces grand targets without mechanisms for delivery.

In a similar vein, states should forge an international trading regime through their actions, not their submission to multilateral bodies. In a world of divergent economic systems, bilateral and regional trade agreements offer a more practical approach to trade governance and strategic interests than do institutions such as the WTO. Unlike multilateral frameworks that require consensus among dozens of countries, often with incompatible economic models, these agreements allow similar states to negotiate rules that are more likely to be implemented and enforced. Trade agreements among institutionally compatible partners will work better than universal regimes that attempt to impose common rules across fundamentally different systems. In an increasingly fragmented global economy, this model offers a realistic path forward: trade integration among willing, capable, and trustworthy partners instead of lowest-common-denominator rules that fail to discipline the most distortive practices.

In global health, one of Washington's most successful initiatives was the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, launched in 2003. Designed and driven by the United States, the state-centric program made hundreds of investments that resulted in major reductions in mortality and infection rates related to HIV/AIDS, especially in Africa. Its success demonstrated the effectiveness of targeted, data-driven assistance anchored in national leadership and accountability. Years later, the Obama administration implicitly recognized this reality with its Global Health Security Agenda, which emphasized concrete state commitments to strengthen national public health capacities, not new global rules. Its premise was that only strong and capable state institutions could handle pandemics. That initiative functioned as a corrective to WHO-led frameworks that had set obligations without producing sustained national improvements.

In defense, NATO offers a good example of the state-based approach. Although Article 5 in NATO's charter commits allies to common defense, it deliberately preserves national sovereignty: each state retains control over its forces and the authority to decide how and when they are employed. The alliance does not replace national militaries; it depends on them. Deterrence flows from state capacity: the quality, readiness, and credibility of national forces, combined with the political will behind them. A common defense organization works because it aligns state capabilities toward a common purpose.

Beyond formal alliances, smaller, purpose-built coalitions have often proved more effective than universal frameworks in addressing concrete threats. These include the AUKUS agreement among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia to deter China in the Indo-Pacific, as well as bilateral cooperation between Japan and the United States. These agreements work because they have the backing and direction of the United States. Consider, for example, the fact that American assistance was vital in saving Ukraine from complete Russian conquest. Russia was not deterred from invading Ukraine by global institutions or universal norms, but it has been constrained by NATO's arms transfers and sustained military support for Kyiv. Global forums condemned the invasion, but it was NATO's material power, coordination, and credibility that limited the war's geographic spread and raised the costs of further escalation. Likewise, the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) in Syria and Iraq in 2019 was achieved not through UN processes, but through U.S.-led coalitions of willing states combining intelligence sharing, targeted military force, and partner capacity building. Across these cases, security outcomes have depended less on global institutions than on coalitions of capable states acting decisively when interests align.

A similar logic applies in counterproliferation. The Proliferation Security Initiative, a voluntary counterproliferation framework launched by the George W. Bush administration in 2003, was not a treaty or supranational body but a practical mechanism designed to strengthen national authorities, share intelligence, and interdict shipments of illicit weapons—such as nuclear materials and missile components. It relied on coordinated national action, not formal supranational institutions, to fulfill its mission. This flexibility allowed the framework to adapt through regional initiatives, from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, and to remain effective as proliferation pathways evolved.

In development, a growing body of scholarship suggests that international efforts to support poorer economies cannot overcome the limitations of state capacity and ill-conceived domestic policy choices. Economists such as William Easterly and David Dollar have long argued that differences in economic policy among developing countries at the national level explain much of the variation in growth performance, especially among African countries, and that no amount of foreign aid can substitute for domestic reform. Top-down global planning produces grand targets without mechanisms for delivery.

Against this backdrop, Africa may be emerging as a testing ground for a different model that treats national governments as the primary drivers of reform, not mere implementers of global agendas. Despite decades of international spending, nearly half of sub-Saharan Africa's population lacks access to electricity. In January 2025, 12 African countries launched National Energy Compacts with country-specific targets, explicitly anchoring responsibility in national policy and institutions. Given the mixed record of global frameworks, this state-anchored approach offers a pragmatic test of whether national ownership can deliver results.

COURSE CORRECTION

The record of the past several decades should invite humility but not resignation. Across many arenas, the results delivered by so-called global solutions have been mixed at best, suggesting that an operating model defaulting to universal frameworks deserves reexamination. This does not mean abandoning international cooperation.

Reorienting toward state-anchored approaches and an emphasis on outcomes reflects a belief that cooperation matters too much to accept arrangements that fail to deliver. It is a necessary correction to ensure that cooperation actually works.

A state-centric shift does not reject multilateral institutions. It calls for a more realistic appraisal of their limits and a clearer focus on what they do best: convening, sharing information, and enabling coordination when interests align. Too often, global bodies are asked to perform operational tasks for which they lack authority and capacity. Only states possess the political authority, citizen accountability, and implementation capacity to deliver durable results that large global frameworks have repeatedly failed to achieve.

This debate is no longer abstract. The divide between globally minded and state-centered policymakers has become a prominent fault line in contemporary geopolitics, shaping transatlantic debates in particular. In Washington, leaders are doubtful that existing global institutions are delivering concrete outcomes, while their European counterparts continue to stress the importance of these institutions in sustaining the postwar order. At its core, this debate reflects a shared concern: that democratic governance must adapt if it is to remain effective, credible, and capable of producing results in a more competitive world. Slow, consensus-bound systems have left democratic states less able to respond to emerging challenges, especially from China. Beijing, for instance, has exploited process-heavy governance by flouting international rules in subsidizing its steel and solar industries, knowing that by the time cases wind through the WTO, competitors have often already been wiped out.

A state-centric operating model starts from a simple but hopeful premise that democratic states, working with partners, remain capable of shaping outcomes. Global frameworks have proved insufficient for many of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century. Progress is more likely to come from persuasion, coalitions of the willing, and direct cooperation among governments. This concrete action will not just produce tangible and positive results; it will also uphold democratic values—and in a more convincing way than the lofty bureaucratic architecture of global institutions ever could. The United States and other democratic states must stop deferring to the sclerotic global order and find their own solutions to the major problems of the age.

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The Multipolar Delusion

And the Unilateral Temptation

C. RAJA MOHAN

From Washington to Beijing and Moscow to New Delhi, a consensus is emerging that the world has entered a multipolar era. Political leaders, diplomats, and analysts routinely declare that unrivaled American dominance has ended and global power is now dispersed across multiple centers. The assertion has become so commonplace that it is often treated as a self-evident fact rather than a proposition to be examined. Even officials in the United States, long the principal beneficiary of the unipolar post–Cold War order, have adopted this language. At the start of President Donald Trump's second term, Secretary of State Marco Rubio observed that Washington's moment as the sole superpower was historically "not normal" and that the international system would inevitably tend toward multipolarity. Rubio's statement appeared to echo the growing belief in China, Russia, and much

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of the developing world that the United States' power is declining and its long-standing global primacy is unsustainable.

This seeming convergence obscures a difference in how the various players define "multipolarity." For the Trump administration, acknowledging multipolarity doesn't mean accepting limits on American power. Instead, it serves as a justification for abandoning the traditional U.S. conception of global leadership and the responsibilities that come with it. The idea of multipolarity allows Washington to pursue a narrower, more transactional foreign policy—one focused on extracting advantage rather than underwriting order, unconcerned with the maintenance of institutions or norms that do not serve immediate American interests. For China, Russia, and many developing countries, by contrast, multipolarity is not merely descriptive but aspirational. It is a political project aimed at constraining American dominance, eroding Western-led institutions, and constructing alternative models of governance, development, and security in which the United States is not the only country in charge.

The idea of multipolarity has been popular since the United States emerged as the sole dominant power at the end of the Cold War. After the 1990–91 Gulf War, which revealed the scale of American military superiority, French leaders warned of the dangers posed by the American "hyperpower." China and Russia later transformed this critique into a strategy, seeking to organize resistance to U.S. primacy. They established what they declared to be a "strategic partnership" in the late 1990s and formed the multilateral BRICS alliance along with Brazil, India, and South Africa to coordinate among non-Western powers. They believed that such efforts could accelerate the transition away from American hegemony.

Trump's return to office made the arrival of a multipolar moment seem inevitable. The United States was internally divided, economically unsettled, and weary of global commitments. China's economy had grown to nearly the same size as that of the European Union, and the country had become a formidable technological leader in its own right. Russia's war in Ukraine had demonstrated Moscow's willingness to use force to revise borders in Europe. And BRICS had expanded to include new members in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, reinforcing the impression of a rising alternative system to counter American dominance. Many observers concluded that the multipolar world had arrived and that American unipolarity was living on borrowed time.

A year later, however, this conviction appears misplaced. The Trump administration has embarked on a forceful reassertion of American power by imposing onerous tariffs, intervening in other countries, and brokering peace negotiations and commercial dealmaking across the world. China and Russia have resisted Washington on select issues, but they have been unable to mount a comprehensive challenge to the United States' effort to restructure global rules. Washington's European allies have proved even less able to stand up to the United States. Facing Trump's insults and pressure, they have wilted and caved.

The reality is that the world is still unipolar. The illusions of multipolarity have not created a more balanced international arrangement. Instead, they have done the opposite: they have empowered the United States to shed previous constraints and project its power even more aggressively. No other power or bloc has been able to mount a credible challenge or work collectively to counter U.S. power. But unlike in the prior period of unipolarity that emerged at the end of the Cold War, the United States is now exercising unilateral power shorn of responsibilities.

POLE POSITION

Claims that the world is becoming multipolar rely on observable indicators of the growing strength of emerging powers, including shifts in relative shares of global GDP and the construction of new development and governance institutions headquartered outside the United States and Europe. These changes show that power is distributed more widely today than at the end of the Cold War. But they do not necessarily signify a transformation in the structure of the international system.

Defined narrowly, a pole is a state or bloc that possesses comprehensive capabilities to shape the international system. A pole is not merely influential in one or two domains, such as nuclear warfare or trade, but rather must be capable of projecting military power globally, sustaining technological and industrial leadership, anchoring alliances, shaping norms, providing public goods, and absorbing systemic shocks. When measured against this more demanding standard, the number of genuine poles in the world today is the same as it has been for the past 35 years: one. Only the United States has this global reach and power.

With an economy now at $30 trillion and growing between two and three percent annually, the United States remains the world's foremost economic engine. Its defense expenditures—around $1 trillion in 2025—exceed those of the next several major powers combined. Washington retains a unique ability to project its power: it has an unparalleled network of alliances, military bases, and logistics infrastructure across the world. American firms dominate frontier sectors as varied as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and biotechnology. U.S. universities are central nodes in global innovation networks, and American cultural industries shape narratives and tastes worldwide.

For Trump, acknowledging multipolarity doesn't mean accepting limits on American power.

Constraints on American power—high national debt, domestic political division, frictions with U.S. allies, and resentment against U.S. policies in the so-called global South—are real and growing, but they do not negate the United States' position as the only credible pole in the system. Even Trump's threats to cut the funding of domestic universities and research agencies, for instance, are unlikely to destroy their preeminence. The depth of the U.S. private sector and the strength of its civil society limit the damage that any president can cause. And the United States' enviable geography, which includes ample natural resources and physical distance from the Eurasian landmass that has long been the main theater of global conflict, gives the United States a large margin of error in its foreign policy choices.

Many analysts argue that the world is evolving toward bipolarity as China continues to rise. In its 2025 National Security Strategy, for instance, the United States acknowledged that China is a "near peer." China has become a major economic and technological power: its economy has reached about two-thirds the size of that of the United States, its nuclear arsenal is estimated to have tripled in size since 2020, and it is building up its military to counter U.S. influence along the first island chain stretching from Japan to the Philippines in the western Pacific.

Yet China remains some distance from being a true pole in the international order. Its growth rate is slowing and is likely to slow even further because of demographic decline and the outsize role of state-owned enterprises in its economy. Its currency lacks global reach: few international transactions are conducted in renminbi because of strict capital controls and a lack of financial transparency. China's military has strengthened its position in East Asia but lacks the logistics networks, access to bases, and alliances required to project power worldwide. And its much-heralded development programs, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, have supplemented rather than replaced U.S.-anchored global governance institutions such as the World Bank.

Russia, often portrayed as a cornerstone of multipolarity, possesses even fewer of the attributes required to shape the international system. Although it has nuclear weapons and a good deal of conventional military power, its economy is narrowly dependent on natural resources, it has fallen far behind in developing emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics, and, like China, it faces a declining population. The European Union, another potential pole, has economic clout but remains politically divided and dependent on the United States for its security. Europe is now trying to make amends by ramping up defense spending, but even in the best-case scenario, it will have to rely on U.S. military power for many years to come.

The so-called middle powers—Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—are growing in economic weight and regional political influence, and are increasingly represented in global forums such as the G-20. Yet influence does not confer pole status. India, which has the size and potential to become a great power in the long term, has a per capita GDP of less than $3,000 (compared with about $85,000 in the United States). It faces deepening political divides and suffers from weak institutions, underdeveloped human resources, and entrenched bureaucratic resistance, all of which have stymied reforms to accelerate economic growth and improve governance. Facing conflict with Pakistan on one border and tensions with China on another, India will still need an economic and security partnership with the United States and its allies for the time being.

Efforts to build countervailing coalitions to the United States have also faltered. Despite China's and Russia's claims that they have a "no limits" partnership, their relationship rests on uneasy foundations and is shaped by historical mistrust and asymmetric dependence. In the early stages of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the "elder brother" on which communist China depended for political support; now, Russia is the junior partner, heavily reliant on China for imports of industrial and dual-use goods—those valuable for both military and civilian purposes, such as machine tools—and as a market for its energy exports. BRICS has also expanded, and the list of countries seeking to join is long. But BRICS is not a cohesive coalition, nor is it likely to position itself against the United States. Instead, most of its members are eager to strike deals to work with Washington. The inclusion of numerous pairs of regional rivals—India and China, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia—also limits the effectiveness of BRICS as a geopolitical tool to pursue any particular strategic objective.

AMERICA UNLEASHED

The first year of Trump's second term has punctured the narrative of American decline and the rise of multipolarity. Trump's assertive use of economic, diplomatic, and military power to push U.S. interests highlights the extraordinary freedom of action the United States enjoys. The weak international response to Washington's aggressive trade policies, its interventions in Latin America and the Middle East, and its threats to take new territory have exposed how difficult it is for any coalition to mount effective resistance to the United States. Power is spread more widely across the international system than it was at the end of the Cold War, but that diffusion makes it harder to channel collective action against Washington.

When Trump began dismantling the multilateral trading system by imposing across-the-board tariffs in April 2025, most major trading powers did not push back. The European Union, for instance, chose accommodation over confrontation. Invoking the need for U.S. support in the war in Ukraine, EU leaders accepted Washington's tariff demands with little protest—an episode that the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis compared to the Qing dynasty's submission to unfair British treaties in 1842 that launched China into what became known as its "century of humiliation." Japan and South Korea, meanwhile, agreed to invest $550 billion and $300 billion, respectively, in the United States while granting Washington leeway over how to spend the money and manage the returns. India, which was hit with a 25 percent reciprocal tariff and an additional 25 percent penalty for purchasing Russian oil, refused to yield on many U.S. demands but was careful to avoid any public argument with Washington.

Only China retaliated. Beijing's decision to restrict exports of rare-earth elements, which the United States depends on for many advanced manufacturing components, forced Washington to the negotiating table and led to an agreement to de-escalate the tit-for-tat tariff war. Although Beijing's power play showed its growing leverage over Washington, China has been unable to force the United States to lift many of the onerous economic and technology sanctions it has imposed over the past decade, including curbs on Chinese companies' access to U.S. chips.

The number of genuine poles in the world today is the same as it has been for the past 35 years: one.

Trump's military actions have shown that the United States can discard its own longstanding positions and ignore international outcry with little consequence. In the Middle East, Trump intervened in the June 2025 Israel-Iran war by attacking three Iranian nuclear sites with 30,000 pound "bunker buster" bombs, which only the United States possesses. Then, after many Arab countries had spent two years denouncing Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide, Trump persuaded them to endorse his plan to resolve the war in Gaza with an arrangement that prioritizes Israel's immediate security demands. Trump also pushed the UN Security Council in November 2025 to adopt a resolution on Gaza that conditions Palestinian statehood on reforms to the Palestinian Authority, the governing body currently in charge in the West Bank. China and Russia criticized the resolution's lack of emphasis on Palestinian self-determination but declined to veto it because they did not want to jeopardize a cease-fire.

In Venezuela, Trump's decision to launch a stunning military operation to seize the country's leader, Nicolás Maduro, and bundle him off to face trial in New York was met with some public outcry but little opposition. Europe, usually a champion of the importance of international law, seemed to accept Trump's unilateral action to avoid a confrontation with the United States. China and Russia condemned the U.S. assault as a violation of Venezuela's sovereignty, but neither could meaningfully respond as Washington moved swiftly to reorient Caracas away from its ties with Beijing and Moscow. But unlike its prior interventions during its unipolar heyday, the United States expressed no desire for regime change, nor did it try to justify its actions under the guise of democracy promotion. Instead, Trump quickly partnered with the remnants of Venezuela's authoritarian order to ensure U.S. influence and promote American energy interests.

For now, no other power can stop the United States. The main constraints on U.S. unipolarity are in the United States itself. A major domestic political shift toward the Democratic Party in the 2026 midterm elections or a significant foreign policy quagmire could temper some of Trump's unilateralism. But Trump has avoided many of the problems that befell the United States in Iraq or Afghanistan by setting narrow strategic objectives and being open to working with dictators and democrats alike. Even more important, the forces supporting the United States' assertive unilateralism extend beyond Trump. An American foreign policy establishment accustomed to the ease of unilateral action will likely continue to pursue it no matter who is in the White House.

WITH GREAT POWER COMES NO RESPONSIBILITY

The revised world order is one in which the United States sheds the responsibilities of a unipolar power but remains the sole force that can shape the international system. Over the past decade, China and Russia have used their military advantage to alter territorial realities: China has aggressively reclaimed land in the South China Sea, for instance, and Russia has conquered and annexed large swaths of Ukrainian territory. The United States, which previously criticized such actions, now also openly employs force to advance its interests. But whereas the leaders of previous U.S. administrations cloaked interventions in liberal rhetoric, Trump frames them explicitly in terms of American power. In a remarkable interview with CNN after the operation to capture Maduro, the Trump adviser Stephen Miller bluntly articulated the administration's worldview: we live, he said, in a world "that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power: these are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

Trump's seemingly uncompromising demand for ownership of Greenland is the most explicit case of this new paradigm. He has indicated that full control of the lightly inhabited island is more important than preserving NATO, which has been the bedrock of the U.S.-European alliance for eight decades. Europe, long accustomed to NATO and the U.S. security umbrella, is struggling to adapt to the end of its friendly relationship with Washington and the shattering of its much-vaunted role in moderating U.S. behavior.

But Trump's assertiveness does not imply that the United States will grant China and Russia similar latitude in their regions. Threats to Greenland or intervention in Venezuela do not mean that the United States will allow China or Russia their own spheres of influence. American military power remains decisive in Europe and Asia and will continue to limit Chinese and Russian action even as Trump brooks no opposition to his strategic plans. The United States is also increasing its own power at the expense of collective organizations. The November UN resolution on Gaza granted unprecedented power to the United States by establishing the so-called Board of Peace, chaired by Trump, to oversee the cease-fire and rebuilding process in the enclave. Trump now seeks to expand the board's mandate from Gaza to conflict resolution worldwide, which could potentially undercut the authority of the UN Security Council and further allow Washington to shape the global order.

U.S. hostility toward multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization is pushing other countries to seek multipolarity, but true rebalancing is a long way off. Major economies want to retain access to the U.S. market, still the world's largest, but are simultaneously hedging against U.S. pressure by expanding trade pacts among themselves. Canada, for instance, has signed trade agreements with China and Indonesia and resumed trade talks with India. But these countries will struggle to divorce themselves from the United States. Russia plays a limited role in global trade flows, and China's export-led model makes it an unrealistic destination for others' trade surpluses in the near term. Hopes that China could replace the United States as the world's primary consumption engine remain distant.

Doubts about the reliability of the United States as a security provider are also encouraging U.S. allies in Europe and Asia to strengthen their own defenses. NATO countries have pledged to raise their overall defense spending to five percent of GDP by 2035, and Japan's defense spending has reached its target of two percent of GDP this year. There is high and growing public support in some allied countries, such as South Korea, for developing their own nuclear weapons. Yet building credible conventional and nuclear deterrents will take time. During this transition, these allies will continue to depend on U.S. support and cooperation because neither Tokyo nor Seoul trusts China or Russia to protect their security.

The main constraints on U.S. unipolarity are in the United States itself.

Despite the widespread claims of its imminence, then, multipolarity is nowhere close to being realized. If anything, aspirations of multipolarity have contributed to this new order of unfettered American power. The first Trump administration and the Biden administration identified China and Russia as threats to U.S. dominance, and those two countries have talked up American weakness and been more assertive in their own foreign policies. In his second term, Trump has welcomed the drumbeat heralding the arrival of multipolarity not as a challenge but as a message that the United States no longer needs to be responsible for global order. In Trump's multipolar vision, every country can exercise its power as it sees fit—but given the gaps in market and military power between the United States and everyone else, only Washington gets to exercise its power unconstrained. The United States is outwardly accepting the shared premise of multipolarity but reaping the benefits of continued unipolarity.

The world today has transformed dramatically since the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States became the sole superpower. But now, as then, there is little prospect for a credible challenger to U.S. hegemony. The unipolar moment never truly ended; it has merely changed. Unlike just after the end of the Cold War, the United States today feels the need to vigorously assert itself with no qualms about the consequences of exercising its dominance. That is what the Trump administration is doing. And for the foreseeable future, no other country or coalition can stop it.

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America and China at the Edge of Ruin

A Last Chance to Step Back From the Brink

DAVID M. LAMPTON AND WANG JISI

Since the early 2010s, the relationship between Beijing and Washington has steadily shifted from cautious engagement to tense rivalry. Step by step, both sides have adopted national security strategies that treat the other not merely as a competitor but as the principal threat to their core values, political legitimacy, and vital national interests. This evolution has been driven not only by external events but also by domestic political incentives, bureaucratic maneuvering, and deeply rooted anxieties about vulnerability, decline, and status. Each country's increasingly muscular attempts to deter the

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other have caused rising friction in the realms of defense, economics, culture, and diplomacy. What began as hedging behavior has hardened into mutually reinforcing strategic postures that assume long-term hostility as the organizing principle of policy.

A world in which the two most powerful countries organize their strategies around mutual enmity is one marked by arms races, institutional paralysis, and the neglect of shared threats such as climate change, pandemic infection, and financial instability. In such a world, conflicts can readily spiral out of control. In the absence of meaningful guardrails, the present trajectory risks locking both societies and the international system into a condition of managed hostility, diminished prosperity, and chronic insecurity—a condition in which competition becomes an end in itself and the costs are borne not by Beijing and Washington alone but by the whole world.

The world, in other words, will be a far more unhealthy, unequal, and perilous place if Beijing and Washington accelerate their competition and continue to narrow the space for collective problem solving. Moreover, with an escalation in tensions that is driven by mistrust and domestic political pressures, the danger today lies less in a deliberate conflict than in an accidental one. Take the April 2001 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane near China's Hainan Island. Or the May 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which the United States maintains was accidental. Were such incidents to happen under today's circumstances, they could trigger not just a war but a nuclear war.

Yet this trajectory is not irreversible. The coming months may present a rare window in which political developments, economic imperatives, and strategic fatigue on both sides create conditions conducive to stabilizing and normalizing bilateral relations. Such opportunities are delicate. As veteran scholars in the United States and China, we have lived through nearly six decades of fluctuation in the bilateral relationship, and we understand the shadow of confrontation between our two countries. But we also loathe the possibility of another generation entering a new cold war. Without timely and deliberate policy action, inertia and rivalry will prevail by default, raising the risk of a confrontation with global consequences. What the world needs is not so much a return to the traditional forms of U.S.-Chinese engagement as a new normalization of relations that pulls each side back from the brink.

EMBEDDING HOSTILITY

As it stands, each side views the other through the lens of worst-case assumptions. In Washington, China is generally defined as the primary systemic challenger to U.S. global leadership, technological primacy, economic dominance, and democratic norms. In Beijing, the United States is widely perceived as the central force attempting to contain China's rise, undermine the Chinese Communist Party, and preserve "America first" supremacy at China's expense. These perceptions are no longer confined to rhetoric; they are embedded in military planning, alliance and partnership structures, export control regimes, and public diplomacy, effectively locking both countries into a persistent state of distrust and reactivity that not even friendly summits between the countries' leaders can unwind.

The depth and consequences of this reality are visible in the military, economic, and diplomatic domains. For instance, military deterrence has become progressively more complex, uncertain, and difficult to achieve thanks to the rapid modernization of nuclear and conventional forces, as well as the expansion of new warfighting capabilities in space, cybertechnology, and artificial intelligence–enabled systems. This complexity will encourage our countries to hedge by multiplying both the number of weapons and their diversity. A rapidly escalating arms race is already underway, adding more uncertainty and ever more cost to the mix. The western Pacific, meanwhile, has seen intensified naval and air encounters, with several near misses between Chinese and U.S. forces. The danger of kinetic conflict, whether through miscalculation, accident, or crisis escalation, is no longer theoretical. And such a conflict would be between two nuclear powers and the world's two largest economies.

Economically, U.S.-Chinese interdependence was once seen as an indispensable stabilizing force in bilateral ties, and it unquestionably contributed to global economic growth. In 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization, its per capita GDP was $1,065 and the United States' was $37,133. By 2023, the corresponding figures were $12,951 in China and $82,769 in the United States. Both countries greatly enhanced their respective positions during that period, although internal dislocations in both countries had disruptive effects: China's northeast was hit hard by unemployment, as was the United States' Midwest.

For these reasons and the increasingly fraught security relationship in recent years, both countries have come to see interdependence primarily as a vulnerability, with economics subordinated to national security.

Sweeping export controls, industrial policies, and supply chain realignments have taken precedence over efficiency and growth, and the language of "decoupling," "de-risking," and "self-reliance" reflects a broader reality: both countries are willing to absorb significant economic costs to reduce reliance on the other. This erosion of the economic pillar of the relationship not only undermines bilateral stability but also contributes to global market fragmentation and uncertainty. The recent disruptions in the trade of rare-earth elements and the sale of high-capacity chips are two notable examples.

Culturally and diplomatically, mutual mistrust now shapes public narratives and foreign policy identity. Although China does not publish the number of American visitors it has each year, it is widely accepted to be a mere fraction of what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic; indeed, very few Westerners are seen on the streets of Beijing these days. Academic and scientific cooperation has become particularly constrained, with the number of Chinese students receiving F-1 visas from the U.S. State Department falling nearly 27 percent between 2024 and 2025. Students, professors, and researchers in both countries are looking over their shoulders. Some U.S. states are passing legislation to curtail cooperation with Chinese educational institutions, and Chinese educators will tell you that low-level officials in their country are wary of assuming responsibility for initiating new intellectual ventures with Americans. With people-to-people ties fraying, each government is increasingly willing to frame the relationship in geopolitical and civilizational terms, raising the stakes beyond mere policy disagreements and making any hint of compromise politically noxious at home.

ROUND ONE

The two of us have seen this before. We are both approaching 80 years old, and we remember when U.S.-Chinese hostility was not abstract but tangible—expressed through war, ideological antipathy, and the fear of nuclear annihilation. For Americans of this age, the Korean War was a national trauma that reinforced images of China, along with its ally North Korea, as a battlefield adversary. People lost loved ones and friends. More than 30,000 American soldiers died during the hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, and the war entrenched a political culture of suspicion that shaped education, media, and public life for decades. The subsequent war in Vietnam, in which the United States fought an adversary allied with China and the Soviet Union, extended that sense of permanent mobilization. Young Americans were exposed to mass casualties and moral uncertainty, and the war ultimately caused the death of over 58,000 Americans, many of whom had been conscripted into service. Even those who did not serve in either conflict lived under the discipline of Cold War preparedness, practicing nuclear attack drills in schools and absorbing the reality that cities could be erased in minutes.

The equivalent Chinese generation endured even more disruption. The Korean War demanded immense national sacrifice from a newly founded state, sending millions of soldiers across the Yalu River into the Korean Peninsula and diverting scarce resources from desperately needed domestic reconstruction. People in China are taught that Chinese soldiers fought heroically in the Korean War, that more than 180,000 died, and that they defeated the Americans on many battlefields. But Chinese people today also know that the result was a strategic stalemate along the 38th parallel, where the war started. And the costs of fighting the United States indirectly in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were staggering. According to Chinese reports, at the request of Hanoi, Beijing clandestinely and successively dispatched troops to Vietnam for air defense, engineering, and logistics. From 1965 to 1968, over 320,000 Chinese troops were sent to Vietnam.

Our generation learned firsthand how strategic hostility seeps into classrooms, families, and personal aspirations. We experienced sustained hostility between Beijing and Washington not as an abstract geopolitical game but as a deeply human tragedy whose real costs could be measured in lost lives, lost opportunities, and generations shaped by fear rather than possibility.

A DEEP RESET?

By the early 1970s, leaders of both countries recognized that these costs were too high. After backchannel meetings between their respective deputies, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger, Chinese leader Mao Zedong and U.S. President Richard Nixon initiated a top-down process to repair relations in 1972. Because the two societies could not comprehensively engage with each other, it fell to these leaders to correct misperceptions and foster peace and cooperation.

Today, there are signs that Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump might welcome a similar moment. For starters, in October 2025, Xi and Trump met in Busan, South Korea. Both leaders stressed

LILY QIAN

cooperation and de-escalation in U.S.-Chinese relations, especially on trade, although with some notable caveats. Xi said China and the United States should be "partners and friends," urging both sides to focus on long-term mutual benefits and to let trade and economic cooperation anchor the relationship rather than fuel friction. According to news reports, China agreed to resume purchasing American soybeans, to suspend rare-earth export controls, and to work with Washington to curb illicit fentanyl trafficking.

In response, Trump sought to reset the tone of U.S.-Chinese relations. He called Xi "a tremendous leader of a very powerful country," signaling a clear shift—at least rhetorically—toward diplomacy and trade-based cooperation over confrontation. His optimism for a broader deal suggested the meeting was intended not as an endpoint but as a steppingstone toward more comprehensive economic cooperation. He also referred to the summit as a gathering of the "G-2," which signaled to Beijing a new, higher level of respect.

This should not be taken lightly. Chinese leaders are most prickly when they sense that the United States is trying to deny them respect and isolate them and when they sense they are in a weaker position than Washington. In the Obama era, Washington explicitly rejected Beijing's call for "a new model of major-country relations" and dismissed suggestions that China be considered half of a new G-2. Now, however, with China's gains in strength and stature—and Washington's missteps in domestic and foreign policy—Beijing is feeling more confident, a sentiment that Trump's comments bolstered.

To be clear, Beijing and Washington should not pursue some kind of dual hegemony that would rightly alarm their neighbors and middle powers far and wide. But they should make room for each other in the international system and regional security architectures. Doing so reassures other countries that they are not about to become victims of a runaway great-power competition. Going forward, both Beijing and Washington should ground their interactions in the reality of multipolarity and multialignment.

The South Korean meeting fell short of a deep reset since it focused mainly on trade and sidestepped major strategic issues such as technological competition, supply chain decoupling, and security tensions. But since the meeting, Trump has extended an olive branch on technology: in December 2025, he announced that the American chipmaker Nvidia would be allowed to sell its second most powerful semiconductor chips to China—a decision that rolled back, somewhat, policies aimed at blocking Chinese access to advanced technologies. According to Trump, "President Xi responded positively."

PARALLEL PULLBACK

There are also signs that both societies would welcome taking a step back from the brink. Public opinion polls in both countries indicate that people increasingly view the current path of confrontation as too costly. Attitudes are converging on the idea that both governments should focus more on healing domestic ills—from inequality and beyond—and reduce or avoid external adventures. A recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll, for instance, found that a majority of Americans, 53 percent, now say the United States "should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China," up from 40 percent in 2024. A poll published in December 2025 by Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy, meanwhile, shows that Chinese citizens are softening toward the United States. When asked to rate their opinion of the United States on a favorability scale of one to five, respondents gave an average score of 2.38, which is up from the 2024 average of 1.85. (For comparison, India's favorability was 2.06 in 2025, and Russia's favorability fell from 3.66 in 2024 to 3.48 in 2025.)

Beijing and Washington, after all, have a common economic need at the moment and for the foreseeable future: to build or rebuild a strong, stable middle class. Sustained conflict between the two countries would significantly hurt both economies and this effort. In China, this dynamic was evident at the Fourth Plenary meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee, held last October. The meeting was suffused with the idea that the economy needs to be reenergized, in part through economic policies that are more resilient, less rigid, and free from foreign policy distractions. The members declared that China should "advance reform and development through greater openness and seek to share opportunities and achieve common development with the rest of the world." This attitude is reminiscent of former paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's reform thinking, which argued that China should pacify the outside world so it could draw more resources from abroad and focus on building its domestic strength. Deng's reforms unleashed four decades of dramatic growth in China beginning in the late 1970s. An upcoming test of China's economic development policy will be the degree to which Xi actually puts more priority on nonstate economic organizations and creates conditions for greater domestic innovation.

The Trump administration's "America first" mantra and the Democrats' message of prioritizing affordability are similarly reflective of a country that is internally focused. As the administration's 2025 National Security Strategy declared, "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over." This does not necessarily mean the United States will pursue isolationism—as the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January proved—but rather that it is seeking a closer alignment between its resources and its commitments and is placing a greater focus on domestic ills, including affordability, drugs, unemployment, and inflation, and its relations with nearby regions. A confrontation with China does not appear to fit within this calculus: whereas Trump's 2017 NSS was explicitly structured around great-power competition with Beijing, the second Trump NSS barely refers to China. A single warm day does not spell the end of the winter freeze, but it is a start.

FLASH POINT FIRST

The best place to begin stabilizing the relationship is, perhaps counterintuitively, with its most dangerous dimension: the long-simmering issue of Taiwan. The growing volatility in the Taiwan Strait makes it important to address this issue quickly, and it might even be easier to reduce tensions than many believe.

China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law sets out specific conditions under which Beijing may resort to "nonpeaceful means" to resolve the Taiwan question: namely, if Taiwan declares independence, if major incidents occur that would lead to Taiwan's separation from China, or if all possibilities for peaceful unification are completely exhausted. By the Chinese government's own legal and political standards, current cross-strait conditions do not meet those criteria. Moreover, despite frequent speculation and emotionally charged commentary on social media, Beijing has not officially declared that a military takeover of Taiwan is imminent or inevitable. Instead, the Chinese government continues to reaffirm its preference for peaceful unification, insisting that it is stepping up full-scale deterrence, such as encircling the island with extensive live-fire exercises, only to prevent secession.

In other words, despite a tense military atmosphere, it is still possible to relax the political hostility over the Taiwan Strait. Now is the right moment for the two countries to reassure each other. It is in Beijing's interest to reiterate its peaceful intentions, and it is in Washington's interest to reinstate its previous position that it "does not support Taiwan independence."

Although such statements might be dismissed as mere lip service, they carry real weight. Words and behavior matter. In early November 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi created a firestorm in China when she said Japan could become involved in a conflict over Taiwan under certain circumstances. In the minds of many Chinese, the remarks tied Japan closer to Taiwan. The Chinese-Japanese relationship has deteriorated significantly since then, with China applying economic and diplomatic pressure on Japan. If Washington were to reiterate its disapproval of any potential unilateral declaration of independence by Taipei, it would not only reassure Beijing but also show Tokyo that Washington wants to lower the temperature in the region.

HELLO FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Beijing and Washington can also take steps toward a new normalization by addressing more malleable issues, such as economic and cultural obstacles, on which there is already significant societal agreement in both countries. China and the United States could, for example, reopen their respective consulates in Houston and Chengdu, which were closed in a display of tit-for-tat retaliation in July 2020.

Beijing and Washington could also negotiate a reciprocal, dramatic drop in the average tariff rate that each is applying to the other. In addition, China could consider reducing subsidy levels on some of its exports. Tariffs and trade barriers are hurting the most vulnerable segments of the U.S. and Chinese populations, and their capricious implementation feeds corruption in both countries and in third parties around the world. Although China and the United States think they are using economic leverage to constrain the other, over time, tools such as tariffs and export controls will lose their edge and ultimately weaken both economies. A better approach would be to recognize that the pursuit of comparative advantage is the best starting point for trade policy. This does not mean a return to total free trade—each country has identified dependencies that are counter to national security and must be addressed. But it does mean that the average tariff rate should be at its lowest possible level consistent with national security and reciprocity.

Both countries could also take steps to break down cultural walls and nurture a more accurate understanding of each other's rapidly changing societies. Some American observers, for instance, expect China's political structure to drastically change in ways similar to the shifts that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, many Chinese analysts believe that China will soon catch up with the United States in economic, technological, and military terms. In reality, neither outcome is likely. Yet such misperceptions have already influenced actions and policies, harming the long-term interests of the two countries. If each country's impression of the other is not balanced by realistic and objective forecasts, there is the very real danger that each side will exaggerate its own power and underestimate the other's.

Oddly enough, the opposite danger also exists—each side could see its own position eroding quickly and become anxious enough to take action sooner rather than later. In some Chinese circles, for instance, there is a lack of confidence about China's ability to resist external pressure in support of Taiwan's separation from China. Likewise, there is anxiety among some Americans that the United States will soon lose its technological edge over China. In other words, each country has become something of a mystery to the other, which feeds the chances of miscalculation.

An important means by which to diminish these perceptions is to encourage deeper connections and engagements across all sections of society. The constraints on journalists, for example, should be relaxed. And academic and research exchanges should be restored to their pre-pandemic levels. Government action in both these domains is only one part of the solution, however. In order to change the atmosphere, our respective citizens have to want to participate, as well. To that end, authorities in both societies might create a more hospitable environment by not categorically referring to each other's students, scholars, and media as spies.

Finally, it is incumbent on both sides to once again pursue military-to-military talks not only to reduce the chance of accidents and misperceptions but also to see whether Beijing and Washington can work on some of the issues driving the arms race between them. Such talks must be grounded in the recognition that U.S.-Chinese tensions over trade, technology, ideology, and security are not a mere blip but part of a long arc. The starting point should be a joint affirmation (perhaps a joint statement) that there is space for both countries in Asia and beyond and that efforts to reduce tensions need to be taken with urgency.

"SEIZE THE HOUR!"

Today, policymakers and scholars in both countries have extraordinary analytical tools at their disposal, including artificial intelligence, that earlier generations did not. This technical capacity is essential to the sound management of global relationships. But even the most sophisticated policymakers reliant on advanced technology cannot simulate a real war, which would impose an unbearable loss of life. Preventing a deadly confrontation between China and the United States will thus require something else: strategic memory, crisis experience, and cross-cultural trust that is built over decades.

Our two countries have the opportunity now to rebuild these guardrails. While the tone at the top has, thus far, softened, it is by no means institutionalized; the carefully managed equilibrium could prove wobbly. If Beijing and Washington lose this chance for a new normalization, it will be impossible for them to protect their strategic interests in the future. There is but a fleeting moment for the two countries to recalibrate their goals and approaches toward each other. As Mao put it in a January 1963 poem urging revolutionary action, and as Nixon famously quoted during his historic 1972 visit to China highlighting the urgent need for U.S.-Chinese engagement, "Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour!"

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Asia After America

How U.S. Strategy Failed—and Ceded the Advantage to China

ZACK COOPER

The pivot to Asia has failed. A decade and a half ago, in 2011, President Barack Obama committed to rebalancing U.S. strategy and resources to focus on the Asia-Pacific. "Let there be no doubt," he pledged on a visit to Australia, "The United States of America is all in." Although the phrasing changed and policymakers and politicians argued about the tactical details, Obama's successors affirmed the logic behind the pivot, which soon became the core bipartisan assumption of American strategy. In speech after speech, U.S. officials emphasized that the only way to prevent China from dominating Asia was for the United States and its allies and partners to make a major investment in the region's political, economic, and military stability.

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Yet nearly 15 years later, U.S. leaders have still not matched their words with action. American promises to foster greater prosperity and better governance now elicit eye rolls throughout Asia. A perpetually distracted United States neglects much of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Few today are asking when the pivot will come. Instead, the question in regional capitals is how far the United States will pull back.

With the United States facing divisions at home and distractions abroad, it has become clear that deep engagement across all of Asia is no longer realistic. Yet the assumptions behind the pivot have persisted, as have the calls to finally give the effort priority. The problem is that having a strategy that cannot be executed in the foreseeable future creates dangers of its own. During World War II, the political commentator Walter Lippmann wrote that "foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power" and warned that not doing so "leads to disaster." Today, Washington has a "Lippmann gap" in Asia: means have failed to match ends for so long that U.S. commitments have lost credibility. The longer the gap between pledges and action is allowed to remain, the greater the risk of a disastrous failure of deterrence.

The pivot to Asia was based on the assumption that U.S. power was capable of fostering strong regional economies, governments, and militaries that could prevent China from overturning the regional order. Today, however, Washington is not seriously contesting Beijing's economic and political influence across much of the region, particularly on the Asian mainland. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy explicitly narrows U.S. regional security objectives to protecting the first island chain—a string of archipelagoes that runs through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines—but this retrenchment has been proceeding quietly for years.

Parts of this thin defensive line rest on shaky ground: countries that are economically dependent on China and thus vulnerable to its political pressure and influence campaigns. China will naturally seek to displace the United States if Washington scales back its commitments. The pivot aimed to make that difficult, if not impossible, by locking in U.S. engagement and ensuring that countries in the region were strong and confident enough to uphold their interests. By serving as a counterweight to China's massive economy and substantial political influence, the thinking went, the United States gave these countries options. But as the United States curtails its economic and political engagement, it faces the prospect that China could pick off U.S. allies and partners one by one. Many of these countries are already rethinking their alignment decisions and concluding that Beijing may be a more appealing partner—or an inevitable regional hegemon.

As a result, any U.S. strategy that focuses primarily on the military defense of a handful of countries on the first island chain may not be sustainable. But the better option—a comprehensive pivot—is now a practical impossibility. What is left is a strategy based on shoring up a defensive line that might not hold forever but could contain Chinese expansion for now. If executed well, such a strategy could buy enough time for missteps by China to create new openings for the United States and its allies and partners in Asia. Chinese regional dominance is by no means assured. Beijing is increasingly overconfident and is likely to overplay its hand. Still, Chinese leaders are now the ones with the cards to play. The pivot was meant to anchor U.S. leadership in Asia; its unraveling could leave China to set the rules.

THREE-POINT TURN

When it introduced the pivot, the Obama administration outlined three pillars on which the rebalance depended: security, prosperity, and good governance. The central logic was that promoting all three would make the United States' Asian partners stronger and better able to defend their sovereignty, thus preventing China from overturning the regional order. In practice, however, only the security pillar received sustained U.S. attention and resources. Washington deepened its alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea and pledged to shift 60 percent of U.S. Navy assets to the Indo-Pacific. But it never delivered on its vision for economic engagement or good governance.

At first, the United States had a plan for regional economic engagement. The Obama administration championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a 12-country trade agreement that included many of Washington's most important regional partners. The objective, in Obama's words, was to enshrine "an open international economic system, where rules are clear and every nation plays by them." But the United States proved unwilling to be bound by the very rules it had helped write. The Senate refused to ratify the TPP by the end of Obama's term, and then the first Trump administration withdrew from the accord altogether in 2017 and began imposing tariffs on Chinese goods. The Biden administration did little to change course. It kept most of Trump's tariffs in place and showed no interest in joining the successor to the TPP. An intended replacement put forward in 2022, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, did not offer increased access to the U.S. market, disappointing foreign partners. As Singapore's ambassador to the United States lamented in 2023, "We're not getting the kind of trade agenda that we would have liked" from the Biden administration.

U.S. commitments have lost credibility.

In Trump's second term, coercive and protectionist economic policies, combined with the dissolution of development aid and humanitarian assistance programs, have made the situation worse. For leaders in Asia who want to deliver economic growth to their people, a more protectionist United States is less attractive as a partner—and China looks more attractive by comparison. Asian officials are fond of saying that they "don't want to choose" between Washington and Beijing. But regional leaders worry that, when it comes to their economic relationships, choices are becoming unavoidable, and many may favor China.

The pivot's governance pillar has crumbled even more spectacularly. Democracy, anticorruption, and human rights were important elements of this agenda when it was first announced. The Obama and Biden administrations made the promotion of democracy and human rights central to their policies, seeing them as both moral and strategic imperatives. This aroused suspicion across much of Asia, where less than half of people live in free societies. When the Biden administration held its 2021 Summit for Democracy, it excluded Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. The omissions put many South and Southeast Asian governments on the defensive, worried that the United States was undermining their domestic political systems.

The second Trump administration has been quiet about human rights and democracy, which has comforted some autocrats. Yet many regional leaders find it troubling that the United States is now rejecting many of the rules, norms, and institutions that it once advanced as part of its good governance initiative. Washington is using economic coercion against its own allies and partners. It has launched military strikes against Iran and Venezuela, which many smaller Asian countries worry will be perceived as a dangerous precedent that China or other great powers might use to justify attacks on weaker neighbors. Finally, U.S. anticorruption efforts stalled when Trump paused enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act shortly after his 2025 inauguration. Countries are now supporting major commercial projects that involve the Trump family in hopes of currying favor with the U.S. government.

Not surprisingly, Washington's reputation has taken a hit across much of Asia. According to a 2025 Pew Research Center survey conducted during the first few months of Trump's second term, favorable attitudes toward the United States in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea had declined by nine to 16 percentage points from a year earlier. If the United States continues to embrace force and coercion—dismissing the rules, norms, and institutions that once tied American hands but bought the country influence—its favorability ratings will decline further, and other countries will be even less inclined follow Washington's lead.

PIVOT WITHIN THE PIVOT

As the economic and governance agendas have collapsed, the full weight of the rebalance has come to rest on the security pillar. Yet even on security, Washington has not delivered all it initially promised. The United States has remained distracted by crises elsewhere in the world. It never shifted away from the Middle East, and the Biden administration, faced with a major war in Europe, rightly chose to support Ukraine. The Trump administration's focus on the Americas adds yet another competing priority. As a result, U.S. leaders have never had enough time to consistently engage South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Only Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan have attracted sustained attention and resources from the United States.

The problem has worsened lately. In the last year, top-tier U.S. military assets—carrier strike groups and air and missile defense units—have been pulled away from Asia to assist with other missions.


GREEN
SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP
IN INTERNATIONAL
AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Recent increases in overall U.S. defense spending have barely kept pace with inflation, and even if the Trump administration succeeds in forcing allies and partners to spend more, their contributions cannot offset China's massive outlays. This leaves Washington without the means to execute a region-wide approach. Recognizing this constraint, U.S. policymakers have tightened their focus, concentrating American diplomacy and defense strategy on the Taiwan Strait to the detriment of other parts of the region. This shift has been most obvious under the Trump administration, but it has been underway for nearly a decade.

Military deterrence is all that remains of U.S. strategy in Asia.

Nowhere are the effects more evident than in South Asia. For two decades, U.S. officials pursued a deeper relationship with India. But the second Trump administration has undone much of this progress. American intervention in the May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan created the perception that Trump was prioritizing Islamabad over New Delhi, and the fallout has pierced hopes that India might align more with the United States. The Quad, the security partnership among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, had strong backing in Trump's first term but now appears to be on the verge of obsolescence: a planned 2025 summit never materialized because of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's obvious irritation with Trump and Trump's apparent indifference to the group.

The story is not much better in Southeast Asia or the Pacific Islands. In his first term, Trump admirably improved ties with the Philippines, Vietnam, and many Pacific Island countries. Today, the U.S. treaty alliance with the Philippines remains strong, with frequent bilateral meetings and deepening defense cooperation. Yet other Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, are reevaluating their policies toward the United States. Singapore's prime minister has lamented that the United States "is rejecting the very system it created," by adopting protectionist policies and imposing tariffs on its friends. This view is also held by many Pacific Island countries, where Washington's downgrading of issues that matter to them—including development, public health, and climate change—is incentivizing closer cooperation with Beijing.

The one subregion the United States seems committed to is Northeast Asia, home to Washington's top security concern: China. In the 2025 National Security Strategy, China is mentioned more than any other U.S. adversary, and Taiwan is mentioned more than any other American ally or partner. The section on deterring military threats in Asia is almost entirely focused on preventing an invasion of Taiwan; North Korea is not mentioned once. In effect, the United States has narrowed its conception of its security interests in Asia to cross-strait security.

Yet even U.S. policy toward China and Taiwan remains muddled. Trump insists that Chinese leader Xi Jinping will not take Taiwan on his watch, and his administration has pressed regional allies to allow American forces to use their territory and to contribute their own forces if a conflict breaks out in the Taiwan Strait. But Trump himself has not publicly stated what he would do in a cross-strait conflict, instead commenting in January that it is "up to Xi" how to handle Taiwan. He has even referred to the U.S.-Chinese relationship as a "G-2," suggesting he is interested in some kind of great-power compact.

The basic logic of the pivot was that it was in the United States' interest to help build strong economies, effective governments, and capable militaries across Asia because this would make it harder for China to overturn the regional order through coercion or the use of force. Countries in Asia would then be free to make the choices that benefited them most, which Washington assumed meant continued cooperation with the United States. But with all three pillars cracked or crumbled, the constraints U.S. policymakers tried to place on China's regional influence are giving way.

IN SEARCH OF PLAN B

As Washington's economic and political engagement recedes, with no reversal in sight, military deterrence is all that remains of U.S. strategy in Asia. But the United States' traditional approach to regional security, weakened as it has been, is increasingly courting danger. Its original objective was to prevent China from altering the territorial status quo anywhere in the region, which required the United States to maintain a forward defense perimeter up to the coast of the Asian continent. Washington aimed to help allies and partners with which Beijing or Pyongyang had territorial or maritime disputes—including India, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—to deter the use of force or coercion. The United States regularly sent ships and aircraft just off China's coast in an effort to prevent China from coercing Washington's friends or exerting control over disputed territories, waters, and airspace. It also invested in regional militaries to ensure that they could better defend themselves and work more closely with American forces. And as the American military edge deteriorated, the United States called on receptive Asian allies to increase their own defense spending and host additional U.S. forces on their territory.

The main problem with this approach was that it required not just American military engagement but also a positive economic and governance agenda to be successful. Building effective militaries requires dynamic economies and efficient governments, and only a network of strong regional militaries can help smaller states defend their interests against China. Without steady U.S. support for economic growth, good governance, and regional integration, the entire region's deterrence posture suffers. Making matters worse, a growing chorus of critics in Washington argues that it is no longer powerful enough to execute such an expansive strategy, that the strategy is needlessly provocative to Beijing, and that too few countries in the region are willing or able to step up military cooperation with the United States. Others insist that the American people are tired of foreign entanglements and unwilling to support the rise in military spending that this strategy demands.

In short, meeting the most expansive version of American security aims in Asia has become unrealistic. The gap between those objectives and U.S. and allied capabilities is apparent to all, including China. And Beijing has been only too willing to take advantage. Despite long-standing U.S. opposition to Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea, Beijing has restarted its island-building campaign there. It is also stepping up military pressure on Taiwan, raising the risk of a cross-strait crisis. Deterrence is eroding across the region, intensifying the danger of a major war in the years ahead.

Avoiding that outcome requires that the United States align its commitments and capabilities. Yet there is danger in pushing retrenchment too far, such as by concentrating U.S. defenses along the second island chain, thousands of miles east of the Chi-

HOLDING THE LINE

U.S. defenses in the Asia-Pacific

Sources: Department of Defense; Congressional Research Service. Data as of 2024.

nese mainland (or even on the third island chain, which includes Hawaii). In this scenario, Australia and Japan, established U.S. allies that lie at the southern and northern ends of the second chain, could still anchor the American regional military presence. Between them, the defensive line would comprise many small isles stretching over thousands of miles, including the Bonin Islands, the Mariana Islands (most notably Guam), Yap, and Palau. This strategy would exclude several friends in East Asia from the U.S. defense perimeter—the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan—effectively conceding that the United States would not defend them against an attack.

A second-island-chain strategy would push many Asian leaders to cut deals with Beijing. All of Southeast Asia would be within China's sphere of influence, so the Philippines and other claimants bordering the South China Sea would have little hope of upholding their rights in disputed waters. South Korea would find itself isolated and surrounded by nuclear powers in China, North Korea, and Russia; without the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, Seoul would have to choose between acquiring its own nuclear weapons and submitting to demands from Pyongyang and Beijing. Taiwan, which China would never permit to have nuclear weapons, would likely be forced to unify with the mainland or face an unwinnable war.

There is no guarantee that China would be satisfied with this U.S. withdrawal, either. It is likely that a stronger, more confident Beijing would expand its horizons to match its growing capabilities. Japan, then, could be particularly vulnerable. Beijing is already contesting Japan's legal claims to Okinawa and other parts of the Ryukyu Island chain. Japan's westernmost island, Yonaguni, is only 70 miles from Taiwan, so defending it and isles near it with conventional weapons would be difficult, perhaps impossible, if Chinese forces were stationed in Taiwan. The United States could threaten nuclear escalation to deter Chinese encroachment, but that threat might not seem credible amid a broader regional withdrawal. Japan might then decide to go nuclear itself or at least reach a nuclear sharing arrangement with the United States, to more credibly defend its territory.

The geography of the second island chain presents a final problem. These small, remote islands and the facilities they house would be vulnerable to Chinese military strikes and political influence. Without facilities in the Philippines and Taiwan able to track Chinese air and naval forces passing through the first island chain, it would be harder to detect these forces before they reached Guam or other second-island-chain territories. Additionally, leaders in some Pacific Islands might prefer to remain neutral and accept Chinese investment offers rather than allow the United States to operate from their territory. This is already a concern in Yap, where Chinese companies are rebuilding a World War II–era airfield. A second-island-chain defensive line might therefore look more like a set of scattered defense bubbles than a full-fledged defensive perimeter. Ultimately, this minimal strategy might not protect U.S. territories in the Pacific and could leave even the most capable American allies feeling they had no choice but to submit to a vast Chinese sphere of influence.

Withdrawal to the second island chain, in sum, would likely be catastrophic. The more realistic option is thus U.S. retrenchment to the first island chain. This approach would trim U.S. commitments while retaining some of the most capable U.S. allies and partners, including Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The United States would likely maintain its presence in Australia and South Korea, given its enduring alliances with both countries and its desire to avoid leaving crucial allies out of the U.S. defense perimeter, a costly mistake Washington made ahead of the Korean War. But it would leave most of the rest of the region off the list of U.S. priorities, including the treaty ally Thailand and the emerging great power India. In practice, this could mean, for example, abrogating the U.S. alliance with Thailand and stating explicitly that the United States will not intervene if China encroaches on the territory or maritime claims of partners on the Asian mainland.

There is danger in pushing retrenchment too far.

This strategy still faces several challenges. First, it is not clear that American leaders would be willing to devote the resources it requires. Although Trump has floated a $1.5 trillion defense budget for 2027, few in Congress seem inclined to support what would amount to a 50 percent increase in defense spending. The United States would still have commitments up and down the first island chain, including to the Philippines and Taiwan, neither of which can deter China without considerable U.S. assistance. Additional defense spending, or at least redeployments from other regions, might therefore be necessary. After all, China can focus most of its military might on its near seas, whereas Asia remains one of several areas of operation for the U.S. military. If Beijing fields nine aircraft carriers by 2035, as a recent Pentagon report predicted it will, U.S. forces would be badly outnumbered, even if Washington economized elsewhere.

Furthermore, the first-island-chain strategy would require key allies and partners to strengthen their cooperation with Washington while the United States pulled back elsewhere. The United States simply cannot balance China's military power unless Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan spend more on defense, give U.S. forces greater access to their territory, or do both.

Yet their leaders could be wary of doing more if they see overall commitment to U.S. alliances waning; some might even consider whether it would be wiser to improve relations with Beijing than to give in to Washington's demands. This problem is compounded by domestic divisions in the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan. Political parties in each country take sharply different approaches to foreign policy, so changes of government often bring strategic reassessments. The more the United States is seen as unpredictable and coercive, the more pressure there will be on a new leader to change course. And as Beijing's economic and political influence grows, it will become harder for Washington to respond to Chinese efforts to affect decision-making in Manila, Seoul, and Taipei.

This strategy would also do little to discourage the rest of the region from engaging more deeply with China, because it would not make the United States more attractive as an export market or more active diplomatically. Thailand is already strengthening economic and military ties with Beijing. If others, such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, also choose to work more closely with China, the United States could be forced to watch from the sidelines as Beijing builds a sphere of influence covering most of continental Asia and part of maritime Asia, as well—making a defense of the first island chain increasingly difficult to sustain.

HARD CHOICES

However flawed a pullback to the first island chain may be, it is the most likely outcome in the years ahead. The challenge will be to shore up this thin defensive line as much as possible to maintain deterrence for as long as possible. Allies and partners along that chain will need to be strong and confident enough to work with the United States to counterbalance China, even in the absence of a U.S. economic and political strategy in the region. What will determine success, therefore, is not just how well Washington resources its military posture but also how it navigates complex regional geopolitics.

American policymakers will need to decide whether the United States can build an interlocking set of security alliances or let a scattering of individual defense partnerships suffice. The Biden administration encouraged allies and partners in Asia to work more closely together, whereas the Trump administration has at times preferred a bilateral approach because it maximizes U.S. leverage. Even an informal arrangement bringing American allies together would require a substantial investment of time and resources from Washington and regional capitals. Some countries would no doubt remain hesitant to cooperate with one another because of historical tensions, legal restrictions on foreign entanglements, fears of being dragged into others' conflicts, and concerns about China's response. Yet without deeper defense industry cooperation and operational integration among regional militaries, it might not be possible to build a sufficiently strong defensive system along the first island chain.

The United States will also have to decide how to handle allied interest in acquiring nuclear weapons—something it has, until now, opposed. If the United States abrogates some of its commitments and pulls back some of its conventional forces, the likelihood of allied proliferation will increase. Japan and South Korea, in particular, may pursue nuclear deterrents of their own if they perceive U.S. extended deterrence to be weakening. Simply rejecting nuclear discussions may not dampen interest, particularly in Seoul, which is surrounded by nuclear-armed states. Indeed, some in Washington might even welcome allied proliferation to offset the worsening conventional military balance and thereby deter encroachment by China or North Korea. One option to examine seriously is the development of nuclear sharing arrangements, which might mollify Asian allies without resulting in significant regional or global nuclear proliferation.

As Washington retrenches, Beijing is likely to test the remaining American positions, raising questions about what Washington is and isn't willing to defend. Chinese forces are already pushing closer to Taiwan and operating more frequently and in larger numbers around Japan, around the Philippines, and farther into the Western Pacific. To date, the United States has been most clear about what it will do to protect its closest allies but more ambiguous when it comes to other partners' defense. Friends that Washington asks to do more are likely to press for clearer U.S. commitments in return. Such clarity might deter dangerous tests of those commitments, but it also entails risk. Removing ambiguity about what the United States considers to be within its defense perimeter—especially when it comes to contested outlying islands, which are harder to defend—would make it necessary to react more forcefully to any violation to maintain deterrence. In cases in which the United States is genuinely willing to escalate, clarity is often the best policy, but that means that vaguer commitments will likely be tested.

Finally, the United States will need to decide whether to retrench abruptly or incrementally. A slow withdrawal might prevent panic but leave all allies and partners fearful that they could be next on the chopping block; a rapid adjustment could avoid a slow-moving landslide but cause immediate instability if allies and partners do not have time to prepare. Either way, Washington will need to reset allies' expectations about future American policies, making some disruption unavoidable. But a one-time change in the U.S. defensive position might be preferable to repeated reminders that the United States is shifting its posture. Allied leaders must be quietly consulted beforehand, however, so that they can adjust their own strategies accordingly and express confidence about the new approach to their publics.

It would have been far better for the United States to properly resource a strategy featuring deep economic engagement and support for good governance alongside a stronger security posture. Yet wondering whether that version of the pivot to Asia would have succeeded is now just an academic exercise. An incomplete pivot, with expansive security objectives but no economic or governance strategy to speak of, will certainly not succeed. Instead, it will risk—in fact, it is already risking—a catastrophic failure of deterrence. Moving on from the pivot and accepting retrenchment is not the best way to protect U.S. interests in Asia. But it is unavoidable.

In 2024, Fumio Kishida, then Japan's prime minister, told the U.S. Congress that he detected "an undercurrent of self-doubt among some Americans about what [the United States'] role in the world should be." Today, that undercurrent looks more like a tsunami, and countries in the Asia-Pacific region are already seeking higher ground. What is left in its wake—where the United States maintains its commitments, and where it pulls back—will affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people in Asia. It is therefore time for Americans to discuss not what would make for an ideal strategy, but how to enact a realistic one. Even that may not be enough to contain China's growing influence. But after falling short of its grand ambitions in Asia, the United States has left itself no other option.

Women's Rights Are Democratic Rights

The Global Authoritarian Backlash to Gender Equality

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

Autocracies now outnumber democracies, and nearly three-quarters of the world's population lives under authoritarian rule. Over the past decade, dictators in China and Russia consolidated their control. Hungary, Turkey, and other fragile democracies tipped further into illiberalism. A wave of coups in Africa toppled legitimately elected leaders. Even in the United States, a democracy since its founding, the rule of law weakened and the threat of authoritarianism surged. This trend has crushed hopes that blossomed after the end of the Cold War about the permanent triumph of liberal democracy and has spurred much debate about what went wrong.

These developments can't be understood, let alone reversed, without grasping a crucial element at the heart of the authoritarian

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Illustration by Michaela Staton

wave: the persecution of women. Across cultures and continents, women champion democracy, and tyrants target them as part of their playbook for amassing power. Failing to treat the repression of women as the crisis it is all but guarantees that democratic erosion will continue unchecked.

More than 30 years ago, I declared at the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights." It was a controversial statement at the time but reflected the reality that women were on the frontlines of the "third wave" of democratization that brought down the Iron Curtain and liberated millions of people around the world in the 1980s and 1990s. Across the Soviet bloc, women-led activism, from labor strikes in Poland to grassroots environmental and civic movements in East Germany and Hungary, helped erode communist control. In Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, women's movements emerged from the shadows of dictatorships to reshape politics. Argentina was the first to enact a national electoral quota for female candidates, in 1991. Guatemalan women helped bring peace in 1996 after decades of civil war. The women of the African National Congress in South Africa helped end apartheid.

Women's rights are still human rights.

Today, with democracy in retreat, it's clear that women's rights have been a canary in the coal mine. Around the world, attacks on women's rights, opportunities, and full participation in society have seemingly been ignored. What follows is rapid democratic decay: institutions hollowed out, dissent criminalized, and power concentrated beyond accountability. This is not by accident, but by design.

Authoritarian regimes systematically chip away at women's rights because they recognize that women's participation is both a catalyst for democracy and a bulwark against tyranny. This repression is both ideological and tactical—silencing women's contributions that underpin democratic strength and enforcing patriarchal appeals that legitimize authoritarian power. As the scholar Saskia Brechenmacher observed in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year: "Given the importance of civic freedoms and political space to meaningful progress for women, strengthening democratic institutions will be an important element. . . . Yet focusing only on democracy while neglecting specific initiatives to improve gender equality would be misguided." This deep connection between women's rights and democracy must be understood in order to combat and ultimately reverse the trends unfolding today. Women's rights are still human rights, and autocrats know it.

The most extreme example of totalitarian misogyny today may be in Afghanistan. When the Taliban retook control in 2021, one of their first moves was to exclude women from all visible roles in society. Overnight, girls were banned from secondary schools and women from universities, public office, and jobs outside the home. The regime claims these measures protect Islamic values and national identity, but there are many places around the world where Islam and democracy thrive together. Instead, the goal of repression is unmistakable: to strip women of access to information, income, and political influence and cement control by cutting half the population out of public life.

The extreme brutality of the Taliban makes it tempting to view them as an outlier that explains little beyond Afghanistan's borders. Yet their misogyny is not exceptional; it's a textbook example. Other authoritarian leaders are watching closely and learning how greater control can be achieved by repressing women. Consider how Iran's religious authorities have assaulted, imprisoned, and killed young women for removing headscarfs, or the calls from governments in China, Hungary, and Russia for women to retreat from public life and return to the home to produce more children. Around the world, authoritarian regimes that have little else in common share a hostility to women's rights. Secular and theocratic, Western and Eastern, developed and developing, dictators of all stripes target women.

TRADITION TURNED TRUNCHEON

Misogyny is an ideological cornerstone and political tool of authoritarianism. Autocrats often promote a zero-sum vision of gender, insisting that any gain for women comes at men's expense. This offers an easy, soothing answer to men (and many women) frustrated by economic stagnation and unsettling cultural change. Behavioral research shows that a scarcity mindset is a potent way to erode empathy and harden social divisions. Many autocrats justify the repression of women as a way to defend "family values," cultural tradition, religion, and national identity. This approach resonates socially and morally, reinforcing the legitimacy of authoritarian power.

By stoking anxieties about women's independence, sexuality, and public authority, autocrats tap into beliefs that feel familiar to many and are thus harder to challenge. And because women who dissent defy both political and gender hierarchies, they are targeted twice over, as the UN high commissioner for human rights explained in 2023, first for threatening the regime and second for violating expectations of docility and deference. Patriarchy becomes both an ideological glue and a mechanism for policing who gets to participate in public life and who must be pushed back into private submission.

The most prominent practitioner and propagandist of this patriarchal approach to authoritarianism is Russian President Vladimir Putin. He is the leader of an illiberal, misogynist, xenophobic international movement that wants to roll back women's rights, expel migrants, disrupt democratic alliances, and undermine the rules-based international order. He portrays women primarily as mothers and caregivers, not equal citizens, while undermining gender equality initiatives and fostering a culture of impunity by decriminalizing domestic violence. He frames these moves as protecting the "traditional values" of family, religion, and masculine authority, in contrast to the liberalism of the West. Media stunts reinforce the image of a manly, moral, and powerful nationalist; photographs of Putin riding shirtless on horseback, winning judo matches, and racing Formula One cars are all meant to cast him as the hero protecting traditionalism from an increasingly open, diverse, and liberal world.

I can say from personal experience that Putin is threatened by strong women. He is also adept at exploiting men's fears about losing social status, in part because he himself is deeply afraid. While one could view the Russian leader as motivated primarily by what he seeks to gain from his power grabs at home and wars abroad, he may be driven more by the fear of loss. He is obsessed with Russia's lost empire and its perceived humiliations, and he is terrified of losing what he has—not just his power but even his life. The "color revolutions" of the first decade of the 2000s in other former Soviet republics made him intensely paranoid. According to the former CIA Director William Burns, Putin frequently rewatched a bloody video recording of the deposed Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi being pulled from a drainage pipe and beaten in 2011.

Putin has cracked down on dissent at home and invaded Ukraine not because he feels strong but because he feels scared. Building up a patriarchal ideology with himself at the top is a way to secure his rule and his ego.

Putin's stooge in neighboring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has similarly leveraged sexist norms to maintain control and sideline women from positions of political influence. Lukashenko has rejected the notion of women's capacity to lead, claiming the constitution "is not for women," and dismissed the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a "housewife." (That Tsikhanouskaya ran for president while juggling the demands of parenting her two young children alone while her husband was a political prisoner would suggest deep reservoirs of resilience and competence.) When she joined with two other Belarusian women leaders, Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova, to mobilize a unified opposition movement, Lukashenko panicked. He rigged the election and forced Tsikhanouskaya into exile in Lithuania.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a Putin ally and unapologetic proponent of "illiberal democracy," embraced a report warning that women's rising college graduation rates threaten marriage and fertility. Meanwhile, he has imposed restrictive measures on abortion access, framing it as a threat to "family values" and national identity.

Similar dynamics appear in other regimes. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has cemented his grip through a combination of policy, rhetoric, and social pressure. As early as 2011, when Turkey dissolved its Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, Erdogan signaled a shift away from women's rights. His government has promoted pronatalist policies, including financial incentives, to encourage families to have three or more children, while publicly criticizing women who prioritize careers over motherhood as "half persons." In 2021, he withdrew his country from the Istanbul Convention, a landmark international accord to address violence against women, because it was "incompatible with Turkey's family values." Erdogan frames these measures as defending the "traditional family" and Turkey's national strength, celebrates hypermasculinity, and has explicitly stated that women are not equal to men. The result is a society in which women's labor, political engagement, and personal autonomy are constantly subordinated to state-defined family ideals.

In China under Xi Jinping, consolidation of power has come hand in hand with an aggressive retrenchment of patriarchal control framed as "family values." Since Xi took power in 2012, the regime has rolled back even the modest liberalization of earlier eras, silencing feminist voices and reasserting the state's authority over women's bodies, choices, and political expression. Online censors have shut down women's rights publications and erased feminist social media accounts, while Xi himself has repeatedly urged women to return to "traditional" roles. In 2023, he called on officials to promote a "marriage and childbearing culture" that steered young people toward "love and marriage, fertility and family."

From personal experience, I know that Putin is threatened by strong women.

Facing a demographic crisis, China's solution has been to push women back into the home by tightening divorce rules, discouraging independence, and treating women primarily as reproducers and caretakers. Human Rights Watch has documented court denials of divorce petitions from trafficked women who endured years of violence, mirroring the broader exploitation generated by decades of a one-child policy and a resulting gender imbalance that has fueled a massive bride-trafficking industry. Outrage over a 2022 video of a woman found chained by the neck (who was later revealed to have been trafficked and sold three times) underscored how entrenched this abuse has become. In the Xinjiang region, the repression takes its most brutal form: placing Uyghur women in mass detention camps where they are forced to use birth control or undergo sterilization surgery. Under Xi, China's authoritarian turn is inseparable from a systematic effort to repatriarchalize society: restricting women's autonomy becomes a tool for fortifying state power.

Even in democracies, patriarchal ideology can be weaponized to roll back rights and restrict women's autonomy. In Argentina, President Javier Milei has vowed to remove femicide from the penal code, dismissing it as an unfair concession to women and deriding "radical feminism" as a "distortion of the concept of equality."

In the United States, the hard-right supermajority on the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating nearly 50 years of legal precedent protecting the right to abortion. This was not a neutral legal shift, but a deliberate ideological intervention that curtailed women's bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom—fundamental tools for equal participation in public, economic, and political life. The rollback of abortion rights has been paired with pronatalist policies and political rhetoric designed to pressure women into traditional roles. U.S. President Donald Trump is considering financial incentives and symbolic awards such as the "National Medal of Motherhood" for mothers with multiple children, framing reproductive labor as a civic duty. Vice President JD Vance has amplified this approach. In 2021, as he positioned himself to run for a Senate seat, he derided Vice President Kamala Harris and other Democratic leaders as "a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives," arguing that the United States is largely governed by people without children who have no direct stake in the country's future. He even suggested penalizing childless people with higher taxes and fewer voting rights.

These measures illustrate a core principle: coercion disguised as policy can be as damaging as overt repression. By defining women's value primarily through their reproductive capacity, such policies restrict economic independence, limit civic engagement, and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. As the scholar Nitasha Kaul has observed, such strategies are part of "anxious and insecure nationalisms" that vilify feminists under the guise of "family values" to consolidate power and suppress challenges to authority. It's alarming but not surprising that the United States withdrew this year from key forums focused on women's rights, peace, and democracy, including the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

The U.S. example underscores a crucial point: ideological attacks on women's autonomy are not confined to autocracies abroad. When women's rights are made conditional, even in long-standing democracies, democratic norms erode faster than many expect. The lesson is urgent and uncomfortable: treating women's autonomy as negotiable weakens democracy itself. And the damage does not stop at a single court ruling or election cycle.

CAUGHT IN THE CROSS HAIRS

Repression of women is not just an ideological move to shore up authoritarian legitimacy; it's also a practical playbook to weaken political opposition, undercut civil society, and extend control. Regimes target female leaders and activists as part of a calculated strategy. They know, as the scholars Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks explained in these pages in 2022, that "when women participate in mass movements, those movements are both more likely to succeed and more likely to lead to more egalitarian democracy." As the political scientist Mona Lena Krook has written: "Traditional definitions of political violence focus on the use of force and intimidation against political opponents. Violence against women in politics is distinct—and also troubling—because it aims to exclude and [dis]empower women as political actors." She emphasizes that this exclusion doesn't just harm the individual victim. It has systemic effects by discouraging women from running for office or participating in politics—a concern reflected in global election results in 2024, when the share of women in national parliaments rose by only 0.3 percentage points. It was the smallest increase in decades.

Sometimes this targeted persecution unfolds behind a veneer of democratic institutions. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni consolidated power over decades through legal manipulation, patronage, and political repression, systematically marginalizing women in the process. Female politicians who challenged the ruling party were sidelined, women's rights organizations harassed, and political quotas manipulated to ensure loyalty rather than genuine representation. Excluding women from independent political influence became a central tactic to weaken democratic checks and entrench control.

In other instances, there is no attempt to hide the brutality. During Charles Taylor's dictatorship from 1997 to 2003 in Liberia, his regime used sexual violence to intimidate women, suppress their political participation, and divide communities. Although the world has belatedly turned its attention to the scourge of rape as a weapon of war, including in conflict zones such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rape is also a weapon of dictatorship in peacetime. Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2005, documented how sexual violence was used to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and lock in their power, silencing women and deterring political participation.

Female leaders and activists faced intimidation, treason charges, prison, and exile. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to be freely elected president in an African nation, was forced into exile twice: first in 1986 by the regime of Samuel Doe, and then in 1997 by Taylor. Despite the threats, Liberian women were unbroken: they helped organize coalitions across ethnic and political lines, including the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, which played a crucial role in pressuring Taylor to end the second Liberian civil war in 2003. Led by Leymah Gbowee, this organization mobilized thousands through sex strikes, sit-ins, and mass vigils to challenge the legitimacy of the warring factions. When the parties finally came to the negotiating table, women literally barred the doors and roads until a peace agreement was reached and democracy was restored.

Attacks on women's autonomy are not confined to autocracies.

In recent years, authoritarians have co-opted technology to further the targeted repression of women. The Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, has spent years raising the alarm about the dangerous ways the online landscape is being weaponized to silence and intimidate women, particularly journalists, youth organizers, and democratic leaders. Ressa bravely reported on the extrajudicial killings and corruption that were hallmarks of Rodrigo Duterte's six-year presidency in the Philippines. As a result, she faced relentless harassment, including racist and sexist online abuse, doxxing, death and rape threats, and a slew of unfounded legal charges.

In her Nobel lecture in 2021, Ressa noted that "what happens on social media doesn't stay on social media," and that "women journalists are at the epicenter of risk." Social media, surveillance enabled by artificial intelligence, and algorithmic echo chambers now amplify misogynistic ideology, allowing authoritarian regimes to target female leaders with ever more precision. Threats that women could once escape through physical exile can now be carried out virtually, spreading disinformation, intimidation, and harassment across borders.

After her husband, Alexei Navalny, died in a Russian prison, Yulia Navalnaya was the victim of an online smear campaign questioning her morality as a wife, mother, and woman as she continued his advocacy for democracy. Fake videos and photos insinuated that she was having affairs and secret abortions and didn't care about her husband's death. In Iran, the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, ignited in 2022 by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in police custody for a supposed violation of the country's hijab law, were met with a brutal crackdown on women's dress. The regime deployed AI surveillance, drones, and citizen-reporting tools, turning women's bodies into objects of state control. And in Serbia, dissidents such as Nikolina Sindjelic, a university student who helped lead protests against government corruption, have been targeted with police violence and image-based sexual abuse, part of a broader pattern of state-sponsored digital harassment to spread fear and silence critics.

LADY LIBERTY

When women are silenced, democracy itself is weakened. Authoritarian regimes do not merely target women as individuals; they attack the very institutions, movements, and norms that sustain democratic governance. Every delay in treating these attacks as an urgent crisis strengthens authoritarian power and narrows the space for resistance. The question is no longer whether women's rights matter to democracy, but whether democracies will act before the erosion becomes irreversible.

There is no quick fix for halting the global rise of authoritarianism, but decades of research and experience suggest clear strategies for strengthening democracies. Central among them is the full and equal participation of women and girls. A March 2025 report titled *Beijing+30: A Roadmap for Women's Rights for the Next 30 Year*s outlines a comprehensive set of policy priorities to advance women's leadership, protect reproductive rights, eliminate gender-based violence, and ensure access to education and economic opportunity. Each is a critical lever for democratic resilience: for example, the report's plea for coalition building among like-minded governments, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations.

Too often, democracy movements treat women's rights as secondary. But history and evidence show that protecting women's ability to participate in the public sphere is central to sustaining democracy. Coordinated alliances have proved essential for both advancing women's rights and strengthening democratic norms:

last year, they secured pledges to expand investment in the care economy, promote women's entrepreneurship, and uphold commitments to eliminate gender-based violence during the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville and defended reproductive rights at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Addressing the repression of women in Afghanistan and similar contexts is both a moral and strategic imperative: autocratic systems persist when women are excluded from the fight for democratic change. Likewise, funders of democracy initiatives must support women's full participation because democracy without women is a contradiction. Coalitions that link women's rights to protecting democracy are essential to holding the line, advancing progress, and preventing backsliding.

Democratization will fail unless women enjoy full and equal participation.

A crucial driver of women's democratic resistance has been the fight for reproductive rights. In Latin America, Argentina's 2018 "Green Wave" mobilized more than a million women of all ages and classes in defense of abortion rights and support of democratic participation. Through mass protests and legal action, the movement succeeded in extending abortion protections in other Latin American countries, including Colombia and Mexico, and elevating women's rights in the democratic debate.

Similarly, the Tunisian activist Aya Chebbi has connected women's rights with broader democracy movements in the region, emphasizing that democratization will fail unless women and young people enjoy full and equal participation. In Slovenia, the sociologist Nika Kovac founded the 8th of March Institute, which played an important role in unseating the country's populist prime minister, Janez Jansa. The women-led nonprofit institute framed the 2022 election as a choice about the future of democracy and helped increase voter turnout by nearly 20 percent. In South Korea, young women were central to the mass protests that led to the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol after his autocratic declaration of martial law in December 2024. Protesters saw the demonstrations as a stand against both authoritarianism and systemic misogyny. In Poland, a 2020 ruling by the Constitutional

Tribunal effectively outlawing abortion sparked nationwide strikes that quickly grew into the largest democratic mobilization in the country since the fall of communism.

Defending women's rights is defending democracy. Three decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, people must still be reminded that democracy and gender equality are not separate issues. The UN Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda provides a clear framework for understanding why. Decades of evidence show that when women participate meaningfully in peace processes and political transitions, democracies are more stable and agreements last longer. Women broaden negotiations to include community security, human rights, and accountability—the very foundations authoritarian regimes seek to erode.

This dynamic has played out most clearly in situations in which women's leadership has been embraced rather than sidelined. Across Africa, women have reshaped political institutions in ways that challenge authoritarian consolidation. In Rwanda, women have held a majority in the lower house of parliament for more than two decades (the current figure is around 60 percent, the highest representation in the world) and have reshaped legislative priorities around health, education, and postconflict reconstruction. And in 2000, Namibia made history by presiding over the UN Security Council meeting that established the WPS agenda, affirming that women must not only be protected from conflict but also empowered to prevent and resolve it. Today, the country continues to reflect that legacy: in 2024, Namibian voters elected Africa's second female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah. She has appointed women to the highest levels of government, including vice president and speaker of parliament, and they make up 60 percent of her cabinet, reinforcing a political culture grounded in inclusion and democratic resilience.

From Northern Ireland, where women helped engineer key provisions of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, to Colombia, where they secured historic protections against gender-based violence in a 2016 peace accord, the WPS agenda demonstrates that women's inclusion is imperative. Such actions do not immunize any country against authoritarian drift, but they demonstrate a core principle: democracy is stronger and repression becomes harder to justify when women's power is institutionalized.

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Ukraine and the New Way of War

Learning the Right Lessons for the Conflicts of the Future

REBECCA LISSNER AND JOHN KAWIKA WARDEN

In the nearly four years since Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war has repeatedly confounded expectations. A conflict that many analysts anticipated would be short and devastating for Kyiv has proved prolonged and costly for both sides. Ukraine's ability to defend its territory, innovate militarily, and rally the United States, European countries, and others to its cause has far exceeded most projections. Russia, for its part, has underperformed militarily but regenerated its forces, improved its tactics over time, and sustained its economy at levels that have surprised even the keenest observers. As the largest land war in Europe since World War II rages on, and with the shape of

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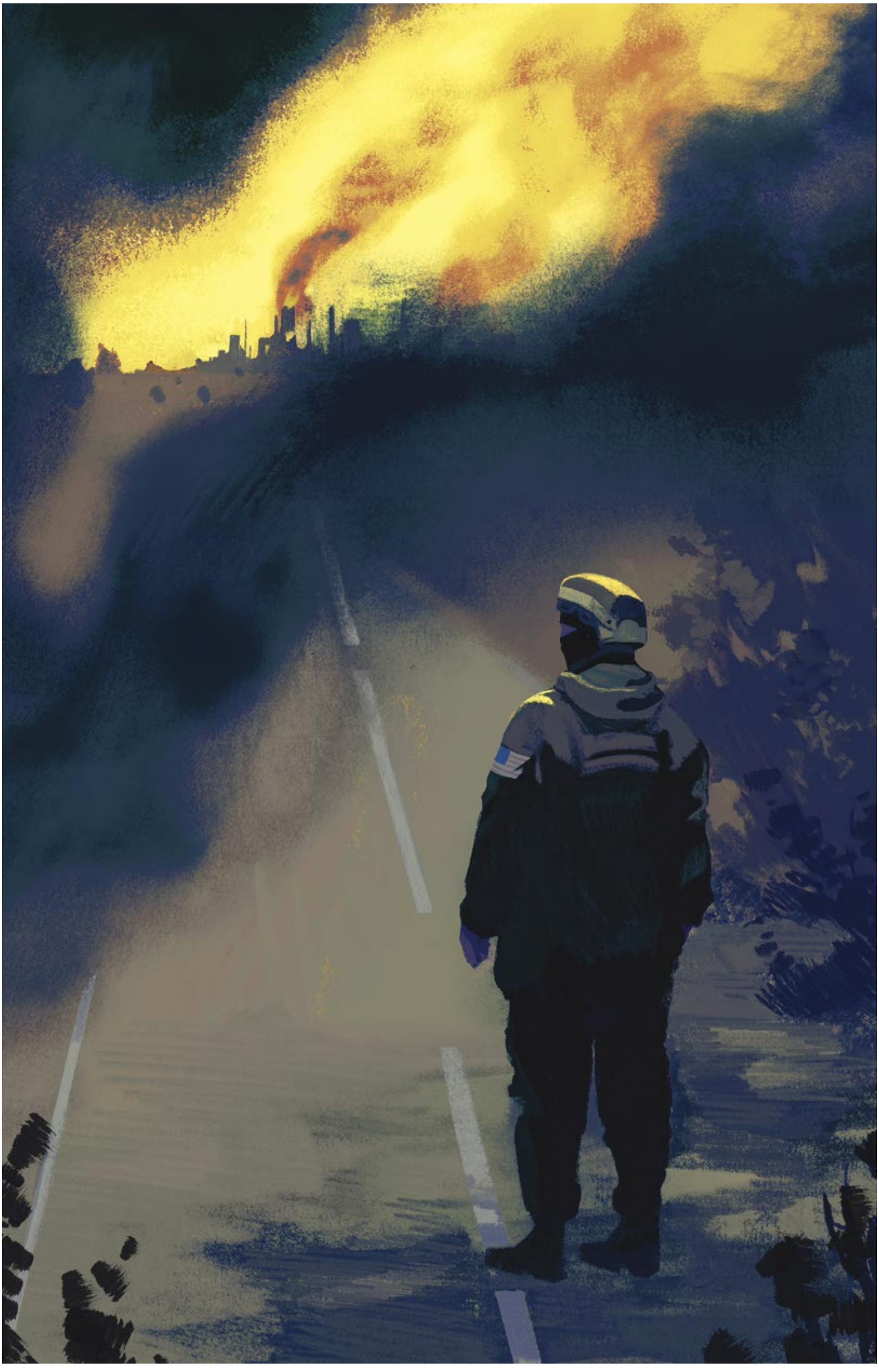

Illustration by Tara Anand

any future peace or even cease-fire still uncertain, more surprises surely lie ahead.

Already, militaries around the world are looking to Ukraine's battlefields, seeing in the cutting-edge technologies and tactics new lessons for the future of warfare. Less considered, however, are the strategic lessons of the war, the first since the fall of the Soviet Union in which two major nuclear powers have found themselves on opposing sides of high-stakes hostilities, even if only indirectly. Although the United States is not a combatant, Washington and Moscow are deeply engaged in shaping the trajectory of the conflict and, by extension, the evolving nature of escalation, deterrence, and warfighting in the twenty-first century.

Washington should not wait until the war's resolution to conduct a comprehensive assessment. It can already take away four important lessons. First, the risk of an adversary using nuclear weapons is real and cannot be dismissed. Second, even under the nuclear shadow, protracted and highly destructive conventional war remains possible. Third, escalation thresholds are not fixed in advance; they emerge through ongoing contestation and tacit bargaining during war. And last, friction with allies and partners, particularly over questions of risk tolerance and escalation management, is inevitable. These lessons suggest that limited war with a nuclear-armed adversary is a scenario for which the United States must more intensively plan and prepare.

To put these lessons into practice, Washington must update its policies and defense planning for limited conflict to ensure it has the flexibility it needs to wage—and win—wars in the twenty-first century. And it cannot do this alone: it must coordinate closely with prospective coalition partners before the next conflict begins, even as it acknowledges the impossibility of total alignment. Doing so will make U.S. security guarantees more credible and, should deterrence falter, its escalation management far more effective. If Washington fails to learn from its experience in Ukraine, however, it will find itself dangerously ill equipped to wage a great-power war, at a moment when the likelihood of such a conflict is growing.

NOT-SO-EMPTY THREATS

For decades after the Cold War, many American policymakers and defense planners treated nuclear weapons as largely irrelevant to high-end conventional war. The durability of the post-1945 tradition of nonuse fostered the belief that the use of nuclear weapons had become politically and morally unthinkable—even for authoritarian leaders facing military defeat. The war in Ukraine is a stark reminder that this view was always too sanguine.

Since its February 2022 full-scale invasion, Russia has consistently made nuclear threats aimed at terrorizing Ukraine, sapping its fighting spirit, and limiting Western support. Much of Russian President Vladimir Putin's saber-rattling rhetoric is bluster. But in the fall of 2022, the combination of public signaling by Putin and U.S. intelligence assessments led Washington to consider Russian nuclear use to be a real possibility. Over the summer, Ukraine's counteroffensive had made significant gains in Kharkiv and pressured Russia's position in Kherson, seemingly catching Russian forces off guard. Suddenly, the catastrophic collapse of Russian lines seemed plausible, opening a path for Ukraine to march toward Crimea, potentially producing a cascading collapse of the Russian army that could threaten Putin's regime.

Nuclear weapons have not given Moscow the coercive leverage many assumed they would.

In that context, Putin issued his most direct nuclear threat. In September 2022, he declared that Russia "will certainly make use of all weapon systems available" to defend its territorial integrity, adding that the statement was "not a bluff." U.S. intelligence corroborated the seriousness of Russia's warning. Later, in 2024, CIA Director William Burns publicly confirmed that the U.S. intelligence community had seen a "genuine risk" of nuclear use if Russia's army lines collapsed. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan subsequently characterized the likelihood of Russian nuclear use as a "coin flip." At the time, the United States issued public and private warnings to Russia that the use of nuclear weapons would result in serious consequences, and the Biden administration encouraged China and India to counsel Moscow against it.

Russian lines ultimately held, and Putin's willingness to employ nuclear weapons was never truly tested. But Moscow's willingness to contemplate nuclear use against a nonnuclear state carries a sobering implication: the norm against the use of nuclear weapons is fragile, and the possibility of nuclear use is not unthinkable. In a direct war between NATO and Russia, the nuclear risk would be even higher and could involve both nonstrategic and strategic nuclear weapons.

Nor is Russia the only source of concern. North Korea is building a diverse arsenal, including weapons explicitly designed for tactical use, and its leader, Kim Jong Un, has signaled that he would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing's long-standing pledge against nuclear first use likely makes its nuclear threshold higher than that of Russia or North Korea, which have made no such commitment. But it remains to be seen whether that policy would hold if China were to face defeat in a conflict over Taiwan. The temptation to use nuclear weapons in such circumstances will only grow as China develops a larger arsenal with a wider reach.

The takeaway for the United States is not that it should retreat in the face of nuclear threats. Doing so would encourage adversaries to exploit Washington's risk aversion and possibly invite nuclear coercion. Instead, the United States must look back to the Cold War, when the threat of Soviet nuclear use loomed over every aspect of U.S. foreign policy, and take nuclear risk seriously while preparing to deter and, if necessary, manage escalation. This is an especially challenging task when dealing with quasi allies such as Ukraine or Taiwan that lack formal defense commitments with the United States, creating greater ambiguity around American obligations.

The United States needs to refresh its policies and plans to defend U.S. and allied interests against Russian, Chinese, and North Korean threats without inordinately risking nuclear escalation. That begins by updating assessments of how the war in Ukraine may have altered adversaries' nuclear strategy and, in particular, their thresholds for nuclear escalation. Doing so will give policymakers a clearer understanding of how to limit conflict across a variety of scenarios, including by exercising selective self-restraint and giving adversaries off-ramps. Washington also needs to expand the set of credible and well-developed military options for responding to nuclear escalation—including offensive cyber, space, and advanced conventional capabilities, as well as theater nuclear capabilities—to enhance deterrence and, should deterrence fail, give the president ample courses of action.

THE LONG HAUL

The war in Ukraine laid bare the reality of nuclear risk in the twenty-first century. But it has also demonstrated the limits of nuclear threats in compelling submission. Despite Russia's overwhelming nuclear advantage, nuclear weapons have not given Moscow the

coercive leverage many assumed they would, since Ukraine has denied Russia its primary war aims. Ukraine repelled Russia's initial invasion, has maintained its sovereign independence, and has inflicted enormous losses on Russian forces, with more than a million casualties and the destruction of billions of dollars' worth of equipment. Kyiv has not capitulated to Moscow's threats and has gradually escalated its own operations. Ukraine has launched strikes on targets inside Russia that many analysts once viewed as likely nuclear redlines, including attacks on oil and gas infrastructure, logistics hubs, the Kerch Strait Bridge connecting Crimea to mainland Russia, and even Russia's nuclear-capable strategic bomber fleet. Ukrainian forces have also carried out incursions into Russian territory, occupying as many as 530 square miles inside Kursk in 2024.

> U.S. allies and partners will not always be more risk tolerant than Washington.

Yet Russia has not responded to these actions with nuclear use. Moscow appeared to most seriously consider nuclear escalation not in response to Ukrainian strikes on its territory but when its frontline forces faced the prospect of a rout. Russia's relative restraint suggests that it does not see nuclear weapons as simply more powerful bombs to be employed when militarily convenient. Nuclear use, Putin has correctly judged, would carry enormous risk, including domestic and international backlash and likely U.S. retaliation.

Still, the war has demonstrated that even if conflicts do not escalate beyond the nuclear threshold, they can involve sustained, highly destructive conventional warfare, especially when escalation is gradual and losses accumulate slowly. Indeed, protraction could be the price Washington pays for escalation management. By attempting to prevent escalation to keep a great-power war limited, the United States would likely create the conditions for a more protracted conflict.

For U.S. policymakers and planners, this lesson should prompt a reassessment of the prevailing assumptions about future wars with Russia or China. Although short, decisive conflicts remain possible—a rapid Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan or a Russian thrust into the Baltic states, for example—and early nuclear escalation cannot be ruled out, the war in Ukraine undercuts the idea that great-power wars would necessarily be brief or quickly escalate to nuclear use. A desire to keep the conflict geographically or militarily contained, the fear of nuclear use, and the difficulty of either winning outright or finding an acceptable off-ramp may instead push adversaries to fight prolonged wars of attrition while attempting to contain escalation.

To deter—or, if necessary, defeat—a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or a U.S. ally in the Indo-Pacific or a Russian attack on a NATO member, the United States must be prepared to deny its adversary a quick operational victory and either escalate to win or prevail in an extended war. A long war would create extraordinary demands on U.S. forces and burn through stockpiles of munitions, missiles, and air defenses. It would damage the U.S. economy, disrupting international trade and supply chains for critical goods and manufacturing inputs. The United States has begun to address some of these challenges, most notably by investing in the defense industrial base, but it has not done enough to prepare for protracted wars of attrition and less-piercing acts of aggression, such as a sustained blockade of Taiwan.

This lack of preparation could force Washington's hand strategically. If the United States were less equipped than its adversary to fight a protracted conflict, it may feel the need to escalate early and dramatically—including potentially to use nuclear weapons—to curtail the conflict before it found itself stretched too thin. Washington relied on this escalation strategy to defend NATO during the Cold War out of necessity, but it has spent the decades since seeking to instead maintain conventional military superiority to place the burden of escalation on adversaries and avoid being boxed into its riskier previous approach. Today, preparing for protraction, arduous as it may be, is the only way to provide the White House with the full complement of options required for a great-power conflict.

BARGAINING PHASE

In Ukraine, the United States and Russia have each attempted to find limits on warfare that would achieve its desired objectives at the lowest possible cost. But neither entered the war with a clear, shared understanding of the other's escalation thresholds. Only repeated probing, signaling, and adjustment by Washington and Moscow revealed how far each would be willing to go. This process of negotiation and contestation, rather than a fixed understanding of escalation thresholds, is likely to define any future great-power war.

In the run-up to Russia's full-scale invasion, Washington and Moscow set the initial parameters of escalation. In December 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden said that putting U.S. troops on the ground to deter or defeat a Russian invasion was “not on the table.” Biden wanted to avoid a direct conflict that would come with the significant risk of nuclear escalation—or, as he put it, “World War III.” Putin, for his part, sought to deter direct intervention by third parties and prevent—or at least limit—support for Ukraine by the United States and its allies and partners. He warned “those who may be tempted to interfere” that “Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”

After the invasion, Washington and Moscow began a process of active probing and tacit bargaining. The Western alliance refused to heed Putin’s threat and continued providing significant economic and military assistance aimed at enabling Ukraine to preserve its sovereignty and retake lost territory. Biden made clear that the United States would defend “every inch of NATO territory,” warning Putin against expanding the conflict or interdicting military assistance provided through Poland and Romania. Moscow attempted to deter the United States from providing tanks, fighter jets, and long-range missiles that would enable Ukrainian strikes into Russian territory.

In most instances, concerns over escalation did not drive the Biden administration’s decisions about what assistance to provide. The United States wanted to give Ukraine the best chance to win the war, and with limited funding made available by Congress, Washington was skeptical of the military utility of high-end capabilities compared with more immediately useful alternatives such as air defenses and artillery rounds. The United States also had its own significant shortfalls in weapons stocks and needed to conserve them for other contingencies.

Russia did, however, find ways to shape the calculus in Washington and other NATO capitals by threatening escalation. Moscow tested what it could get away with short of a direct kinetic attack on NATO: jamming Western space capabilities, carrying out a sabotage campaign against infrastructure and logistics targets in Europe, conducting incursions into NATO airspace. Doing so allowed Russia to create a perception in Washington and European capitals that it might be willing to escalate. That concern, in turn, led the United States and its NATO allies to circumscribe their on-the-ground military and intelligence cooperation with Ukraine; delay the provision of long-range strike capabilities, such as the surface-to-surface ballistic Army Tactical Missile System

(ATACMS); and put limits on the types of Ukrainian strikes into Russian territory they were willing to support or tolerate.

Yet over the course of the war, the United States and its allies and partners contravened nearly all the limits on Western assistance that Russia attempted to maintain. By probing Russia's threats and gradually escalating its support for Ukraine's forces, Washington was able to "salami slice" away Russia's purported escalation thresholds, exposing most Russian threats as hollow. Meanwhile, Western intelligence sharing and operations support have enabled the Ukrainian military to use increasingly sophisticated capabilities to great effect.

Before the war, it would have been unthinkable that the United States would go as far as it has in facilitating long-range strikes into Russia without inviting a direct attack against NATO—and if the United States had taken that step in the first days after the invasion, it may have provoked such a response from Russia. But because the Biden administration escalated its assistance gradually, each step looked like an incremental change, not a dramatic jump. Before providing ATACMS, the United States sent Ukraine shorter-range missiles and one-way attack drones. Before enabling strikes on targets in Russia, the United States supported attacks against occupied Crimea.

To be sure, this strategy had its limitations. Although Ukraine has been able to prevent conquest and impose severe costs on Russia, it has little prospect of recovering full control of its entire territory any time soon. It is doubtful that any form of military assistance would have been a silver bullet, but in retrospect, Washington withheld some assistance and constrained Ukrainian operations longer than necessary: although earlier provision of ATACMS would not have made the difference that the most vocal advocates of their use suggest, the Ukrainian military could have employed them to target logistics hubs, airfields, and other high-value targets well behind the front in order to disrupt Russian operations and support Kyiv's counteroffensives in 2023 and 2024.

In the event of a conflict with Russia or China, bargaining over escalation thresholds will again prove critical in determining the costs both sides will endure—and in determining which side emerges victorious. Unlike in Ukraine, a war with Russia or China will likely invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Taiwan Relations Act, or a bilateral mutual defense treaty, meaning that direct U.S. involvement will not represent the most consequential threshold. But even then, the parties will bargain over significant conflict thresholds, be they strikes on national territory, attacks on critical infrastructure, or nuclear escalation. Washington must be prepared to probe, signal, and maneuver along the escalation spectrum—sometimes restraining itself, sometimes escalating deliberately—to establish advantageous limits that provide the United States the military freedom to achieve its desired objectives while minimizing the cost and risk.

Beyond deterring nuclear attack, the United States must be prepared to set limits on conflict. Conflict in space and cyberspace, for example, may be unavoidable, but Washington should nonetheless seek to spare its most important assets in space, including those that facilitate nuclear command and control, and prevent cyberattacks that could permanently damage critical infrastructure, such as the power grid or the financial system, by threatening severe consequences while withholding commensurate attacks. On land, Russia and China will hope to protect their own territory so that they can strike and resupply with impunity. The United States must be prepared to escalate and probe, seeking to conduct select strikes on mainland targets from which Moscow and Beijing are likely to launch aggressive attacks. Washington should still exercise restraint in the intensity of strikes on these mainland targets to deter large-scale retaliatory strikes. Precisely because any limits will emerge through tacit bargaining, it will be impossible to establish these thresholds in advance of a potential conflict. Washington needs approaches to warfare designed as much for probing as for military effect.

AGREE TO DISAGREE

As much as the war has showcased NATO's capacity to come together in support of a threatened partner, it has also tested Washington's ability to manage a coalition during a high-stakes conflict and made clear the limits of Washington's control of escalation management. Ukraine has demonstrated a higher tolerance for escalation risks, particularly those associated with strikes on Russian territory, than the United States and some of its NATO allies have. It has also acted without U.S. input, at times working at cross-purposes with the United States. These dynamics would exist even if Washington were fighting alongside treaty allies, but they are particularly challenging when the United States must come to the aid of quasi allies such as Ukraine and, in the event of a conflict with China, Taiwan.

Ukraine's forces are fighting for the survival of their country with military, intelligence, and other forms of assistance from the United States and other partners. Washington can decide the scope and scale of the security assistance it provides and include end-use restrictions on how the Ukrainian armed forces employ U.S. weapons. But since the United States is not a combatant, key tactical, operational, and strategic choices ultimately lie with Kyiv.

The United States and Ukraine have at several points diverged in their assessments of the risk-reward calculus of strikes on targets in Russia. Whereas Washington counseled caution, particularly in using U.S. military materiel to hit Russian territory, and encouraged a focus on operations that would degrade Russia's occupying forces or otherwise disrupt Russian military operations, Kyiv consistently sought permission for deeper strikes against a broader range of targets, seeking to weaken Russia's military operations, impose economic and political costs on Putin's regime, and bolster Ukrainian morale. Although Ukraine generally honored the limits the United States placed on it, it conducted the invasion of the Kursk region using American equipment without Washington's approval or coordination. Kyiv also used its own drone capabilities, over which Western governments could exert less control, to strike critical infrastructure and targets thought to have symbolic importance for Moscow. This divergence is hardly surprising; Ukraine was not concerned about provoking a Russian attack on NATO. If anything, drawing the West directly into the war would be a boon for Kyiv.

The war in Ukraine has been a tragic tutorial in twenty-first-century conflict.

But U.S. allies and partners will not always be more risk tolerant than Washington. If Russia had employed nuclear weapons against Ukraine and Kyiv feared that follow-on strikes might devastate its armed forces or kill hundreds of thousands of civilians in population centers, Ukraine, in the nuclear cross hairs with much to lose, might have proved less risk tolerant. The United States, by contrast, might have felt that with the norm against nuclear use already shattered, its leadership of the global nuclear order was at stake. As a result, Washington might have been willing to take on more risk, including potentially entering the conflict directly.

The United States should recognize the inevitability of wartime friction with its coalition partners and plan accordingly. The need for such planning is particularly acute with respect to quasi allies such as Ukraine and Taiwan, for which the United States has devised no mature processes for peacetime planning and wartime combined operations. But even when the United States comes to the defense of a treaty ally and can assume more direct control, national interests and leaders' political incentives will invariably diverge. And because of the proliferation of long-range weapons systems, U.S. allies will be independently capable of inflicting meaningful damage on adversaries. Washington and its partners can reduce friction by seeking alignment ahead of time on questions of military strategy and escalation management.

With its treaty allies, Washington should revisit joint military plans and test command structures by conducting realistic war games and exercises. With Taipei, it needs to develop a common understanding of how command and control would work if the United States were to intervene to defend Taiwan, using war games, alongside official and unofficial dialogues, to surface and resolve disagreements over operational risk tolerance, escalation management, and war termination. And with Ukraine, although Kyiv and Washington already cooperate successfully, the United States should take advantage of any cease-fire to jointly plan for how to fight renewed Russian aggression, especially if Washington extends a security guarantee and NATO allies deploy forces in Ukrainian territory.

THE FIRES NEXT TIME

The war in Ukraine has been a tragic and costly tutorial in twenty-first-century conflict. Both sides have mobilized and reshaped their societies, attacked a variety of important targets, and suffered devastating casualties. The great-power wars of the future could be even more destructive.

Yet these wars are likely to remain limited rather than total, because all sides want to achieve their objectives while containing costs and avoiding nuclear catastrophe. This challenge is not novel; it was a hallmark of the Cold War. But the war in Ukraine is a harbinger of a new era of limited war. Preparing for it demands a theory of victory rooted in favorable escalation management, refined through constant interrogation of escalation thresholds, and translated into refreshed U.S. strategies, plans, and capabilities that expand options available to the president. By showing that it can come to the defense of allies and partners at an acceptable risk level, the United States will strengthen deterrence by making its intervention more credible in the eyes of its adversaries.

Escalation management is not only about avoiding nuclear war. The United States must also shape how its adversaries fight under the nuclear shadow by threatening higher costs and greater risk if they cross certain thresholds. Future wars between the United States and Russia or China are likely to extend into their respective homelands and into space and cyberspace, and Washington will need to figure out what limits it ought to maintain on conflicts in those domains.

Planning is crucial. But wars never unfold exactly as envisioned. The United States must hone its skills in probing and tacit negotiation. Adversaries will try to constrain and deter U.S. actions while seeing what they can get away with under U.S.-imposed limits by testing the seriousness of American threats to escalate. At times, the United States will need to intentionally escalate to an advantageous position. At other times, slow escalation or self-restraint may be the best way to discourage escalation by adversaries. In every case, policymakers must ensure that the risks Washington takes are calculated and aimed at bringing a potential conflict to an acceptable close. And in every case, Washington should make the necessary investments in its strategic stockpiles, its defense industrial base, and its national resilience against cyberattacks and economic shocks to prevail in a protracted conflict. Such careful calibration will require intense coordination with coalition partners fighting alongside the United States. Whenever possible, Washington and its partners should carry out joint exercises designed to align expectations in advance of a conflict. But exquisite coordination on strategic messaging and signaling in the midst of hostilities is also essential, particularly with Taiwan, where restrictions on contact between Washington and Taipei constrain joint peacetime contingency planning and operational integration.

Above all, the war in Ukraine has shown the United States that it needs a new theory of victory for wars that feature great-power aggressors attacking U.S. allies or quasi allies. Only by linking credible threats, calibrating escalation, and managing coalition partnerships can Washington and its allies prevail in wars that remain limited in intensity and scope but nevertheless take a massive toll.

Europe's Next Hegemon

The Perils of German Power

LIANA FIX

"I give you my solemn warning that under the present trend, the next world war is inevitable," declared the French military leader Ferdinand Foch. It was 1921, and Foch, the commander in chief of the Allied armies during World War I, was raising alarms in a speech from New York City. His concern was simple. After defeating Germany, the Allied powers had forced it to disarm with the Treaty of Versailles. But just a couple of years later, they had stopped enforcing the terms of their victory. Berlin, Foch warned, thus could and would rebuild its military. "If the Allies continue their present indifference . . . Germany will surely rise in arms again."

Foch's comments proved prescient. By the late 1930s, Germany had indeed rebuilt its military. It seized Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and then Poland, sparking World War II. When it was again defeated, the Allies were more attentive in their management of the country.

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Illustration by Nathan St. John

They occupied and divided it, disbanded its armed forces, and largely abolished its defense industry. When the United States and the Soviet Union allowed West Germany and East Germany, respectively, to reestablish their militaries, it was only under strict oversight. When they allowed the halves to merge, Germany had to limit the size of its armed forces. Even so, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher opposed reunification, fearing it would produce a dangerously powerful country. A bigger Germany, she warned in 1989, "would undermine the stability of the whole international situation and could endanger our security."

Should Germany stay the course, it will be a great military power before 2030.

Today, Foch's and Thatcher's fears seem to belong to ancient history. As Europe has navigated one crisis after another in recent decades—most important, Russia's aggression against Ukraine—the continent's officials have worried not that Berlin might become too strong but that it is far too weak. "I fear German power less than German inaction," declared Radoslaw Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister, in 2011, during Europe's financial crisis. It was a remarkable statement coming from a Polish official, given that Warsaw has traditionally been one of the governments most worried about German power. He is hardly alone: Germany's military must "spend more and produce more," declared NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in 2024.

Now, these leaders are getting what they wanted. After many delays, Germany's *Zeitenwende*—its 2022 promise to become one of Europe's defense leaders—is finally becoming a reality. In 2025, Germany spent more on defense than any other European country in absolute terms. Its military budget today ranks fourth in the world, just after Russia's. Annual military spending is expected to reach $189 billion in 2029, more than triple what it was in 2022. Germany is even considering a return to mandatory conscription if its military, the Bundeswehr, cannot attract enough voluntary recruits. Should the country stay the course, it will again be a great military power before 2030.

People in Europe have largely been happy to see Berlin rebuild its military to defend against Russia. But they should be careful what they wish for. Today's Germany has pledged to use its outsize armed power to help all of Europe. But left unchecked, German military dominance might eventually foster divisions within the continent. France remains uneasy about the fact that its neighbor is becoming a major military power—as are many people in Poland, despite Sikorski's sentiments. As Berlin ascends, suspicion and mistrust could grow. In the worst-case scenario, competition might return. France, Poland, and other states could attempt to counterbalance Germany, which would divert attention away from Russia and leave Europe divided and vulnerable. France, in particular, may seek to reassert itself as the continent's leading military power and "*grande nation*." This could prompt outright rivalry with Berlin and place Europe at odds with itself.

Such nightmarish outcomes are especially likely if Germany ends up being governed by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is rising in the polls. The intensely nationalistic party has long been critical of the European Union and NATO, and some of its members have made revanchist claims about the territory of neighboring countries. An AfD-controlled Germany might use its power to bully or coerce other countries, leading to tensions and conflict.

Berlin does need to build up its military. The continent is in danger, and no other European government has the fiscal capacity that Germany can bring to bear. But Berlin must recognize the risks that accompany its strengths and restrain German power by embedding its defensive might in more deeply integrated European military structures. Germany's European neighbors, for their part, should make clear what kind of defense integration they would like to see. Otherwise, German rearmament could very well yield a Europe that is more divided, mistrustful, and weaker—exactly the opposite of what Berlin now hopes to achieve.

TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

For many, it is hard to understand why Germany's rearmament could lead to competition and instability in Europe. All Europeans are familiar, of course, with the country's militaristic history. But in the decades after World War II, Germany integrated both its economy and its defense apparatus deeply into Europe. West Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, firmly rejected the idea of turning his country into an independent military power and advocated integrating the West German armed forces either into a European army or into NATO. After the end of the Cold War, Germany adopted an approach of military restraint and identified itself as a "civilian power"—one that was trustworthy and nonthreatening, even as reunification made it far stronger. As Helmut Kohl, the first leader of reunified Germany, declared in 1989, "Only peace may come from German soil." The economic and political integration later brought about by the EU created a pan-European identity and fostered a perception that European countries, Germany among them, had shared strategic interests and could thus never return to competition.

And yet, as some realist scholars have argued, rivalry among Europe's countries never really disappeared, and certainly not through the EU alone. It was merely subdued, and largely by NATO and American hegemony. The EU was, and is, primarily an economic organization. Security and defense in Europe were mostly in the hands of NATO and the U.S. military. It was an overbearing U.S. presence, in other words, that ameliorated the European security dilemma that Germany's size and position have traditionally posed—not just the political and economic integration fostered by the EU.

Now that the United States seems to be reducing the attention and resources it has historically committed to Europe, that competition could return. It might start in small and harmless ways. Other European countries are already uneasy about Germany's military buildup and defense spending. Berlin, for example, is planning to spend the lion's share of its defense budget on German defense companies, exploiting an exception to EU competition rules that allows member countries to skip notification and clearance procedures for the public funding of national defense industries when such spending is a matter of essential security interests. This will undermine collaboration and make it difficult for true European defense industrial champions to emerge. It does not help that Germany wants procurement to remain firmly in the hands of national governments and rejects a greater coordinating role for the European Commission. What the continent's defense industry needs is Europeanization and a single market for weaponry, but Berlin's policies are not pushing the sector in this direction.

France, Italy, Sweden, and others have taken advantage of the same EU loophole to build up their defense sectors, and they have military industries big enough to moderate German dominance. But no European country can match Berlin's spending. Germany recently loosened its debt brake to allow for almost unlimited defense expenditures, an option that most European countries—which have larger deficits—don't have. The best solution to this conundrum would be for the European Commission to engage in large-scale joint borrowing for defense. A precedent for doing this already exists: the eurobonds the commission issued during the COVID-19 crisis. Berlin, however, has refused

to allow such a sweeping defense initiative. Instead, it has endorsed only conditional borrowing programs such as EU SAFE, which offers up to $175 billion in cheap loans for collaborative defense projects. These programs (and future ones like them) simply cannot meet the consistent financial demand for capital-intensive defense-industrial endeavors. They are also small compared with Germany's plan to spend more than $750 billion on defense over the next four years.

German policymakers say they do not want to foot the bill for exuberant domestic spending by what they see as fiscally less responsible governments in the EU, especially not when their country's growth is stagnating. But this argument is self-righteous: Berlin's past balanced budgets and economic growth were powered for many years by exports to China and cheap Russian energy, without concern for the political risks of financing Beijing's assertiveness and Moscow's aggression. Germany's position is also shortsighted. It is in Berlin's interest to let other parts of Europe spend liberally on defense without having to cut social welfare. Such cuts, after all, lead to populist backlash, which will undercut unity on Ukraine and defensive efforts against Russia—the very reason more spending is required.

Berlin argues that it is pursuing partnerships with other European governments to ensure that Germany's defense spending benefits the entire neighborhood. In its view, even if domestic firms gain the most from German spending, the cake is big enough for everyone to get a piece. Berlin also sees the stationing of German troops in the Baltic States—and possibly more countries in the future—as enough of a reassurance that it has Europe's best interests in mind and is not just focused on its own rearmament. But offering the continent's other states a piece of the cake is unlikely to stifle their uneasiness about German dominance, particularly against the backdrop of the United States' retreat and uncertainty about NATO. For all the enthusiasm Europeans feel for Germany's defense buildup right now, many are beginning to ask questions about how Berlin plans to embed its military and industrial dominance in Europe. They want to see Germany pulling its weight, not throwing it around.

MIGHT MAKES FRIGHT

German policymakers are brushing aside such concerns. They argue that Germany's neighbors cannot have both a weak Berlin and a strong one that can defend Europe. Their attitude to European unease seems to be that because the continent asked for the buildup, it does not get to complain about it.

But this argument will not assuage concerns about German dominance. Paris does not like the idea of Germany being Europe's military powerhouse because it believes that's France's role. It will closely watch for any signs that Germany might aspire to get nuclear weapons—the only remaining domain of French superiority. Some Polish officials fear that a militarily powerful Germany might one day feel free to restore amicable relations with Russia. Poles, and not only those who support the populist Law and Justice party, have also voiced concerns that a dominant Germany will marginalize the role of smaller EU states and could use its power to coerce them.

Analysts who want to understand why Europeans fear German hegemony do not need to look back a century; a decade would suffice. During Europe's 2010s fiscal crisis, several EU countries were drowning in debt and in need of bailouts from the EU. That meant, in practice, getting approval for bailouts from Germany, the biggest and wealthiest eurozone economy. But rather than showing solidarity and using its enormous wealth to generously help these states, Berlin was concerned about fiscal responsibility and imposed harsh austerity measures as part of bailout packages, resulting in double-digit unemployment and protracted misery for debtor countries. The German government was particularly tough on Greece, forcing deep cuts to its social welfare programs and other government services. The country's unemployment rate reached nearly 30 percent in 2013, and by the middle of the decade, its GDP contracted by a quarter. Greeks, in turn, grew to detest Berlin. One famous Greek poster depicted Germany's then chancellor, Angela Merkel, dressed in a Nazi uniform.

If Germany does not take steps to mitigate mistrust and discomfort, competition really could return to Europe. To counterbalance Berlin's military might, Poland, for example, might look to ally itself more closely with the Baltic and Nordic countries and the United Kingdom in the Joint Expeditionary Force. It might also look to join the Nordic-Baltic Eight, a regional cooperation framework among Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. Either way, the result could be the fragmentation of common European defense efforts. Paris, for its part, might be tempted to reassert itself by significantly increasing its defense spending as a way of catching up with, and containing, Germany, despite France's domestic fiscal troubles. Paris might also seek closer cooperation with London to counterbalance Berlin.

If Europe is divided and destabilized by internal competition, both the EU and NATO might be paralyzed. Russia could sense an opening to test NATO's Article 5 commitment to collective defense, in addition to plowing ahead in Ukraine. China could exploit the continent economically, threatening its industrial strength. Europe would struggle to defend itself, particularly in Washington's absence. And if the United States becomes a hostile power, as its talk of annexing Greenland suggests, it will have an easier time manipulating the continent. A divided Europe, in other words, would become a pawn in the game of the great powers.

THE RETURN OF REVANCHISM

A militarily dominant Germany could prove particularly dangerous if its centrist domestic leadership starts to lose power—as it just well might. The country is not due to hold national elections for three more years, but the extremist AfD now polls in first place at the national level. It subscribes to a far-right, illiberal, and Euroskeptic ideology. It is Russia-friendly, opposed to supporting Ukraine, and wants to reverse Germany's post-1945 economic and military integration into the EU and NATO, at least in their current form. It sees military power as a tool of national aggrandizement that should be used exclusively to benefit Berlin. It hopes to develop a German defense industry that's entirely autonomous from those of Berlin's traditional allies. If it wins federal power, the AfD will use the German military exactly as Thatcher feared: to project power against Germany's neighbors. In the same way that Washington has made once inconceivable claims on Canada and Greenland, an AfD-led Germany might eventually make claims on French or Polish territory.

Germany's centrist parties are aware of how frightening the AfD is to neighboring countries. They have, accordingly, worked to quarantine it, with the center-right and center-left forming grand coalitions to keep it away from federal authority. But blocking the AfD is becoming harder each year. The party received the second largest number of votes in Germany's 2025 elections. It will likely be emboldened by the 2026 state elections: polls show the party within reach of a majority in Mecklenburg–West Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt. If it wins a plurality of seats in Germany's next national election, the firewall might collapse.

The return of revisionism and revanchism under the AfD would take place gradually, then suddenly. As a first step, Germany's center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union, which for now remains firmly opposed to the AfD, might allow the far-right party to indirectly prop it up as the leader of a conservative minority government. The AfD would then use its newfound prominence to mainstream its ideology. It would also try to take the government hostage, threatening to bring it down if it doesn't pass far-right policies. AfD representatives would push for an end to support for Ukraine, but they could also stoke tensions with Germany's neighbors by making irredentist claims about lands once controlled by Berlin, such as some of the former eastern territories of the German Reich that have been part of Poland (and Russia) since 1945. A conservative minority government would insist that it would collaborate with the AfD only on specific issues and that Germany's main principles in foreign and defense policy would remain unchanged. But the AfD's newfound power would almost certainly cause a huge loss of trust and greater tensions with other European countries.

Germany could emerge as a nationalist, militaristic hegemon in Europe.

In an even more dangerous scenario, the AfD might become an official partner in a coalition government—or even the coalition's leader. It would then push to formally disentangle Germany from Western structures or to weaken them from within. It would, for instance, try to reshape the EU into an illiberal "Europe of Nations" without the euro as a common currency, reversing Germany's integration into the continent. Doing so would weaken the economic ties that have promoted peace for 80 years in Europe, reintroduce countless economic problems, and prompt all kinds of intra-European political fights. The AfD would also likely withdraw from the remaining NATO efforts against Russia, opt for appeasing the Kremlin, and push to withdraw the German brigade from Lithuania. It might also try to have Berlin leave NATO altogether, although if NATO is led by an illiberal United States, it could want to stay. It might blow up cooperation and reconciliation with France and the United Kingdom, including by suspending the newly concluded Treaty of Aachen and the Kensington Treaty, which elevated French-German and British-German security cooperation to new levels. Germany would emerge as a go-it-alone, nationalist, militaristic hegemon in Europe.

In response, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom would almost certainly establish counterbalancing coalitions designed to contain Germany, even if they were also governed by right-wing parties. Other European states might do the same. An AfD-led Germany, meanwhile, would seek out its own alliances—for example, with a Germany-friendly Austria or Hungary. The continent's ability to defend itself against external threats would effectively dissipate. Europeans would be at each other's throats again, exactly what the United States has long sought to prevent.

GOLDEN HANDCUFFS

There is a way for Berlin to expand its military power without sending Europe back to an era of competition and rivalry—perhaps even if Germany is eventually governed by the AfD. The solution is for the country to accept what the historian Timothy Garton Ash, writing in these pages three decades ago, called "golden handcuffs": restrictions on its sovereignty through greater integration with its European neighbors.

Past German leaders have made this tradeoff. Adenauer integrated West Germany's new Bundeswehr into NATO. To reunify with East Germany, Kohl traded the deutsche mark for the euro, surrendering Berlin's monetary sovereignty. Today's leaders should follow those examples. They can start by accepting large-scale joint European debt for defense and thus allow countries with less fiscal wiggle room than Germany to spend generously on defense without further indebting themselves and risking—as might happen with France—further credit downgrades. Compared with most European countries, the EU's aggregate borrowing costs are low, and as the largest economy in the eurozone, Germany can afford to serve as the guarantor of last resort. Doing so would embed German military and industrial power more thoroughly in Europe by making Berlin take on financial responsibility for the continent's armament. (It might also foster more joint decision-making, since EU states could work together on selecting the defense projects and priorities financed by these eurobonds.)

Germany should also push for the stronger integration of Europe's national defense industries, including by seeking more collaboration on its own projects rather than spending largely on domestic firms. Likewise, Germany should embrace true European defense companies akin to Airbus, which was created as a European aviation consortium to provide an alternative to American manufacturers. All these measures would not only avert fears of a dominant Germany by ensuring that

Berlin's defense base relied on others. It would also provide greater scale and effectiveness in Europe's overall military buildup.

Finally, and most ambitiously, Germany and its European allies should think about deeper military integration. Because the United States has been pulling back, Europe will need to find military formats and structures outside NATO with which to defend itself. And although a European army remains unlikely for the foreseeable future, the continent's countries will have to create larger multinational military formations to deter Russia. (There are already small examples of such attempts, including a French-German brigade and some EU battlegroups, although they have yet to be deployed.) In addition, the continent should establish European command structures that tightly integrate the Bundeswehr with other armed forces and offer an alternative to NATO structures at times of transatlantic tensions. Deeper European military integration would constrain German power by subjecting Germany to collective decision-making. It would even hedge against an AfD-led government by making it virtually impossible to extricate the Bundeswehr from joint initiatives without taking drastic and unpopular measures, such as leaving the EU or other cooperative European institutions. The "coalition of the willing" that various European officials have proposed deploying to Ukraine after a peace settlement could serve as a trial run.

The risk of fracturing the continent ought to give Washington pause about pulling back—and especially about supporting the AfD. If Europe returns to great-power competition, Washington might ultimately have to commit more resources to the continent than it has over the last several decades in order to prevent Europe from descending into conflict. This is precisely the outcome that the White House wants to avoid.

But an unstable and fragmented Europe is by no means guaranteed, even in an era of reduced American involvement. European countries have learned to integrate and cooperate over the last eight decades in ways that past observers would have dismissed as fantasies. In fact, thanks to Russia's invasion, continental concord is higher now than at any point in history. Europe has plenty of ways to avoid a security dilemma centered on a dominant Germany. The brutal pressure from Washington could even further unite the continent and forge a stronger European identity. Such a positive outcome will require restraint, far-sightedness, and luck. But the continent's leaders must work hard to achieve it. The stakes are too high—and the alternative unspeakable.

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Europe's Next War

The Rising Risk of NATO-Russia Conflict

SAMUEL CHARAP AND HISKI HAUKKALA

For the last four years, policymakers in Washington and European capitals have been consumed by a single question: how to respond to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Their focus is understandable. Russia's attack on its neighbor is the greatest threat to European security since U.S. and Soviet tanks stood off in Berlin over 60 years earlier. As a result, NATO allies have sent Ukraine hundreds of billions of dollars in military, economic, and humanitarian assistance to prevent it from losing the war and collapsing. The Europeans have received waves of refugees and, together with the Americans, enacted tough sanctions against Russia. Facing pressure from U.S. President Donald

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Illustration by Patrik Svensson

Trump, leaders across the alliance have held a series of summits to try to end the fighting.

But the resolution of the conflict, whatever its contours, will not put an end to the forces it has unleashed. Indeed, a cease-fire could mark the start of an even more dangerous era. Once the guns fall silent, Russia and Ukraine will still be locked in a tense confrontation. Moscow will rearm and likely increase its destabilizing activities across the continent. Europe will keep spending more on defense, disavowing the integration it once pursued with Russia and adopting a more hawkish posture. The United States might try to disentangle itself from the standoff, but its economic and political stakes in Europe will make a full withdrawal impossible. There will, in short, be little communication and much suspicion between NATO and Russia.

This is hardly a recipe for a new long peace. Quite the opposite: the risk of a direct conflict between Russia and Western states will remain unacceptably high. With prolonged distrust, ongoing military buildups, minimal communication, a gutted security architecture, and continued Kremlin provocations, there will be no shortage of scenarios in which a small spark could lead to a continental conflagration. The odds of war could grow especially high if the transatlantic alliance frays or even collapses.

Policymakers in the United States and Europe must not allow that to happen. Even as they struggle to end Europe's current war, they must begin working to prevent the next one. NATO should accept that there's no returning to the pre-2022 world and develop new ways to manage its relationship with the Kremlin. Otherwise, the Americans and the Europeans might find themselves in a third global conflict, with the continent once again the central battlefield.

POINT OF NO RETURN

For most of the post–Cold War era, Russia and Western states had working relations. After their confrontation ended, the two sides established a latticework of institutions, diplomatic forums, and exchange programs aimed at fostering mutual understanding and preventing conflict. They created the inclusive and consensus-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a continent-wide forum for dialogue based on shared norms and institutions. They set up various mechanisms for interaction and even cooperation between NATO and Russia. And they implemented a host of arms control agreements and military confidence-building measures.

This framework was never perfect, and it nearly collapsed when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014. But it was broadly successful at preventing a return to a Cold War–style standoff. The economies of the European Union and Russia grew increasingly interdependent: the former received cheap energy and other raw materials, and the latter gained large amounts of foreign direct investment, Western knowledge, and sophisticated consumer products. Millions of people began traveling back and forth between Europe and Russia each year via trains, land crossings, and dozens of daily flights. Russia was part of the EU's educational standardization, which meant that degrees from its universities were recognized across the continent. Moscow was a party to the Council of Europe—the continent's human rights, democracy, and rule-of-law organization—and its multitude of conventions.

A cease-fire in Ukraine could mark the start of an even more dangerous era.

But when Russian tanks started rumbling toward Kyiv on February 24, 2022, this system fell apart. The NATO-Russia Council was immediately suspended and subsequently abolished. Moscow withdrew from the Council of Europe. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe still technically exists, but it now serves as a forum for Russia and NATO countries to exchange mutual ritualistic condemnations and accusations. EU-Russian trade has nosedived: in 2024, the total trade in goods between the EU and Russia amounted to around $80 billion, compared with around $300 billion only three years before. Aside from recent U.S. engagement on Ukraine, Western officials speak to their Russian counterparts very little, if at all, on any level. Educational exchanges have almost entirely ceased. The land crossings between Russia and its NATO neighbors are all either closed or heavily restricted. The only direct flight between Moscow and countries in Europe, aside from Belarus, is an Air Serbia flight that departs from Belgrade.

At first, Western allies told themselves that these steps were temporary. But after four years, it is apparent that this shift is permanent.


The Finland Station: British soldiers training near Kajaani, Finland, December 2025

Although some past wars—for example, World War II—have ended in reorderings in which the trends and systems that existed before and during the conflict were upended, the war in Ukraine is unlikely to produce such a moment. Neither side seems capable of achieving an absolute victory, which means the Russian regime is extremely unlikely to collapse and be replaced with a more liberal government—as happened in Germany and Japan after their defeats. For at least as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin is in power, his country will remain a personalist autocracy. Its economy will be weakened, but unlike the Soviet Union's command economy, it will not collapse.

With so many of its people dead and wounded and many more alienated by both domestic propaganda and Western policy and rhetoric, Russia will be angry and resentful toward the United States and Europe after the war in Ukraine is over. Moscow will have every motive to rearm and regenerate its forces. Some of those forces will be stationed in and around Ukraine, but many will be deployed along NATO's eastern flank in order to tilt the military balance in Russia's favor. According to Finland's 2025 military intelligence review, after the war Moscow is expected to more than double the number of troops it stations along NATO's northern

OWEN HUMPHREYS / PA IMAGES / GETTY IMAGES frontiers—from 30,000 to 80,000—and to modernize key capabilities in the region.

The old Russia, which at least paid lip service to cooperation, is not coming back. But prewar Europe is also long gone. The allies are in a process of remilitarization. They are massively increasing defense spending. Some of them are contemplating reinstituting mandatory national military service. Others are distributing manuals on what to do in case of an invasion. European countries will also position more troops near the NATO-Russian frontier: since Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, the alliance has been planning several new multinational military formations in the region. Meanwhile, officials have reengineered their countries' economies away from being dependent on Russia, particularly for energy imports. European policymakers are personally—and justifiably—mortified by Russia's ongoing aggression and atrocities in a country that borders four members of the EU and NATO. As a result, they have adopted hard lines on Russia and are deeply skeptical about the prospects for any engagement.

For now, it is safe to conclude that the continent's environment after the war in Ukraine ends will not be dramatically different from the unstable environment of today. NATO allies and Russia will remain largely cordoned off from each other, with no functioning mechanisms for intergovernmental or intersocietal communications. They will struggle to understand each other's decisions and will assume the other side is hostile in intent.

ON THE BRINK

As relations have deteriorated, policymakers in both Europe and Russia have warned that they are on a path to war. A July 2025 French National Strategic Review warned of the "risk of open warfare against the heart of Europe" by 2030. Germany's defense minister said in November that Russia would be ready to attack by 2029 and observed that "certain military historians" were saying that the continent had already lived through its "last peaceful summer." In December, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte announced that Russia could attack a NATO country in the next five years and that member states "should be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents or great-grandparents endured." Moscow, meanwhile, has framed NATO as an aggressive, expansionist bloc.

In February 2024, Putin warned Russians that NATO is "preparing to strike our territory."

It would be foolish to rule out a deliberate, premeditated Russian attack against NATO. Militaries can and should prepare for even low-probability events when the stakes are high, as they are here. The most plausible conflict scenarios, however, do not dovetail with European leaders' current rhetoric. It has been clear since the early 1990s that Moscow considers NATO—and particularly the United States—the superior conventional power, destined to win in a direct fight against Russian forces. As long as NATO maintains a relatively united transatlantic front, a deliberate, opportunistic Russian attack on the alliance is a remote prospect.

Russia is not interested in security and stability on NATO's terms.

But there are quite plausible ways that Russia and NATO could end up at war, even if the transatlantic alliance remains intact. Consider, for instance, Moscow's persistent gray zone actions, such as the sabotage of critical infrastructure and targeted assassinations. So far, the alliance has been restrained in responding to these provocations. Yet NATO officials increasingly think this timidity merely emboldens the Kremlin and are therefore considering "being more aggressive" in response—as Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, the chair of NATO's Military Committee, put it in November. A Russian airspace incursion or damage to an undersea cable could now engender a much more assertive response, such as seizing a Russian tanker.

If that did happen, a crisis might quickly ensue. Given the mutual suspicion and lack of communication between the two sides, the Russian military's general staff and its political masters in the Kremlin would probably not interpret NATO's move as purely reactive or defensive. Moscow would thus counter, possibly by engaging in destructive cyberattacks on civilian and military targets. Both NATO and Russia would then start raising the readiness levels of their conventional forces, calling up reservists, and moving key capabilities toward their shared frontiers. The United States would likely surge assets to Europe, including long-range air and ground-based missile systems. Russian strategists believe that these are the exact systems that Washington would use early in a conflict to hit Russia's leadership and military targets—an outcome they greatly fear. Throughout the war in Ukraine, Kyiv has used high-end U.S. systems to strike important military targets in Russia, exposing the country's poor defenses. Moscow might therefore respond to the arrival of U.S. long-range weapons with a preemptive attack against them.

That is just one path to war. Another might begin with Russia's snap military exercises. These drills are not announced in advance, and foreign countries can easily misinterpret them as preparations for an attack. NATO member states are particularly suspicious that such drills could serve as cover for a new Russian military operation after Moscow used military exercises in early 2014 and late 2021 as a pretext for massing forces on Ukraine's border. Given the minimal communication between the two sides, high political tensions, and large numbers of forces arrayed in proximity, NATO leaders could conclude that Russia was readying a new assault if Moscow were to suddenly conduct such an exercise near the Baltic states. To avoid western Europeans and Americans hemming and hawing about whether to respond, Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania might have an incentive to preemptively strike Russian forces before they cross the border.

A NATO-Russian war could also expand out of a second, full-scale armed clash in Ukraine. Conflict spillover has been a risk since the start of Russia's 2022 invasion. There have even been close calls, including when an air defense missile, later identified as Ukrainian, strayed into Polish territory and killed two people in November 2022. If a future Russian-Ukrainian cease-fire broke down, the risk of escalation that ensnares one or more neighboring allies would likely be even higher. European countries have indicated that they could intervene directly on Ukraine's behalf were Russia to attack again.

Finally, NATO and Russia could come to blows over other states in the region, particularly Belarus. The country is Russia's most important treaty ally: it provides a modicum of strategic depth for major Russian population centers, hosts several Russian military installations, and is now home to some of Moscow's nuclear weapons. Like any authoritarian state on a geopolitical fault line, Belarus is also a potential tinderbox, since any major domestic political change could transform the country's external alignments. After

Alexander Lukashenko, the country's Russia-friendly president who has ruled since 1994, was declared the winner of the rigged August 2020 elections, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets to protest in support of the more pro-Western opposition. At the time, Moscow had the patience and confidence to sit on the sidelines, providing verbal support as Lukashenko's forces violently suppressed the demonstrations. But if Lukashenko or his chosen successor wound up in the same situation, the Kremlin likely would not feel comfortable waiting out the protests. After enraging Ukrainians with its invasion and transforming Kyiv into an enemy, Moscow would not accept the loss of Belarus.

To ensure that a Moscow-aligned regime survived mass Belarusian protests, Russia would not hesitate to move its national guard or airborne units into its neighbor to quell the unrest. As it did in 2020, Belarus would put its armed forces on high alert. But unlike then, it might now reposition some units toward its borders with Lithuania and Poland in response to fears—justified or not—that those neighbors were supporting the opposition. The two countries might call for NATO consultations under Article 4 of the alliance's founding treaty, mobilize their reservists, and move their forces closer to the borders with Belarus. NATO would probably ready its rapid-reaction forces for deployment to the area. Russia, fearing conflict, would surge assets into its Kaliningrad exclave by air and sea. Tensions would reach a fever pitch. If either side made a wrong move, war could result.

DENIAL BY DETERRENCE

After the war in Ukraine is settled, some Western officials might be tempted to roll back defense spending pledges and immediately move to negotiate a broader détente with Moscow. But that would be a major strategic error. As a revisionist power with deep, existential insecurities and firm views about how to address them, Russia is not interested in security and stability on NATO's terms. On the contrary, it will probe and prod at any openings that it detects, real or imagined. That means NATO's top priority should be eliminating any such openings by shoring up deterrence.

To do so, the United States and its allies should start by getting their relationship on a firmer footing. This will not be easy. Tensions between the Trump administration and European governments have nearly boiled over on multiple occasions, including because of U.S. designs on Greenland. A full break between the United States and its allies would leave the continent much more vulnerable to Russian aggression. Moscow has been careful to avoid a direct conflict with NATO thanks, in large part, to Washington's military presence in Europe and its clear commitment to the continent's defense. Without that, Putin might become less cautious. Open fractures must therefore be avoided.

Some members of the Trump administration may care little about Europe's fate and thus about repairing the rupture. But anyone who thinks Washington would escape a war between Russia and the continent is mistaken. The United States cannot remain prosperous and secure without a stable and secure Europe. Transatlantic linkages are hard-wired into the U.S. economy, and American geopolitical heft would be greatly diminished if NATO collapses. Washington will inevitably be dragged into a conflict with Russia if deterrence fails.

There is reason to hope the two sides will find a new, mutually acceptable equilibrium. Europe increasingly accepts that the United States will not revert to the status quo ante, in which it took primary responsibility for defending the continent. But Washington will have to play a large role in European security until its allies are mostly capable of defending themselves. European NATO members have the resources and industrial capacity required to build formidable militaries, and they have started to use them to that end. But they can move only so fast, and if Washington abandons Europe before it is ready, Russia might take more risks.

In addition to putting up a united transatlantic front, European states will need to deliver on their ambitious plans for new spending and new capabilities. But rather than spreading their defense euros thinly on a wide variety of capabilities, the continent needs to be targeted and specific. Its states should have a clear idea about what they are trying to prevent and what will actually intimidate its adversary. They should, in particular, recognize that deterring Moscow does not require being capable of repelling any act of aggression under any circumstances. In fact, trying to do so might encourage Russia to take action to prevent a decisive shift in the military balance. Instead, Europe should have enough forces forward deployed to both raise the cost of a potential attack and make escalation to a continent-wide fight inevitable. Its countries, in other words, have to calibrate their posture to reinforce deterrence without exacerbating Russian threat perceptions.

BREAK THE ICE

In the postwar period, deterrence will continue to be the bedrock for any plan to manage Moscow. But deterrence alone will not be enough. Allies will need new formats for dialogue and interaction with Russia to reduce risks and contain tensions. And at the moment, no Western government seems to have a plan for handling an adversarial relationship with Russia after the war.

But there are templates they can follow. During the latter decades of the Cold War, there was more dialogue between Moscow and NATO than there is now, and Western countries could start building institutions like the ones that helped keep the peace during that era. European allies, for instance, might establish communication lines to Russia akin to the nuclear crisis hotline that still connects the White House and the Kremlin. Russia and NATO countries could also forge risk-reduction mechanisms similar to the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement, which established a shared code of conduct to prevent inadvertent clashes between each side's ships and aircraft. And after the war, European and American policymakers should aim to restore some degree of mutually beneficial connectivity with Russia. Reverting to prewar openness would be unwise and infeasible, but maintaining a near-complete severing of ties creates fertile ground for misunderstandings and misinterpretations that make conflict more likely. If the West had direct flights, trade, educational exchanges, and tourism with the Soviet Union, it should be able to do so with postwar Russia, too.

To regulate this commerce and ensure that Western goods don't strengthen the Russian armed forces, Europe, Canada, the United States, and Asian-Pacific democracies such as Japan should develop a modern-day equivalent of the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls: the informal coalition of 17 states that limited and controlled the export of sensitive items from the West to communist states from 1949 until the end of the Cold War. Such a group could determine what can be freely traded and prevent military and dual-use goods (products that have both military and civilian uses) from getting through to Russia after the war in

Ukraine is over. The restrictions imposed on Russia after 2022 were coordinated among allies, and it makes sense for any regime that comes after the war to be multilateral, as well.

The alliance needs risk-reduction mechanisms and managed connectivity to prevent misunderstandings and miscalculations. But to prevent a clash with Moscow, it will also need a durable peace in Ukraine. Since a second full-scale war in the country could trigger a NATO-Russian war, it is in the alliance's interest to ensure that whatever agreement ends the fighting is well formulated and effectively crafted. As the political scientist Page Fortna has demonstrated, when cease-fire deals are formalized with specific documents that establish implementation measures such as demilitarized zones, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and third-party monitoring, they tend to stick. When they are vague, informal, and lack such institutions, they tend to collapse. NATO must therefore push for any Russian-Ukrainian peace deal to be thorough and enforceable. It should also, of course, make sure that Ukraine's military is well equipped in order to deter Russia from resuming the conflict.

The NATO-Russian relationship is shaped by hostility and suspicion.

NATO will need strategies for mitigating tensions with Russia over other nearby countries that could become hot spots. Belarus is perhaps the most plausible casus belli. But contestation in countries such as Georgia and Moldova could also boil over. Russia has a military presence in separatist enclaves in both countries. Both societies are divided by their geopolitical preferences. And Moscow meddles in both countries' electoral politics.

What Russia wants from Washington and Europe is clear: recognition of Moscow's *droit de regard* over these countries. That is, obviously, impossible. NATO cannot simply consign other states and their peoples over to Moscow. Neither Georgians nor Moldovans nor even Belarusians want to have their fates determined by their former imperial metropole. But Washington and Europe's strategy of vying for these countries' loyalties without having the resolve or the resources to bring them into the Western bloc has not benefited anyone.

Instead, NATO states need to try to rein in the competition in order to avoid worst-case outcomes, like what has occurred in

Ukraine. That means laying the groundwork for dialogue. Since Moscow and Western capitals will inevitably continue some degree of contestation over the region long after the war in Ukraine is settled, they will need to have mechanisms in place to minimize the potential for disastrous miscalculations. And they must be willing to start conversations on matters of regional security when things go wrong as opposed to suspending dialogue during crises, as has been the practice in the past.

TALK IT OUT

There was once a time when NATO and Russia might have been able to resolve many of their problems through diplomacy. For 30 years, the two sides had a collaborative, if fraught, relationship. They had some shared interests and, it seemed, shared ambitions.

But those days are gone, and they are not coming back. Today, the relationship is shaped almost entirely by hostility and suspicion. It is extremely volatile, and it will stay that way no matter how the war in Ukraine is settled. The Kremlin wants to upend the current security architecture in Europe, which is largely stacked against its interests. Yet it does not want a war with a unified NATO. The challenge that awaits the allies is to deny Russia its malign objectives while avoiding a direct clash.

That is no small task, and success may ultimately depend on forces beyond the allies' control. Although NATO states can and must build up their militaries without needing Moscow's buy-in, establishing new lines of communication to the Kremlin will, of course, require Russian agreement. And Russia might simply refuse. Putin's regime loathes Western governments, and it might not be willing to reach a new, stable status quo with its adversaries.

But the proposition must be tested before it is dismissed. Powerful adversaries need to talk. Prudent, clear-eyed, and hard-nosed diplomacy has a critical role to play in avoiding interstate conflict. That is especially true when that conflict could be existential, as any shooting war between nuclear powers would be. Washington and European capitals should continue their efforts to bring the war in Ukraine to an end, and they should support Kyiv for the long term. But they must also start looking down the road and find ways to manage what will be a highly combustible, volatile relationship with Russia after the war ends.

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Tragedy of Great-Power Foreign Policy

Do Realists Hold the Solution to a World in Crisis?

STACIE E. GODDARD

First Among Equals: U.S. Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World BY EMMA ASHFORD. Yale University Press, 2025, 280 pp.

For almost 30 years after the Cold War ended, American foreign policy elites argued that the United States should use its unmatched military and economic power as a force for transformation. For some, this meant working to expand the role of multilateral institutions such as NATO, promoting unfettered free trade, and protecting human rights worldwide, even by using military force. Others believed that the United States should wield its military power as democracy's spear by subduing violent terrorists, overthrowing tyrannical regimes, and deterring potential revisionist powers. These views, however, were two sides of the same coin: underlying both was a belief that the United States must maintain its dominant position in the world and, when necessary, wield its might to defend liberal rights.

But after the failures of U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of rival great powers, and the weakening of American democracy at home, this era of relative bipartisan consensus has ended. U.S. foreign policy is in disarray, with no obvious vision for what should come next. For Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center, the path forward lies in what she calls "realist internationalism." Grounded in a long tradition of realist thought, this strategy places the national interest—not ideology—at the center of foreign-policy making and views the pursuit of democratization abroad as unnecessary, even foolish.

Ashford also pushes back against what she sees as excessively purist calls for retrenchment or even isolationism. International engagement, she argues, is no longer a choice; the United States'

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security and prosperity are tethered to an open global market. In practice, a Washington that followed her realist internationalism would retrench militarily from places where the United States lacks a national interest, such as the Middle East; draw down its support in places where partners can manage security threats on their own, such as Europe; and accept that it cannot determine Ukraine's fate. Provocatively, Ashford encourages the United States to accept great powers' "spheres of influence" while also ensuring that it can use nonmilitary instruments, especially economic tools, to counter aggression that could cripple the global economy.

Ashford's effort to unpack Washington's chaotic foreign policy debate is impressive, breaking down its strains of thought into four clear positions. And her own preferred position is prudent. Rejecting liberal triumphalism, she recognizes the need to hem in American ambitions to effect change abroad. Unlike hawks and isolationists, however, she also recognizes that only by nurturing robust relationships with other countries can the United States ensure security and prosperity at home.

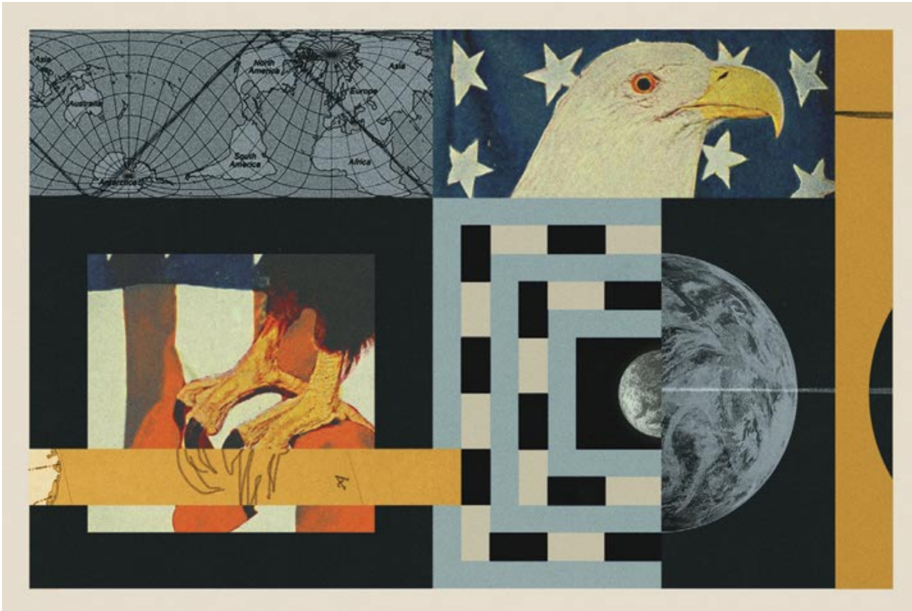
But Ashford also acknowledges that realists have often had a hard time gaining influence in Washington. "No one loves a political realist," she laments, quoting the realist political scientist Robert Gilpin. Historically, realists' proposed strategies have been misunderstood, ignored, or even mocked as cold and immoral. In Ashford's view, however, this public relations problem is a secondary obstacle. Realists' more urgent task is to define and articulate a coherent strategic paradigm, which should then appeal to policymakers thanks to its sound reasoning, especially at a moment of geopolitical turmoil.

This is where the book stumbles. It understates the degree to which realists' obsession with cool-headed reason has too often left them unwilling to contend with the need to galvanize both elite and public opinion. Good ideas are not enough. If realists such as Ashford cannot figure out a way to capture the imaginations of policymakers and ordinary Americans, all the reason in the world won't matter.

FROM CHAOS TO ORDER

Washington's foreign policy debate now seems cacophonous. Each view represented in it, Ashford writes, "repudiates some core part of the post–Cold War consensus: nation-building, democracy promotion, globalization, trade, or . . . military primacy." But the various camps cannot coalesce. Some "remain decidedly ideological in orientation, whereas others hew toward more traditional realpolitik approaches to the world." Adding to the confusion, these views no longer "map neatly onto partisan political lines."

Yet Ashford contends that a useful taxonomy can be imposed on this debate. She argues that in essence, U.S. foreign policy thinkers and practitioners now take one of two sides on two key foreign policy questions, yielding four distinct blocs. The first question concerns the role of ideology in U.S. foreign policy: Should the United States seek to reshape the international order in its image? The second question is about what drives violence and instability in international politics: Does insecurity arise when large powers fail to restrain "determined,



revisionist actors"? Or, conversely, are threats to use force most often unnecessary provocations, creating misperceptions that drive escalatory spirals?

In Ashford's view, the two possible answers to each question "produce four often highly distinctive visions" for the United States' global engagement. Some of Ashford's schools of thought resemble Walter Russell Mead's well-known categories of strategists (Hamiltonians, Jeffersonians, Jacksonians, and Wilsonians), but they differ in that they go beyond description and instead define these cohorts by their core assumptions. "Liberal-order primacists" (people Mead called Wilsonians) remain fiercely committed to the idea that liberal values should drive American foreign policy and believe that deterrence failures invite autocratic aggression. At the heart of liberal primacy is "the notion that an American-led order of liberal international institutions can stabilize the international system, overcome rivalries, and bring peace to the world." This camp includes many neoconservatives, such as the Brookings scholar Robert Kagan, as well as traditional Democratic foreign policy hands, such as Samantha Power.

Members of a second group, which Ashford dubs the "progressive worldbuilders," draw from an "anti-war, socialist" heritage. Like liberal primacists, they "believe in building a better world," but primarily "through non-military tools." Quoting the foreign policy expert Robert Farley, Ashford notes that this sometimes incoherent movement has, until recently, been united around just two core convictions: that "the United States should refrain from fighting stupid, random wars" and that "the U.S. defense budget is far, far too high." But this camp (whose adherents include Matthew Duss, Senator Bernie Sanders's foreign policy adviser in his 2020 presidential campaign, and the Chatham House fellow Heather Hurlburt) is

RICAERDO SANTOS

making efforts "to build a more nuanced, and distinctly 'progressive,' foreign and defense policy framework . . . preferably with a redistributionist bent."

Among those who believe U.S. foreign policy should be less ideologically motivated, "America-first hawks" (Mead's Jacksonians) seek "peace through strength," the deterrence of aggressors through military might rather than international institutions. Members of this cohort (including some within President Donald Trump's administration, such as Undersecretary of Defense Elbridge Colby) believe that the United States must strive to remain the dominant power in international politics. They are not ideological crusaders, but they are more than willing to use force to coerce aggressive powers, rogue nonstate actors, or even U.S. allies and partners.

Those in the fourth and final group, the "realist-restrainers," also believe that interests should trump ideology in U.S. foreign policy. But they are far more skeptical than the America-first hawks when it comes to Washington's ability to achieve primacy through military strength. This camp includes a motley assortment of academics, progressive Democrats, conservative Republicans, "libertarians and anti-imperialists for whom restraint is a moral issue," deficit hawks, veterans' groups—and Ashford herself. "It might be simplest to say that realist-restrainers are united primarily by their opposition to primacy (or 'deep engagement') and its tendency to overreach," Ashford explains. "This is the core factor that divides them from . . . America-first hawks." Their goals are confined to preventing the emergence of a hegemon that could threaten the global free-trade system on which the United States' political and economic health depends.

Critics might charge that collapsing grand strategic debates into a two-by-two matrix is an oversimplification, one that glosses over important disputes about the utility of military force or the value of institutions. But Ashford's taxonomy is an important contribution. By contrasting foreign policy positions in terms of a few core assumptions, she suggests paths for constructive dialogue among competing factions.

PEACE IN RETREAT

Like all realists, Ashford bases her own preferred strategy on several key assumptions about the nature of international politics. The United States (and all countries) should wish to preserve its security above all else. It should seek to advance the national interest, not act on behalf of the universal good. And it must do so in a world that is fundamentally anarchic—one that lacks a global government. But she differs from traditional realists by recognizing that maintaining an open and free global economy is vital to the United States' prosperity, and thus the national interest is not easily separated from an international one. And she questions long-standing realist assumptions about the primacy of military power, arguing that economic and diplomatic instruments are often just as effective in securing the national interest.

If Washington adopted a realist-internationalist strategy, Ashford argues, U.S. foreign policy would head in a radically different and more pragmatic direction. It would no longer make sense for the United States to claim, for instance, that aggression against Taiwan poses an existential threat, especially when a pledge to defend the island's sovereignty at all costs could mire the U.S. military in a catastrophic war. And with the return of multipolarity, U.S. policymakers would have to "learn to again live with the reality of spheres of influence." They would have to acknowledge that Taiwan lies squarely in China's sphere.

Such a recognition need not mean abandoning small states to domination. Rather, the United States should seek to shift the burden of protection to its allies and partners and rely on nonmilitary means to deter aggression. In Ashford's view, there is no reason that Japan and South Korea could not take chief responsibility for supplying Taiwan's security. In Asia, Ashford suggests that the United States should deploy a limited set of air and sea assets oriented toward protecting global shipping lanes. She also argues that Washington can leverage a variety of political instruments—economic tools, diplomatic talent, and intelligence know-how—to keep itself secure without provoking unnecessary military conflict.

Ultimately, Ashford believes that the United States' privileged geographic position and nuclear deterrence make it fundamentally secure. Once one accepts that premise, there is no reason for Washington to invest huge amounts of resources in maintaining military might. It is easy to see the appeal of such a world. But as Ashford herself wonders, if a realist approach to foreign policy is so reasonable, why is it that time and time again U.S. administrations have rejected realist approaches in favor of hawkish or liberal-internationalist ones?

THE POWER OF PARABLE

Ashford mainly blames forces beyond realists' control. U.S. partisanship often undermines a moderate, rational approach to foreign policy. Public opinion, she argues, tends to follow the whims of elites, who tend to favor more grandiose narratives. Entrenched bureaucracies fiercely oppose prudent budget cuts. And the United States' democratic allies abroad often encourage U.S. leaders to adopt a Wilsonian framework.

At a deep level, Ashford writes, Americans also want their foreign policy to appear to be rooted in morality and are fundamentally resistant to realists' "skepticism about transformative change" and their somewhat "pessimistic view of human nature." Ashford is hardly the first American realist to recognize that realist grand strategy has rarely mobilized public support. At the end of World War II, there was little consensus about what direction U.S. foreign policy should take. Should the United States return to isolation or dedicate itself to building a liberal and international order? Should it work with the Soviet Union or treat that power as an ideological rival?

Realists such as George Kennan, President Harry Truman's director of policy planning, advocated for a prudent strategy based on the national interest. Believing that the Soviet Union was motivated foremost by insecurity, Kennan urged Washington to pursue containment using economic and political instruments and prioritize defending industrial centers such as Germany and Japan. The political scientist Hans Morgenthau, an influential realist, counseled Washington to avoid embarking on a liberal crusade lest it provoke war with Moscow.

Kennan has been immortalized as the father of containment and thus the architect of the United States' Cold War strategy. But in truth, Kennan's broader realist vision lost out. Instead, Truman and his successors painted the Soviet Union as an existential and ideological threat. Embracing the domino theory, Washington treated every part of the globe as integral to the fight against communist aggression, justifying military interventions with appeals to universal liberal values.

This happened because hawks and liberal internationalists proved able to weave grand narratives that resonated with the public and with partners abroad, sidelining realist grand strategy for decades. After the Cold War ended, realist strategists again urged U.S. leaders to restrain their global commitments and reap a peace dividend at home. Public opinion seemed to be in these realists' corner: a 1993 Pew survey found that only ten percent of Americans wanted their country to adopt a role as the "single world leader" and expand NATO. But, as Ashford understands, the general public would not lead the way. Under President Bill Clinton, liberal primacists took the reins of foreign policy by appealing to a moral high ground. NATO's expansion east, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright argued in January 1997, could "defeat old hatreds" and "deter conflict." Later that year, another Pew survey found that a majority of Americans had come to support NATO's expansion.

THE PRAGMATIST'S TRAP

Ultimately, Ashford seems to have faith that rational arguments can overcome realism's public relations problem. But here, Ashford repeats the mistake of so many realists: they are so convinced of their superior ability to reason that they neglect to stress the ethical foundation of that reasoning. Failing to cast a strategy in terms of ideals can easily lead to the perception that realists are selfish and amoral, especially in the United States. This error has led some to mislabel Trump as a realist, mistaking his "crude transactionalism . . . unencumbered by morality" for a principled commitment to the U.S. national interest.

In truth, realists could fairly cast themselves as the truest defenders of American ideals. At the heart of much (although not all) of realist theory lies a normative commitment to democratic processes. Indeed, Ashford argues that "morality . . . can be the foundation of realist thinking." She writes that a "second core interest" that realist policymakers must seek to ensure—after the United States' protection from basic threats such as a nuclear attack—is "democracy and prosperity at home." The very concept of a national interest incorporates the idea that a country's aims abroad must be both collective and contested. A foreign policy based on the national interest must appeal to different interests within a society; its aims and means have to make sense to the public as a call for collective action.

Not all realists are fervent democrats. But the realist vision of a collective national interest creates, at least in theory, more space for contestation than its counterparts. America-first hawks silence alternatives by instilling fear, as when Senator Roger Wicker applauded the Trump administration's strikes on Iran as necessary to "eliminate an existential threat." Liberal primacists appear more democratic, with their devotion to multilateral forums and procedures designed to create a level playing field. But their commitment to universal liberalism as a set of nonnegotiable principles shuts down contestation in practice by excluding and stigmatizing those who disagree.

Because realists recognize a variety of national interests, and because they see power politics as a normal condition of international affairs, they are willing to engage in a more pluralistic manner and forge paths to cooperation with both partners and rivals. They could be far more explicit about the moral value of these approaches. For instance, they could emphasize that by advocating for a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine, they do not merely want to save cash at the expense of saving democracy. Instead, they seek to end a conflict that still threatens to become a devastating great-power war, consolidate the Ukrainians' gains, and allow the vital task of rebuilding to begin.

Ashford has done policymakers a service by offering a clear-eyed assessment of contemporary global power dynamics, a well-reasoned argument in favor of international partnerships, and a sober warning about the consequences of provoking catastrophic conflict. It is an eminently rational foreign policy blueprint. But her too-brief treatment of realism's public relations problem falls into a familiar and unnecessary trap. For realist internationalism to prevail as a grand strategy, its adherents need to develop a moral narrative that can win hearts, not only minds.

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REVIEW ESSAY

China's Fragile Future

How Secure Is the CCP?

ANDREW J. NATHAN

Political Trust in China
BY LIANJIANG LI. University of Michigan Press, 2025, 176 pp.

Institutional Genes: Origins of China's Institutions and Totalitarianism
BY CHENGGANG XU. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 800 pp.

For many years, predicting the downfall of the Chinese Communist Party was something of a sport among China watchers. But few serious observers today suggest that China looks unstable. Despite facing numerous challenges, including the implosion of the country's real estate sector since 2021 and high debt loads that have bogged down local government finances, China's political system appears strong. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has a firm hold on all the levers of power, and the country is proving to be competitive, or even dominant, in a growing number of twenty-first-century technologies, such as electric vehicles and biotechnology. Moreover, scholars consistently find overwhelmingly high levels of public support for the CCP. In comparison to the growing fragility and divisiveness of political systems elsewhere, including in the United States, the Chinese regime appears to the outside world as competent and stable—an image that Beijing is eager to project.

Two new books challenge this view. In *Political Trust in China,* the political scientist Lianjiang Li digs deep into survey methodology to question the way that most scholars have measured public support for leaders in Beijing. He concludes that citizens' trust in the regime is weaker than other researchers believe. In *Institutional Genes,* the economist Chenggang Xu uses a sweeping comparative and historical analysis of China's political institutions to argue that the country's inability to reform them will condemn it to economic stagnation. In Xu's view, the kind of authoritarian rule that worked for China's imperial dynasties is strangling its modern economy.

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Both books offer a needed corrective to the conventional wisdom that the Chinese regime is stable, but neither is definitive. To translate local findings into national claims, Li reinterprets existing data sources in ways that stretch their meaning. Xu's metaphor of "institutional genes," meanwhile, shows that Chinese authoritarian institutions are resistant to change—but it does not adequately explain why they cannot be reformed. Still, it is difficult to read these deeply researched texts without worrying about China's future. Sadly, if the two authors are correct, what follows regime collapse might be even worse than the system China has now.

SURVEY SAYS

Li, a professor at the University of Hong Kong, is a veteran scholar who has spent decades trying to understand and measure the foundations of political and social trust in China through field surveys of Chinese citizens. A well-designed survey with a valid sample of respondents produces a map of attitudes and behaviors within a population. Investigating the variation within this map allows a social scientist to analyze how different types of citizens think and act—for example, how characteristics such as education, gender, and income shape what people believe and how they behave. But Li, like all good survey researchers, is uncomfortable with some of the core assumptions of the method he uses. Gathering large quantities of survey data requires simplifying complex attitudes: citizens answering questionnaires have to express unidimensional views on multidimensional topics.

The dangers of overly simplified results are especially pronounced when scholars try to understand how citizens view the state. Researchers often ask respondents to rate their level of trust in various public institutions, such as the national government, local officials, or the police, on a scale from one to six or one to ten. Scholars frequently use the average trust level in these institutions as a variable, labeled "institutional trust," to summarize a regime's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. The Asian Barometer Survey, which since 2001 has collected six waves of data from countries across Asia (and which I advise and help design as a core partner), relies on this index to show that Chinese citizens accord high levels of trust to their government. In the 2014–16 ABS wave, for example, which surveyed citizens from 14 countries, China scored 4.6 out of 6 on institutional trust, compared with 2.1 for Taiwan, 2.3 for South Korea, and 2.6 for Japan.

Li argues that the high level of reported institutional trust in China is misleading. In China, people trust the government because they "do not have an enforceable right to retract trust through free, fair, and regular elections"—that is, because they have no alternative. It is like the fable of the fox who, unable to reach a bunch of grapes, decides he doesn't want to eat them. The political scientist Jon Elster labeled this phenomenon "adaptive preference formation," arguing that people form preferences by choosing among only those options that are realistically available to them. Li calls the same phenomenon "embedding," because the range of possible preferences is embedded in the system in which the preferences are being formed. Embedded trust is still real trust—but it is different from the trust that is expressed by citizens in systems in which there is an option to distrust political leaders.

Li thus set out to find a more meaningful measure of regime support than the conventional measure of embedded trust. He narrows his focus from trust in a set of core government institutions to trust in the top power holders in the CCP, or what Chinese people call "the party Center"—which, he suggests, today consists of one man: Xi. Li further reconceptualizes trust not as a single rating between zero and six, but as a set of types based on two dimensions, "commitment" and "capacity." Commitment is citizens' belief in the Center's—that is, Xi's—commitment to pursuing good policy goals, and capacity is the belief in Xi's ability to make the bureaucracy achieve those goals.

This approach generates four types of trust in contemporary China. Citizens expressing total trust have confidence in both Xi's commitment to adopt the right policies and his capacity to make the bureaucracy carry them out. Those with partial trust believe in Xi's commitment but not in his capacity, and those who are skeptical have some doubts about Xi's commitment, capacity, or both. Citizens expressing total distrust do not have faith in either Xi's commitment or his capacity.

Li carried out two local surveys to test this conceptual reboot, one in 2006 and one in 2014. He asked remarkably direct questions about residents' attitudes toward Xi and leaders at four lower levels of government, from the province down to the local township, and found that citizens assess leaders on both commitment and capacity. The more local the government, the less citizens believe in officials' willingness to implement central government policies, which Li understands as the Center's lack of capacity to force them to do so.

To fully assess his idea that there are four types of trust toward the party Center, however, Li needed a national sample, not a localized survey of a few areas. But it would have been politically difficult in China's repressive research environment to conduct a new national survey on trust. So Li instead deconstructed and reassembled the standard battery of institutional trust questions from the fourth and fifth waves of the ABS's China questionnaire, completed in 2015 and 2019, respectively. Because citizens associate the central government with setting policies and local governments with implementing them—or failing to do so—Li uses the ABS measure of trust in central government as a measure of how people perceive Xi's commitment to pursuing good policies, and trust in local government as a proxy for Xi's capacity to achieve his goals.

Reinterpreting the meaning of survey questions in this way risks imposing an esoteric meaning on straightforward responses, which calls into question whether these data points are valid measures of perceived commitment and capacity. Still, Li's work provides an intriguing foundation for challenging the consensus that China's

population overwhelmingly supports the regime. The ABS finding that 95.7 percent (in 2015) or 98.3 percent (in 2019) of respondents in China trust the central government always seemed too good to be true. Li instead shows that only about 28 percent of the population has total trust in Xi. He finds that another 20 to 25 percent partially trust China's leader—believing in his goals but not his capacity—while around 35 percent are skeptical of either his commitment or his capacity, neither fully trusting nor distrusting. Ten to 20 percent express total distrust. Even if Li's analysis of national data should be viewed with some caution, these numbers suggest that trust in the party Center is much less robust than most scholars—and perhaps the party itself—believe.

This new perspective explains much that is otherwise puzzling about citizen behavior in contemporary China. People with total trust support the government, and those who are skeptical tend to be politically apathetic. People with partial trust, who think local officials are not implementing the leader's correct policies, are likely those who denounce, petition, and demonstrate against local authorities, or who call government hotlines or post on online government platforms to bring pressure on local officials from above. And those with total distrust are the ones who "join protests to express discontent, to vent anger, and even to embarrass the regime and the central leadership," as Li writes.

Li's analysis suggests a greater likelihood that dissent will threaten the regime than is often assumed. If a large number of citizens with total distrust come out against the regime, perhaps because of an economic or public health crisis, many who only partially trust the regime's capacity might join the protests, followed by those whom Li classifies as skeptics. In that scenario, protest would spread from group to group, in the same way that demonstrations grew out of control in 1989 in Tiananmen Square or during the revolution in East Germany that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the eventual dissolution of the communist bloc. Even citizens who now express total trust might change their attitude once they perceive that an option has opened up to voice distrust—like foxes who want to eat the grapes once they are able to reach them.

GENETIC DISORDER

Whereas Li challenges overly rosy views of Chinese citizens' support for the regime, Xu disputes optimistic assessments of the health of the Chinese economy. Beijing's official figures acknowledge that the country's growth has slowed to around five percent per year, but Xu has claimed elsewhere that the true current growth rate is zero or even negative. In 2024, he told the German news outlet Deutsche Welle that although industries such as electric vehicles are booming, they make up only a small share of the economy compared with floundering sectors such as real estate, which are dragging down growth.

In his book, Xu claims that China's economic problems are rooted in its political institutions. For any economy to grow, Xu explains, the state needs to give up some control. For several decades after the death of Mao Zedong, in 1976, Chinese leaders did loosen their grip on private entrepreneurship, the media, academia, and people's personal lives. Although the government never relinquished the ultimate right to control how land, energy, and labor are used, it allowed enough openness for businesses to grow, farmers to search for new sources of income, and local economies to take off. What followed is well known: China's economy boomed, frequently reaching double-digit annual rates of growth.

But, Xu argues, the country's Leninist party-state system could not tolerate the increasing autonomy of private entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and the middle class that powered this expansion. To regain control, Xi has reversed many economic and social reforms since he came to power in 2012. He has punished private entrepreneurs for criticizing CCP policies or even just running companies that became too large, expanded party cells in private enterprises, tightened control over the media, and increased social surveillance.

Many observers attribute this reversal to Xi's personal thirst for power, but Xu blames China's institutions. He proposes the concept of "institutional genes," which he describes as the fundamental components of China's historical approach to property rights, government administration, personnel recruitment, and ideology. These institutional genes replicate themselves over time and limit how China can change. Notable examples of institutional genes from imperial times were the emperor's right to commandeer any person's land, top-down bureaucratic control of political and judicial functions, and the use of the examination system to enforce ideology and to prevent wealthy families from emerging as an independent hereditary nobility. These institutional features are replicated in today's communist party-state, which maintains a monopoly over key industries and land, administers its program through several levels of local government, and metes out influence and regulates ideology through college entrance examinations, tests to enter the civil service, and a performance-based promotion system within the party.

To show that past institutional patterns control future institutional developments, Xu argues that China failed to establish a constitutional democracy in the first part of the twentieth century because restrictions on government power did not fit its authoritarian traditions. The imperial system had eliminated independent social forces that could have formed the basis of a constitutional republic. The revolutionaries who overthrew the empire in 1911 did not seek to empower citizens but rather embraced a superficially appealing Western political model to increase national wealth and power. In Xu's view, China's experiment with constitutional democracy was dead on arrival.

China's institutional genes were instead compatible with the Leninist party-state system, which China imported from the Soviet Union. Leninism reproduced in modernized form the patterns of centralized control over the economy, administration, personnel recruitment, and ideology characteristic of the Chinese dynasties. Given these institutional genes, partial liberalization under Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening" policy that began in the late 1970s could not continue indefinitely, much less expand. Xi's retrenchment was the inevitable expression of the CCP's deeper genetic makeup, and it ended China's growth spurt. As Xu writes, "Communist totalitarian systems are fundamentally unreformable, making economic reforms destined to fail, leading to economic stagnation."

Xu substantiates his analysis with a deeply informed account of how Chinese institutions have developed through history. But his use of the gene analogy falls short in explaining the mechanisms by which the past blocks change in the present. The science of genetics explains in chemical and biological detail how an organism's characteristics are passed from one generation to the next. It also shows how organisms with the same genes can vary, as genes express themselves differently in different environments, and how organisms evolve as genes mutate.

Xu does not present a similarly concrete theory of how political institutions replicate themselves or how they change. Drawing on mechanism design theory, a branch of economics focused on incentives, Xu argues that an institutional change will survive only if it aligns with the self-interest of those already in power. But this line of reasoning is circular: if an institutional change sticks, then Xu determines that the incentives for adopting it were in place; and if it doesn't, they were not. This reasoning rules out the possibility of fundamental change, which is contrary to how real genes evolve.

At times, Xu grasps for other ways of explaining why institutions endure, suggesting causes as varied as culture, norms, or social consensus. But he does not explain how any of these forces come into being or what enables them to resist change. These arguments, too, ultimately seem circular: institutions persist because they are able to persist, and they change when change is compatible with the interests of their members. These may be truths, but they are not explanations.

CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

Both Li's and Xu's books imply a bleak future for the party and what may come after it. Li establishes that regime support is connected to the perception that the regime is unassailable, and this image of unassailability is fragile because it depends so much on one man. "Aside from the practical challenges," Li writes, "a much graver challenge for the ruling party is maintaining the credibility of the paramount leader. As the ultimate object of political trust, the top leader is the soul and face of the Center. His credibility is critical for sustaining trust in the Center as an institution." The current party leadership, which has bristled at any criticism of Xi, seems to agree that unraveling trust in the top leader could threaten the regime.

In Xu's telling, meanwhile, China is today so obsessed with fine-grained surveillance and social control that it is strangling itself economically and socially. The state-dominated economy is inefficient, household income is too low, China's population is declining, and top-down control of personnel and ideology stymies innovation. The ongoing real estate slump, Xu suggests, could even spark "a financial and fiscal crisis."

Such an event—or a public health emergency or failed attempt to take Taiwan by force—could crack Xi's veneer of invincibility, spurring those with partial trust to join their compatriots who fully distrust Xi and trigger a spreading movement against the regime. Li does not say what might follow such a trust meltdown, but both his and Xu's theories suggest that a collapse of political order is more likely than a democratic transition. Xu notes that if the regime were to fall, China lacks the resources, including "widespread private property rights, a civil society, and a social consensus on human rights, property rights, and the rule of law and constitutionalism" that it would need to reconstruct itself as a stable democratic system. If trust in the party were to collapse, the only forces able to reimpose order would be either a party faction or the military—neither of which would bode well for China's future. The country would likely undergo a period of painful chaos and end up with some other form of authoritarian rule.

Although many U.S. observers and politicians might like to exploit China's fragility to topple the CCP, the implications of these books should serve as a warning. Lacking either the trust or the institutional genes to set up a more stable alternative, a post-CCP authoritarian regime rooted more in raw power than in engineered consensus might be even harder for the West to deal with than the relatively disciplined and strategic regime China has today.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Cracks in the India Model

Democracy Can Be Both Curse and Cure

YAMINI AIYAR

A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey
BY DEVESH KAPUR AND ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN.
Harper Collins India, 2025, 760 pp.

In December 2025, newspapers in India carried an arresting, dystopian image: scores of young people sitting obediently in rows on an airstrip in the eastern state of Odisha to take an exam. Over 8,000 test takers had lined up under the sun to compete for 187 posts in the police service. That so many people were willing to take an exam in such inhumane conditions is revealing. In India, government jobs have long been coveted because they bring financial security and a measure of social prestige. But the candidates in Odisha were vying for the lowest rung of the police service. Such a large volume of candidates for such a poorly paid post reflects widespread desperation among educated youth. India's economy has failed to generate opportunities for the country's many young people, even as it has recorded an average annual GDP growth rate of six to seven percent over the past three decades.

In the nearly 80 years since gaining its independence, in 1947, India has struggled to deliver broad-based prosperity. In that time, its economy has been through several transitions. It first took the broadly socialist path of centralized planning, state-controlled industrialization through public enterprises, and the raising of barriers to foreign trade. That orientation produced tepid growth, averaging 2.5 percent between 1950 and 1980. India concertedly liberalized its economy in the 1990s, embracing reforms that accelerated growth and massively reduced rates of extreme poverty, which fell from over 50 percent in the

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early 1980s to less than 20 percent by 2010.

But India failed to engender a deeper economic transformation. Most Indians remain stuck in low-quality, low-productivity jobs: as of 2024, 46 percent of the country's workers were thought to be in agriculture, according to government data. India's failings are stark when viewed comparatively. Its per capita GDP is less than one-fourth that of Brazil and one-sixth that of Turkey, two other aspirational middle powers. The gains from growth have been staggeringly unequal. India has more billionaires—205, according to a 2025 Forbes estimate—than any other country apart from the United States and China. At the same time, millions of young people ready to enter the workforce every year find few jobs on offer.

In their sweeping and statistically rich book, *A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey*, Devesh Kapur and Arvind Subramanian describe the Indian economy as characterized by "prolonged ruralization, stunted industrialization, and precocious servicification." They show that India did not follow the path that characterized many of the success stories of post–World War II development, including China, Japan, and South Korea. Those countries made investments in boosting agricultural productivity, which in turn raised rural incomes and laid the groundwork for labor-intensive manufacturing that fueled meaningful economic growth and eventually high-skilled services. Instead, India neglected agriculture and skipped lightly over low-skilled manufacturing, seeking to grow on the back of a highly skilled service sector. Kapur, a political scientist, and Subramanian, an economist and former chief economic adviser to the government of India, claim that this gamble has not paid off. India's unusual path has locked the country into low productivity and low incomes.

Yet the problem, as they see it, rests not simply in economic policy but in the very nature of the Indian state. Kapur and Subramanian celebrate India's democracy, which emerged in the inhospitable conditions of poverty, low literacy, and entrenched social inequality, as a signal achievement and warn against democratic backsliding under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But they also suggest that democracy lies at the heart of the country's economic woes. Democracy in India, they argue, was "precocious," arriving early with the formal adoption of universal franchise in 1950 at relatively low levels of economic development. Electoral politics in these conditions created pressures that, on the one hand, precluded many of the radical changes needed for economic development (for instance, meaningful land reform) and, on the other, burdened a fledgling state and economy with a plethora of demands from all segments of society for access to subsidies, tax breaks, and regulatory protections. This troubling dynamic had the effect of fostering a state that at once maintains an overweening presence in economic life and fails to provide basic public goods, such as education and health care. No political party is willing to champion market reforms, and the process of liberalization that accelerated in the 1990s has largely stalled. The result is the "durable disappointment" of India, its inability to parlay democratic success into an economic model that creates jobs, educates and trains a strong workforce, and improves people's lives in a broad and sustained way.

THE PARADOXICAL STATE

Kapur and Subramanian's examination of India's economic policy choices weaves in efforts to build a bureaucratic and administrative apparatus and strengthen state capacity. Such a novel approach lays bare the many contradictory impulses and pathologies that have shaped India and contributed to its economic challenges.

Chief among them is what the authors describe as the paradoxical nature of the government, its administrative capacity, and its relationship with society. India's central problem, according to the authors, is the dominant ideology of statism. Indians view the state as their "provider and protector . . . even as it has also been an apathetic parent and absentee landlord." One manifestation of this belief is the fact that the government is the country's employer of choice. Government jobs account for more than 60 percent of India's tiny formal sector, which according to some estimates makes up only ten percent of total employment in the economy. This has distorted the labor market, especially at the lowest end of the skill spectrum, where state wages are at least twice those in the private sector and make it harder for manufacturers to successfully establish themselves.

At the same time, the Indian state is remarkably thin. In the early 1990s, the global average for state employment as a percentage of the working-age population was 4.7 percent. In India, it was 3.0 percent, a figure that had declined to 2.2 percent by 2011. Moreover, for a state with an overwhelming presence in the country's imagination and economic life, it is remarkably absent at the local level, where public services ought to be delivered. Local government accounts for less than 12 percent of total government employment.

Similarly, despite its avowed socialist leanings at its inception, the Indian state has long failed to provide universal public goods. It did not see the provision of education, for instance, as central to the democratic social contract, in part because of the preference of elites for state investment in higher education. Statist ideology also played a role; the public judged the state's performance on the basis of its personnel, subsidies, and welfare payments rather than its ability to deliver basic public goods. The Indian state finally began universalizing access to primary and secondary school in earnest in the 1990s, but overall, the quality of both public and private schooling as measured by learning outcomes remains appalling.

Kapur and Subramanian explain these problems by invoking India's precocious and ultimately "premature" democracy. Democracy's early arrival, for example, made critical land reforms impossible because electoral pressures meant that the interests of landed elites had to be accommodated. (All successful cases of land reform in contemporary times, including in China, South Korea, and Japan, occurred under conditions that were not democratic.) As electoral competition intensified, the state also became vulnerable to demands from both elites and the broader public for state largess. Indian democracy morphed into what the authors call a "Kamdhenu democracy" (a reference to the bovine goddess of Hindu mythology), in which the state suckles the country's clamoring constituencies. The government still extends tax breaks to farmers and corporations, provides a variety of subsidies, and refuses to shut down inefficient state-owned enterprises. "Too much was asked of the state, too often and too soon," the authors write, frequently at the cost of efficiency and growth. By maintaining dominance in various markets, the government asphyxiated private enterprise even as the state did little to supply meaningful public goods. This, the authors say, is India's democracy tax.

ON INDIAN SOIL

Yet India could not have survived unless it was democratic. From the moment of its birth, outside observers assumed that it was only a matter of time before democracy would give way and this unwieldy, diverse country would fragment. The promise of equal standing through universal franchise and representative government was necessary to hold India together. Democracy arrived early because it was essential to the country's existence: in this sense, India is sui generis, an audacious experiment that held the promise of "revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people . . . without bloodshed," as B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's constitution, described it. India's social transformation would take place through democracy—not the other way around. The problem is not, as the authors suggest, that Indian democracy was precocious but that its less-than-satisfactory consequences were not inevitable.

Ambedkar saw tremendous danger in the deep social hierarchies and centuries of caste oppression within Indian society. Democracy was "only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic," he wrote. The state had to help promote democratic norms and create a broad-based civic spirit. But to achieve this goal, state power had to be centralized, and its administrative apparatus insulated from parochial and narrow societal pressures. Ambedkar's vision aligned with the high-modernist desire of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, to manage the economy through central planning and infuse technocratic and bureaucratic apparatus with a scientific temperament. A centralized state emerged, empowered to impose its political authority on the country.

But the imperative of centralization clashed with the imperative of nurturing a democratic culture. A centralized state had no incentive to solicit the participation of society in exercising its power or to forge a social contract around universalistic, democratic norms and the delivery of social and public goods. Instead, the Indian state derived its legitimacy from the top-down exercise of power.

For most citizens, the state was a distant bureaucracy whose power could provide an escape from oppressive social hierarchies. Democracy came to be seen as a route to access state power rather than a means to demand that the state serve the general public good. Electoral competition coalesced around demands for government jobs, with quotas established for particular social groups, and around extracting subsidies and state protections. Democracy's success lay in the space it created for new, hitherto marginalized, and oppressed groups to mobilize and gain that state power. But it also resulted in forging a transactional relationship between state and society in which government power was deployed to serve private interests rather than the broader public—and was not held accountable for the delivery of public goods. The Kamdhenu state derives from this transactional logic, as does the paradox of an electorate consigned to seeking education, sanitation, and health care from the private sector while demanding that the state play a leading role in most arenas of economic and social life, whether as the number one employer or as a manager of temples.

India's path from socialism to capitalism has entrenched this transactional logic. Its big businesses are deeply intertwined with state power, leading to a high degree of capital concentration and the capture of political elites through election financing. This has precluded India from following the East Asian model in which the state directed innovation and stoked competition in the private sector. And it has also eroded appetite for liberal market reforms. No politician can credibly subject vulnerable parts of society (notably farmers and low-wage laborers) to the vagaries of the market while protecting big businesses. These dynamics make it hard for the government to deregulate key sectors of the economy, including agriculture and energy. In this light, the statism of Indian society seems almost rational.

LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRACY

Yet zoom in, and the picture is not so bleak. This broad-stroke portrait of Indian economic and political life obscures the achievements—and better political arrangements—that can be found among some of the country's 28 states. In some parts of India, society mobilized to push successfully for more diffused and participatory state power, notably in the states of Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. These states boast significantly better human development indicators than much of the rest of the country. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have a long history of social movements that resisted caste-based discrimination and in the process encouraged people to make a collective demand for public goods. Kerala, in particular, developed a robust local government and built networks of women's associations that contributed to ensuring that the state had one of the best human development outcomes in the country; in 2025, the state government declared that Kerala was the first state in the country to eradicate extreme poverty. In Himachal

Pradesh, the provincial bureaucracy successfully ensured access to primary education earlier than in many other parts of the country and has sought to share its power through local civic organizations. Even in difficult settings, such as India's poorest state, Bihar, women gained greater access to financial services and education when the state made an active effort to mobilize women into local village associations.

The authors generally pay insufficient attention to the role played by organized civil society and nongovernmental organizations in fostering social transformation. Civil society has been instrumental in pushing the obdurate government toward experiments in access to rural credit, improving the quality of education, and designing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, a law that ensured rural households paid unskilled work from the government. (The act was repealed in December 2025.) India's abiding disappointments are not simply a product of a precocious, premature, and elite-dominated democracy. Rather, they are the consequences of the organization of state power and the type of democratic social contract that it has enabled. Democracy offers evidence of how best to reshape this contract. But it would require India to recommit itself to the possibilities of democracy and to resist the political winds that are pushing the country toward democratic backsliding under its current Hindu nationalist government.

In one of the most informative and insightful chapters of the book, the authors trace the divergent paths to growth of different parts of the country. Despite the country's pathologies, one-third of India, chiefly its southern and western states, grew faster than China did in the last four decades. Each of these states has defied the traditional prescription for achieving growth, finding its own path. Kerala undertook serious land reforms between 1950 and 1970, but much of its growth in recent decades has come from remittances sent by migrants in the Gulf. Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have grown on the back of highly skilled services, while Tamil Nadu is emerging as a manufacturing hub. This diverse experience suggests that more robust federalism is critical. The central government must allow the states greater agency. The record of Indian states also suggests that answers to India's chief conundrum—how to find a model of development that delivers jobs and prosperity to its youth—lie within the country.

The authors don't delve into this, but India's states have also been pioneers in finding new ways to balance the demands of redistribution and growth, including by providing school meals, distributing bicycles to help girls get to school, and mobilizing women's groups to improve access to markets. These experiments began locally in response to democratic pressure before they made their way into the national debate. They offer a reminder that democracy, for all its potential failings, can be a powerful self-corrector. In this moment of global disenchantment with democracy, India offers some hope, even if many citizens have forgotten the power of their achievements.

RESPONSE

The Dream Palace of the West

Why the Old Order Is Gone for Good

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

In his essay "The West's Last Chance" (January/February 2026), Alexander Stubb, the president of Finland, correctly divines the future trajectory of world order. "The global South," he writes, "will decide whether geopolitics in the next era leans toward cooperation, fragmentation, or domination." He's also right in asserting that "this is the last chance for Western countries to convince the rest of the world that they are capable of dialogue rather than monologue." Yet to have a dialogue, one must listen. The sad truth is that the West does not seem willing to listen to the global South.

The countries of the global South do not all share the dominant Western perspectives about world order. Stubb emphasizes the challenges posed by China and Russia. But many of the 3.3 billion Asians who are not Chinese, along with many of the approximately 1.5 billion people who live in Africa and the over 660 million who live in Latin America, view China and Russia differently. Western policymakers rarely try to understand why. China and Russia may loom menacingly in Western imaginations, but people in the global South do not think of them in that way—nor should they be expected to. Indeed, the rest of the world has had as much, perhaps more, to fear from the West in recent history as it has from the West's autocratic competitors. To his credit, Stubb urges the governments of Western countries to take the demands and

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interests of the global South seriously. But engaging with the global South is not just an exercise in listening. It also requires Western governments to reassess their own positions and approaches to a world they have long taken for granted.

HIGH HORSES

Consider, for instance, the war in Ukraine. Many countries in the global South have condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was and is illegal. Yet when Western governments imposed sanctions on Russia, most other countries didn't follow suit. Instead, they maintained normal relations with Russia. In December 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the world's largest democracy, received Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi with a 21-gun salute, reminding the West that its efforts to ostracize Russia would fail.

The West insists that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was unprovoked. Of course, Ukraine never attacked Russia, but the West's policies toward Moscow since the collapse of the Soviet Union helped precipitate the crisis. Many leading Western thinkers, including the American diplomat George Kennan and the Australian intellectual Owen Harries, had warned decades ago that the eastward expansion of NATO would eventually provoke a Russian backlash. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva captured a more nuanced view on the war in Ukraine when he said, in May 2022, "Putin shouldn't have invaded Ukraine. But it's not just Putin who is guilty. The United States and the EU are also guilty. What was the reason for the Ukraine invasion? NATO? Then the United States and Europe should have said: 'Ukraine won't join NATO.' That would have solved the problem." A 2015 video in which the American political scientist John Mearsheimer explains how the West provoked Russian aggression, drawing from his 2014 essay in these pages, has been watched over 30 million times on YouTube—and widely shared in the global South.

Some Western leaders dismiss these views as amoral and as anathema to the principles that Western democracies seek to uphold in the world. Here, the simultaneous fighting in Ukraine and Gaza in 2024 and 2025 undermined Europe's moral standing. Europeans have rightfully expressed horror over the killings of innocent civilians in Ukraine, but EU leaders remained mostly silent as Israel destroyed Gaza. Not only have many more civilians died in Gaza than in Ukraine, but Israeli military actions, according to estimates published in *Foreign Affairs* and elsewhere, may have led to the deaths of five to ten percent of Gaza's prewar population—a staggering figure, exponentially higher than the toll of Russia's war in Ukraine. No one respects an adulterous priest who preaches marital fidelity in church. But this is how European leaders are seen in the global South. And it's a key reason why the West is losing the rest.

Since many global South countries have also suffered the consequences of the Ukraine war (with many African countries seeing aid they once received from Europe diverted to Ukraine), they naturally welcomed U.S. President Donald Trump's efforts to end the war.

By contrast, EU leaders have unwisely been trying to thwart Trump's efforts by encouraging Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky not to compromise on a peace deal.

In theory, when Trump backed away from confronting Russia and cut off U.S. financial flows to Ukraine earlier this year, the EU could have stepped in to bridge the gap. As Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk put it in March, "500 million Europeans are begging 300 million Americans for protection from 140 million Russians who have been unable to overcome 50 million Ukrainians for three years." But to replace lost American funding, the EU leaders would have to be brave and cut domestic spending, demanding sacrifices from their own populations. None of the leaders of EU countries have so far dared to significantly cut the welfare benefits of their own populations to support the war in Ukraine. Instead, they have been trying to illegally seize Russian assets in Europe, violating the multilateral principles that Stubb advocates.

In short, instead of isolating Russia, the EU has effectively isolated itself from both the global South and from Trump's United States. The EU would improve its standing in the global South significantly were it to better support Trump's efforts to find a compromise with Russia. A long-term détente between the EU and Russia is possible if both sides reconstruct Ukraine as a bridge between them rather than as a knife in Russia's back.

GOOD LISTENING

If the EU has mismanaged its relations with Russia, a middle power, it has performed equally poorly with regard to China, a budding superpower. A massive shift has taken place in EU-Chinese relations. In 2000, the combined GDP of the EU countries was roughly seven times as big as China's GDP. Now, both are about the same size. By 2050, the GDP of the EU will be about half the size of China's. And yet the EU countries speak condescendingly toward China and have blocked deals that would productively strengthen ties, such as the EU-Chinese investment agreement.

The EU leaders will defend such actions by invoking their moral commitments to democracy and human rights in the face of an authoritarian China. In so doing, they believe that they are on the right side of history. But for over 2,000 years, Chinese people have thrived when they had a strong, effective central government that ruled wisely. Under the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese people have enjoyed the best 40 years of human and social development in 4,000 years of Chinese history. As a result, the CCP enjoys a great deal of respect, support, and legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people—and in many global South countries, as well.

China's government is certainly not perfect. It makes mistakes. It is still trying to extricate the Chinese economy from challenges such as the enormous debt in the real estate sector and diminished consumer confidence. But it is also one of the most effective governments in the world. Just see how it has driven China's share of global manufacturing from six percent in 2000 to roughly 30 percent today, a share that could reach 45 percent by

2030. Western leaders and pundits who cast the CCP as a villain and call for the equivalent of regime change in Beijing are unaware that they look perfectly ridiculous in the eyes of the 88 percent of the world's population that lives outside the West.

Stubb offers wise advice to his fellow Europeans. "Governments of the global West," he writes, "can maintain their faith in democracy and markets without insisting they are universally applicable; in other places, different models may prevail." The global South would enthusiastically support this approach, as well as Stubb's analysis that "a rules-based world order underpinned by a set of well-functioning international institutions that enshrine fundamental values remains the best way to prevent competition leading to collision."

Stronger multilateral institutions are the answer. Yet, as Stubb emphasizes, these institutions need reform to accommodate rising powers, especially China and India. Here, too, sadly, European countries stand in the way. Stubb is right in saying that the UN Security Council's list of permanent members needs to be changed. I have proposed a "7-7-7 formula" for Security Council reform that would see the body made up of seven permanent, seven semipermanent, and seven periodically elected members. The permanent members would be major powers representing each region: Brazil, China, the EU (represented by France and Germany), India, Nigeria, Russia, and the United States. The next 28 most influential powers (based on population and GDP) would take turns filling the seven semipermanent seats, and the final seven seats would be filled by the remaining UN member states, also on a rotational basis. This approach would ensure that the Security Council will always be representative in terms of geography, demographics, and economic influence.

There is also a simple way to jump-start the process: the United Kingdom could give up its permanent seat to India. In 2000, the British economy was 3.5 times as large as India's. By 2050, India's could be four times as large as the United Kingdom's. The United Kingdom should make amends for the plunder of British colonial rule—and accept the shifting distribution of global power—by giving India its seat. To be sure, the United Kingdom will be reluctant to give up its veto power, but such a move could help the country come to grips with its changing role in geopolitics. When the United States seems increasingly unreliable as an ally and when the United Kingdom has suffered reputational damage for hewing close to the American line in recent decades, London would gain greatly from strengthening its relationships with other countries. By staging a grand, historic reconciliation with India and simultaneously taking the lead in pushing for much-needed Security Council reform, the United Kingdom can reposition itself as a friend and champion of the global South. It can also use the opportunity to negotiate binding exchanges with India and other countries that would benefit from Security Council reform to help ensure that the United Kingdom retains significant geopolitical leverage even after it surrenders its veto.

The United Kingdom could set itself up for success in the decades to come rather than cling futilely to the ultimately unsustainable advantages it accrued for itself in the past.

The West is equally reluctant to reform the International Monetary Fund. In theory, IMF voting shares are supposed to reflect a country's share of global GDP. Yet today, even though the EU countries combined and China have similar shares of global GDP (the EU has about 15 percent, China about 17 percent), the EU's voting share is 26 percent, whereas China's is six percent. The EU has fiercely resisted lowering its voting shares. It is also absurd that the IMF has never been headed by any non-European in its over 80 years of existence. Failing to reform the IMF will drive countries to depend more on parallel institutions and programs set up by China, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Stubb's ultimate recommendation is a wise one: "A new symmetry of power among the global West, East, and South would produce a rebalanced world order in which countries could deal with the most pressing global challenges through cooperation and dialogue among equals." But achieving this symmetry of power will require a dialogue among equals. A good dialogue requires good listening. Unfortunately, the 12 percent of the world's population that lives in the West hasn't yet learned the art of listening to the remaining 88 percent with whom they share the planet. If Stubb's essay provokes a new process of good listening in the West, especially in Europe, it will have served a useful purpose.

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

The Triangle of Power: Rebalancing the New World Order
BY ALEXANDER STUBB. Columbia Global Reports, 2026, 216 pp.

Stubb, the president of Finland, claims that the international system has reached a crossroads. The next global order will follow either the logic of Yalta (a reference to the 1945 summit) or the logic of Helsinki (a reference to the 1975 summit); that is, we will have either a multipolar world divided into spheres of influence or a more open and cooperative multilateral world. The outcome will be determined by the interplay of three global coalitions: the "Global West," led by the United States, Europe, and Japan; the "Global East," led by China and Russia; and the "Global South," led by countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. Stubb argues that the West, despite the momentary disruption of U.S. President Donald Trump's unilateralism, remains committed to some sort of reformed and updated multilateral system, while the East tilts in the direction of multipolar blocs. In this contest of orders, the South will cast the decisive vote. Drawing on Finland's Cold War–era tradition of "pragmatic realism," Stubb calls on Western leaders to work with both the East and the South to rebuild a global system of rules-based cooperation centered on the United Nations.

Goliath's Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse
BY LUKE KEMP. Knopf, 2025, 592 pp.

Kemp, a specialist in global risk analysis, surveys the rise and fall of states, empires, and civilizations across the last five millennia, looking for lessons for today. He is particularly interested in polities that he calls "Goliaths": large-scale hierarchical political orders built on dominance, force, and elite rule. The Roman Empire and the Chinese Han dynasty were Goliath powers in their eras, and more recent European and Asian empires followed in their footsteps. Kemp argues that despite their many differences, these Goliaths all sowed the seeds of their own destruction. The book offers a long list of reasons why seemingly rich and powerful empires and civilizations eventually faced setbacks and collapse, including territorial overreach, wealth inequality, corruption, social immiseration, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, war, and poor leadership. Kemp argues that the contemporary Goliath is not a single country but a globalized capitalist civilization. With climate change, nuclear weapons proliferation, pandemics, spiraling inequality, and a fragmenting global system presided over by uninspiring leaders, Kemp worries that today's global Goliath may be approaching the precipice.

Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft From Attila the Hun to Kissinger
BY A. WESS MITCHELL. Princeton University Press, 2025, 352 pp.

Mitchell makes the case for the importance of diplomacy as the world enters a dangerous new era of great-power competition. This richly researched book offers a series of detailed portraits of leaders who used the tools of diplomacy to fend off rival great powers. These figures include a Byzantine emperor who protected his realm from the Huns in the fifth century, the rulers of Renaissance-era Venice who faced the Ottomans, the Habsburg emperors who maneuvered against Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century, and Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who worked to avoid a two-front war with France and Russia. Diplomacy is not just the conveying of information to other states but an exercise in grand strategy: how states manage the gap between their limited capabilities and their need to deal with threats and dangers lurking beyond their borders. Leaders build alliances and assemble coalitions while undercutting the operating space of adversaries. They must play for time and integrate policy goals with their military and economic power. Mitchell offers a salutary survey of an increasingly necessary art in today's fractured world.

The Hour of the Predator: Encounters With the Autocrats and Tech Billionaires Taking Over the World
BY GIULIANO DA EMPOLI. Translated by Sam Taylor. Pushkin Press, 2025, 160 pp.

Da Empoli, an Italian essayist, journeys through summit meetings and elite gatherings to recount the Machiavellian machinations of some of today's autocrats, oligarchs, and tech billionaires. The old Western-led order of statesmen, diplomats, and international law is giving way to a world run by a new power elite of strongmen and tech moguls who are cynical, ruthless, self-serving, and contemptuous of the rule of law and the old norms of democratic politics. Moscow, Riyadh, Washington, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and the UN General Assembly provide the backdrop for da Empoli's vignettes about these new "predators." What makes today's moment so revolutionary—and so dangerous—is the amalgam of two forces: authoritarianism and artificial intelligence. The Western defenders of the old postwar order appear hapless, unable to fully grasp the profound danger of the gathering storm. U.S. President Joe Biden, emblematic of this passing generation, is depicted as the "last transatlantic president" and the "last internationalist." Da Empoli foresees a world without rules or enlightened leaders, plagued by violence and chaos.

How to Survive in a Hostile World: Power, Politics, and the Case for Realism
BY PATRICK PORTER. Stanford University Press, 2025, 202 pp.

In this short, spirited book, Porter summarizes the core intellectual beliefs of the realist tradition of international relations. Realism offers a simple set of timeless insights: international life is intrinsically dangerous, the shadow of war is always present, foreigners can never be fully trusted, power is the currency of world politics, and, in a world of anarchy, the pursuit of the national interest is not just a necessity but an ethical obligation. Idealists and cosmopolitans may see realism as an amoral or immoral worldview that stokes violence and warmongering. But Porter sees realism's focus on the preparation for war as prudent. The doctrine's morality is based on the belief that escape from a fearful, grasping world is impossible, so it is best to seek a modicum of stability through the artful pursuit of state interests. Porter admits that realism can fall prey to excess, when imprudent leaders exaggerate the fear of others to justify violence and barbarism. His hope is that realism can remain a useful framework through which states can manage the dangers of anarchy.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

How Progress Ends: Technology, Innovation, and the Fate of Nations
BY CARL BENEDIKT FREY. Princeton University Press, 2025, 552 pp.

Frey, an economist, provides a sweeping survey of a millennium of global economic growth and stagnation with an eye toward charting possible technological futures. Through short historical case studies, he argues that a competitive market system, complemented by a decentralized or federal political structure, is best for technological innovation, whereas top-down bureaucratic systems are advantageous for scaling up existing technologies. Great Britain in the Industrial Revolution and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are examples of the former, while Prussia under Otto von Bismarck in the late nineteenth century and Japan in the age of the zaibatsu (industrial and financial conglomerates) exemplify the latter. Stagnation sets in when a society fails to adapt its prevailing model to new circumstances, such as when a country with a centralized, hierarchical economic system cannot shift toward the kind of competitive, decentralized market that can best take advantage of technological change. Frey worries that both China and the United States will face this challenge: China because of the centralization of power under

Xi Jinping, and the United States because of how incumbent firms have successfully stifled competition.

Their Future: A History of Ahistoricism in International Development
BY MICHAEL GUBSER. Yale University Press, 2025, 408 pp.

Gubser argues that those providing economic development assistance need to better understand the past. Aid workers ignore history when designing and assessing programs. Planners neglect local circumstances that might usefully inform the structuring of programs and activities. Ignorance of the past prevents practitioners from drawing lessons from the broader history of development assistance, while neglect of comparative experience prevents them from transferring approaches that succeed in one national context to another. This ahistoricism is regrettable but understandable: bureaucratic pressures and managerial routines leave aid workers with little time for research and study, while the abstract models of development theorists tend to overlook particularities. The author's clarion call for reintroducing history into the theory and practice of international development is especially timely given the political challenges and threats to foreign aid institutions in the United States and elsewhere.

The World's Worst Bet: How the Globalization Gamble Went Wrong (and What Would Make It Right)
BY DAVID J. LYNCH. PublicAffairs, 2025, 416 pp.

The economic globalization that accelerated dramatically in the 1990s was based on two premises: opening global markets would benefit everyone, and integrating China into the world economy would force Beijing to liberalize its political system. As Lynch recounts in this sweeping history of the subsequent quarter century, neither assumption held up. In the United States and other advanced economies, the so-called China shock—the tsunami of exports enabled by China's admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001—deindustrialized large parts of the American heartland and pushed significant swaths of the manufacturing workforce out of their jobs. Chinese leaders, meanwhile, were able to resist liberalizing reforms even as multinational firms, the Internet, and other forces of globalization entered their country. Lynch's book, like many others on the subject, is better at recounting what went wrong than suggesting what would make it right. Still, if understanding the failures of globalization is a prerequisite for saving it, then this history is a start.

Timebomb: When Ageing Explodes
BY GILES MERRITT. Policy Press, 2025, 296 pp.

Merritt argues that rapid population aging, if unaddressed, threatens prosperity and social cohesion. Although this book is focused on Europe and written primarily for a European audience, its arguments will resonate with readers in East Asia and the Americas, where analogous demographic trends are playing out. Aging pushes up the cost of health care, eldercare, and pensions, which governments pay for with taxes on the working-age population. But slow growth of that cohort limits the revenues available to cover these costs and to meet other pressing needs, such as education and training for new entrants into the labor force. Merritt offers recommendations for defusing the demographic time bomb: governments can increase fertility rates by expanding the availability of housing and childcare and providing a living wage or a universal basic income, and they can mitigate the costs of sustaining older populations by raising the retirement age and tailoring health services to the needs of the elderly. The author also points to immigration as a possible solution but worries that more open immigration policies could lead to political turmoil.

How the Brady Plan Delivered on Debt Relief: Lessons and Implications
BY NEIL SHENAI AND MARIJN A. BOLHUIS. Cambridge University Press, 2026, 75 pp.

This slim volume is a timely retrospective on the Brady Plan, the 1989 initiative named after Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, through which the United States helped resolve the Latin American debt crisis. Under Brady's plan, Latin American governments could exchange troubled bank loans for newly issued bonds. The United States applied regulatory and political pressure and multilateral institutions provided modest incentives known as financial sweeteners to encourage banks and governments to participate in the exchange. The arrangement cleared away defaulted loans, jump-started trading in emerging market debt securities, and renewed developing countries' access to global financial markets. The authors caution that this strategy won't help resolve today's debt crisis in low-income countries, however, because circumstances have changed. Where once there were only banks, there is now a diverse set of creditors, and the United States has ceded to China the mantle of the world's top lender.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

AI, Automation, and War: The Rise of a Military-Tech Complex
BY ANTHONY KING. Princeton University Press, 2025, 240 pp.

These days, much of what is written about the effect of artificial intelligence on war is hyperbolic and speculative. It is thus refreshing to come across a book that is grounded in current military practices. King, a sociologist, rejects technological determinism and the idea that, one day, intelligent computers will combine with autonomous robots to exterminate humankind. Instead, he looks at the social and political forces that have shaped the development of AI and its military applications. As he notes, the digital revolution—the rise of digital technologies—was first made possible by military contracts. But over time, Western armed forces came to depend on the companies the digital revolution produced and that now lead the way in AI development, such as Microsoft and Palantir. But these companies have global commercial interests beyond U.S. national security, and that creates a tension in civil-military relations. King's informative and thoughtful chapters explain the history of AI and run through its possibilities and limitations. He concludes that AI is not a substitute for humans, but a tool humans can use to make decisions.

The Warhead: The Quest to Build the Perfect Weapon in the Age of Modern Warfare
JEFFREY E. STERN. Dutton, 2026, 416 pp.

The United States first used Paveway, the original so-called smart bomb, in combat in 1968. In 1972, launched from an American jet and guided by sophisticated lasers, the precision missile destroyed a bridge in North Vietnam that American forces had previously been unable to hit. The strike was a marquee moment in military history, and in this illuminating and thoughtful book, Stern, a journalist, tells the story of the bomb and its effect on warfare. He discusses the prompts and experiments that encouraged engineers to develop Paveway and then improve it. He shows how the missions of pilots became less dangerous and more successful. He also describes the effect precision missiles had on policymakers, arguing that by reducing the risk of civilian and American military casualties, their advent made it easier for Washington to launch military operations in Iraq, Kosovo, and Libya.

The Geriatric Peace: Population Aging and the Decline of War
MARK L. HAAS. Oxford University Press, 2025, 360 pp.

Haas's description of demographic trends can make for a sobering read. Largely thanks to shrinking fertility, by the 2060s people 65 and older will outnumber those 15 and younger. Economies around the world will slow, and welfare systems will come under great strain. But Haas, a political scientist, draws one major positive conclusion. As populations age, he argues, states will become less capable of waging war. After all, there will be fewer resources available to spend on wars and fewer people to fight them. Haas believes that these limitations could constrain conflict between China and the United States, especially given the former's dramatic demographic challenges: estimates suggest that between 2015 and 2065, China's working-age population will shrink from 998 million to 412 million. Haas is careful to point out that he is making no more than a "probabilistic" argument. He also acknowledges that Russia complicates his predictions, given that its severe demographic crisis was not enough to dissuade President Vladimir Putin from attacking Ukraine (although that crisis has made it harder for the Russian military to fight). The Russian case illustrates the problem with his argument. Haas demonstrates why demographic factors might dampen pressures to go to war, but, unfortunately, not that they will be overriding.

Strange Stability: How Cold War Scientists Set Out to Control the Arms Race and Ended Up Serving the Military-Industrial Complex
BENJAMIN WILSON. Harvard University Press, 2025, 488 pp.

Wilson, a historian, offers a thoroughly researched and informative account of how natural scientists and social scientists shaped debates over nuclear policy in the 1950s and 1960s. He sets out to debunk myths about their role, including the notion that scientists generally opposed the arms race. Instead, they argued that the rivalry between the two superpowers could be stabilized and made less dangerous through arms control. Wilson's book is valuable as a guide for how individual thinkers turned their ideas into policy proposals. But it is no great revelation that those promoting arms control were skeptical about disarmament and believed in deterrence, whereas the concept of stability, for all its flaws, helped analysts and policymakers organize their thoughts. Wilson is right that their influence over nuclear debates was less than is commonly suggested, but the book would benefit from more discussion on the era's wider political context—which could help explain why scientists were sometimes sidelined from nuclear decision-making.

Race Against Terror: Chasing an al-Qaeda Killer at the Dawn of the Forever War
JAKE TAPPER. Atria Books, 2025, 336 pp.

Despite the subtitle, this book is not about chasing down an al-Qaeda killer. Instead, it is about chasing the evidence necessary to convict one in a U.S. criminal court. In 2011, Ibrahim Harun, an al-Qaeda agent who killed American troops in Afghanistan, introduced himself to Italian police on a ship carrying people escaping Libya. The Italians were keen to hand Harun over to the Americans, but they did not want him to enter military custody, so the United States was forced to try him in a civilian court in exchange for his extradition. Prosecutors secured a conviction, but only after corroborating evidence was found in his original confession—a process that took almost seven years. Tapper treats this story like a police procedural, but his book makes for an intriguing exploration of the role law plays in war and terrorism. Although due process takes time, Tapper notes, the criminal courts have been more effective than military commissions in prosecuting terrorists.

East Asia

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

Autocracy 2.0: How China's Rise Reinvented Tyranny
BY JENNIFER LIND. Cornell University Press, 2025, 244 pp.

In a provocative and important study, Lind challenges the familiar notion that authoritarianism hampers innovation. She offers ample evidence of China's technological dynamism, including its world-leading electric vehicle sector and the host of science and engineering Ph.D.'s it graduates. But she goes further to argue that great powers do not need to be rich to innovate. Instead of high GDP per capita, they need economic capacity—human capital, infrastructure, and industrial policy that can promote sustained growth—and the ability to deploy cutting-edge technology in society and the military. Authoritarian states that have these can practice "smart authoritarianism," in which they selectively relax political control to encourage growth and innovation. China's success as a smart authoritarian power, Lind argues, has transformed it into a genuine competitor of the United States that boasts both growing global influence and an attractive development model. Scholars of Chinese politics may take issue with her claim that China's leaders "silence critics not with bullets but with lawsuits and red tape" and her downplaying of the country's economic challenges. But she usefully interrogates common assumptions about China's rise.

Towards a Future for BRICS+
EDITED BY HEIWAI TANG AND BRIAN WONG. Hong Kong University Press, 2025, 228 pp.

The multilateral grouping known as BRICS or BRICS+—whose first five members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—is often portrayed as a unified political, economic, and security counterweight to advanced industrialized countries in Europe, North America, and Asia. The essays in this fascinating volume challenge that simplistic assessment by exploring the bloc's internal dynamics. Member countries use the BRICS platform to advance their own myriad interests. Russia and China, for example, often try to use the grouping to balance against the United States by pushing aggressively to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar. India, by contrast, views China as a significant threat and has used BRICS meetings to press Beijing on border disputes. Another member, Indonesia, has opted to hedge against the group itself, reaching out to the Europe-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development even as it engages with BRICS. Taken together, the essays leave the impression of a group of countries committed to the bloc as a way to amplify the voices of rising powers and rebalance global governance but unable to overcome internal divisions.

The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism
BY MINXIN PEI. Princeton University Press, 2025, 344 pp.

Pei adds to his distinguished body of writing about China with an investigation of why the country shifted away from decades of reform and neo-authoritarianism (capitalist development under one-party rule) toward a new form of totalitarianism, and how engagement with the United States devolved into a new Cold War. He describes how, from the early 1980s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Chinese Communist Party increasingly found itself stuck in what he terms a "partial reform equilibrium" in which it pursued economic liberalization but also nationalism, soft repression of Chinese society, co-optation of rising elites, a weakly institutionalized collective leadership, and a cautious foreign policy. When Chinese leader Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he responded to a slowing economy and challenges to the party's legitimacy by reactivating the foundational institutions of totalitarianism—state dominance over society, control of information, the systematic use of terror, and greater party influence in the economy—that had remained intact. Xi also sought to exploit perceived U.S. weakness by advancing a bolder foreign policy. Pei concludes pessimistically that Xi's neo-totalitarian turn will delay the emergence of a prosperous, politically liberal China for at least another generation.

The Upside of U.S.-Chinese Strategic Competition: Institutional Balancing and Order Transition in the Asia Pacific
BY KAI HE AND HUIYUN FENG. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 209 pp.

The political scientists He and Feng offer a counterintuitive and refreshingly optimistic argument about competition between China and the United States. They insist that the two rivals are not destined for military conflict, thanks to the abiding strength of nuclear deterrence and the constraints of economic interdependence, and because the competition between them occurs primarily through institutions. This competition engenders three unintended positive consequences: more dynamic regional institutions, occasional collaboration between the two superpowers, and greater provision of public goods such as infrastructure and development funding. China created the new Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2016, for example, at least partly in response to the slow pace of International Monetary Fund reform, which in turn helped trigger reforms in the U.S.- and Japanese-dominated Asian Development Bank. U.S.-Chinese competition has also spurred constructive reform in other multilateral organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations. The authors acknowledge that the rivalry will invariably produce periods of serious friction. But they argue convincingly that institutions, deterrence, and interdependence can mitigate conflict and that the new great-power competition will also yield underappreciated dividends.

Fallout: The Inside Story of America's Failure to Disarm North Korea
BY JOEL S. WIT. Yale University Press, 2025, 560 pp.

Only a handful of people could have written this book, and few could have written it as well as Joel Wit. Wit spent three decades working on U.S.–North Korean relations, first as a government official and then as a lead participant in scholarly and semiofficial dialogues. He draws on his unique first-hand experience and over 300 interviews to craft a riveting, blow-by-blow account of the fierce internal battles, bureaucratic stove-piping, paralysis, and missed opportunities that have characterized U.S. policymaking toward North Korea since the 1990s. Wit is unsparing in his assessment of what he views as successive administrations' sometimes well-intentioned but often flawed execution of North Korea policy. He characterizes the Obama administration's approach as "paralysis cloaked in a virtuous posture of patience"; describes the George W. Bush administration's decision-making as "a mess" because of internal competition between the State Department and the White House; and excoriates John Bolton, the U.S. national security adviser during Donald Trump's first term, for relentlessly seeking to derail the president's diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Wit's personal negotiation experience and mastery of policy detail make this book invaluable both as a history of U.S.–North Korean relations and an analysis of the U.S. policy process.

South Asia

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

The Range of the River: A Riverine History of Empire Across China, India, and Southeast Asia
BY IFTEKHAR IQBAL. Stanford University Press, 2025, 272 pp.

Iqbal, a historian, demonstrates that rivers are more than just geographical features. They are powerful agents of history and geopolitics. In this innovative book, he focuses on six such rivers—the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Red, and Yangtze—each of which originates in the Tibetan Plateau. Iqbal argues that these rivers produced distinct and rich cultures. In the nineteenth century, they fostered intense imperial competition. The late Qing state sought to extend its authority into southwestern China by trying to govern shipping traffic on these waterways. The British tried to control large stretches of the rivers by annexing Assam and fighting for much of Myanmar, which would allow London to govern trade between the latter territory and China. The many ethnic communities spread across these river basins did not simply submit to these empires, and some of them succeeded in remaining independent. But modern nation-states have been broadly successful at making rivers their instruments. Both China and India, for instance, turned rivers into borders by damming flows and restricting navigation across what had once been a shared watery world.

Computing in the Age of Decolonization: India's Lost Technological Revolution
BY DWAIPAYAN BANERJEE. Princeton University Press, 2026, 296 pp.

This fascinating study examines India's quest for technological self-reliance. Banerjee, a historian of science, tells the story of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research Automatic Calculator project: India's attempt, beginning in the 1950s, to design and build a homegrown computer. New Delhi took the endeavor very seriously, and it completed the project in 1960. The government then attempted to forge partnerships between TIFRAC and other foreign consortia to reduce IBM's dominance over computing worldwide. In 1977, it pushed IBM from India altogether. But India never became a hardware or electronics manufacturing power, and by the 1990s, its technology sector was oriented around providing lower-value software services. Banerjee argues that this failure was not scientific; TIFRAC, he says, was cutting-edge for its era. Instead, the effort petered out because the state supported a single project rather than an entire industry. As a result, India suffered from a weak domestic electronics manufacturing base, meaning that key components for TIFRAC had to be imported. The country's technical talent was concentrated in a few institutions. Toward the end of the book, Banerjee suggests that India's current attempt to become technologically independent is beset by similar challenges. The country has scientific expertise but a bad manufacturing environment.

The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandant of the Killing Fields
BY RITHY PANH AND CHRISTOPHE BATAILLE. TRANSLATED BY JONATHAN CULLEN. Other Press, 2025, 304 pp.

Between 1975 and 1979, the horrific Khmer Rouge murdered nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population. The filmmaker Rithy Panh lived through this brutal period. His account moves back and forth between his agonizing memories of being a 13-year-old prisoner, watching his family slowly die in labor camps, and his later-life interviews with Kaing Guek Eav (better known as Comrade Duch), who commanded a Cambodian prison where at least 14,000 people were tortured and executed. The book, an update of Panh's 2013 edition, probes the nature of the evil the Khmer Rouge unleashed and the unfathomable motives driving its atrocities. Yet Panh makes sure to emphasize each victim's individuality and dignity, without abstractions, and he refuses to absolve anyone in the regime of their sins. He shows that Kaing, for example, was responsible for his own transformation into a killing machine. He was not simply following others' orders. He had a choice—people like him always do.

Fascism in India: Race, Caste, and Hindutva
BY LUNA SABASTIAN. Harvard University Press, 2025, 296 pp.

This powerful book persuasively argues that Hindutva, the virulent form of

Hindu nationalism embraced by India's current leaders, is a fascist ideology. But Sabastian, a historian, shows that Hindutva is not a mere imitation of European fascism but an indigenous strain, shaped by local history and politics. She argues that Hindutva's architects were less concerned with exterminating minorities than their European counterparts were and more focused on forcibly assimilating them into a homogenized Hindu community. But Sabastian also reframes European fascism by highlighting the ubiquitous use of the word *Kaste* by the Nazis. German fascists, she writes, deployed ideas of race, purity, and hierarchy in ways that were functionally similar to India's caste ideology. German and Indian fascism were still fundamentally distinct, given the former's emphasis on mass killings. Yet her book indicates that caste is not simply an ancient Indian institution but a broader, fascist tool. Finally, Sabastian argues that the post-independence evolution of Hindutva has moved away from thinking of Hinduism as an ethnicity and toward thinking of it as a religion.

Democracy and Inequality in India: Political Economy of a Troubled Giant BY ATUL KOHLI AND KANTA MURALI. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 360 pp.

Kohli and Murali, both political scientists, compellingly assert that India's elite-driven economic growth has eroded the foundations of the country's democracy. India may be one of the world's fastest-growing economies, but this expansion has been accompanied by deepening inequalities—both economic and social—and the growing dominance of a few conglomerates. The governing Bharatiya Janata Party has used these divisions to consolidate power, mobilizing India's Hindus while winning over economic elites through pro-business policies. Kohli and Murali agree that the country still has democratic institutions, yet they suggest that civil society and the opposition are too weak to counter the combined force of capital and cultural majoritarianism. The authors may underestimate the breadth of the BJP's base by emphasizing the role elites play in the party's success. But they provide a sobering account of what concentrated economic power and an entrenched social hierarchy do to a democracy.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Centers of Power in the Arab Gulf States BY KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN. Oxford University Press, 2024, 336 pp.

In eight crisp, comprehensive, and accessible chapters, the longtime Gulf analyst Coates Ulrichsen provides a rich overview of the dynamics in the countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. He examines not only the rulers themselves but also the elites with whom they consult, their partially successful efforts to build formal administrative institutions, their varying approaches to popular representation, and how their regimes respond to political opposition, including through generous distributive policies and sometimes harsh repression. This comparative perspective allows him to draw out the considerable variation among governments that are too often bracketed together as indistinguishable absolute monarchies or rentier states. From Kuwait's long and checkered history of parliamentary politics to dynastic rivalries and political marriages among the region's ruling families, from the ambitious aspirations of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth funds to the UAE's recruiting of Colombian and South African soldiers, Coates Ulrichsen conveys with precision and clarity the diverse purposes, resources, strategies, and tactics of some of the world's oldest ruling monarchies—and some of the region's most powerful countries.

The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization
BY ELHAM FAKHRO. Columbia University Press, 2024, 352 pp.

Thorough and judicious, this book offers a welcome analysis of the Abraham Accords, the U.S.-brokered diplomatic agreements signed in 2020 that for the first time formalized diplomatic relations between Israel and four Arab countries: Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. Some Israelis were especially excited about the accords, which have allowed them to travel more widely, particularly to the UAE, and have allowed Israel to ink numerous new trade deals, notably in advanced technology, missile defense systems, and cybersecurity. The absolutist Sunni monarchies of the Gulf took advantage of the agreements to burnish their reputations for interfaith religious tolerance even as they cracked down on Shiite Muslims at home. Although the accords were often portrayed in the United States as a step toward Arab-Israeli peace, the failure to address the Palestinian question has made it hard to build on the deals. Fakhro, an analyst at Harvard, also provides an unusual and very welcome focus on Bahrain, so often overshadowed by its bigger neighbors, in this valuable guide for Middle East policymakers.

Jordan: Politics in an Accidental Crucible
BY SEAN YOM. Oxford University Press, 2025, 320 pp.

Yom, a political scientist, provides a useful and accessible corrective to one-dimensional treatments of Jordan, a small but consequential state. Rarely studied in its own right, Jordan is often treated as an addendum in discussions of the resilience of monarchy in the Middle East, the interminable Israeli-Palestinian peace process, or even the United States' influence in the region. The country is evoked in tourist posters as a land of deserts and camels, but it is actually one of the most urbanized countries in the world: its capital, Amman, is more populous than either Damascus or Beirut. Accounts of the exploits of its rulers—"plucky little kings," as the international press has called them—obscure a vast and intrusive military, police, and intelligence apparatus that employs one in six Jordanian men. The growth of a cosmopolitan business elite on the back of decades of

International Monetary Fund programs and enormous American aid packages has concealed rapidly widening inequality and deepening poverty; more than a third of Jordanians live under the World Bank poverty line—and per capita, Jordan hosts more refugees than any other country in the world.

From Apartheid to Democracy: A Blueprint for Peace in Israel-Palestine
BY MICHAEL SCHAEFFER OMER-MAN AND SARAH LEAH WHITSON. University of California Press, 2025, 272 pp.

The chimerical goal of a two-state solution still ensnares most policymakers who feel obliged to characterize it as the only feasible way to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though many know it is unworkable. Two career human rights and humanitarian affairs advocates offer another way. Violations of international law must be addressed before substantive negotiations can begin. They propose ending the illegal and discriminatory policies that create and sustain myriad power disparities. Only this first step would open the negotiating arena to proposals that reflect the actual preferences of Israelis and Palestinians. As Omer-Man and Whitson themselves concede, it will require considerable international pressure, particularly on Israel, to elicit the kinds of concessions they advocate. Their proposals for security sector reform seem implausibly ambitious, but they defend these suggestions with a bracing mix of optimism and sobriety—and they reject the notion that the only options are to prolong failure or await tragedy.

America's Middle East: The Ruination of a Region
BY MARC LYNCH. Oxford University Press, 2025, 272 pp.

Lynch, among the most prominent American political scientists working on the Middle East, offers a furious critique of U.S. foreign policy in the region since the end of the Cold War. He argues that the heady ambitions of the unipolar moment permitted American policymakers, Democrats and Republicans alike, to pursue the imposition of a U.S.-centric order without the resolution of the central conflict in the region—that between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Indeed, he suggests that the dispute was prolonged by the U.S. commitment to a "peace process" that was, in fact, all process and no peace, which served only to prolong U.S. involvement in the region and justify Washington's indispensability. The failure to recognize the urgency of the Palestinian issue inevitably led to policies that ignored regional public opinion, undermined putative democracy promotion efforts, propped up autocrats, and required several U.S. military interventions to put down increasingly violent eruptions of popular discontent from Iraq and Syria to Libya and beyond. Lynch does pull some punches; he insists that these U.S. policymakers are talented, earnest, and knowledgeable, and yet they are the authors of monumental blunders and disastrous policies, including, in Lynch's well-documented view, advocating a ruinous invasion of Iraq and supporting Israel's brutal assault on Gaza.

Africa

ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY

Digital Surveillance in Africa: Power, Agency, and Rights
EDITED BY TONY ROBERTS AND ADMIRE MARE. Zed Books, 2025, 240 pp.

African countries rarely figure in discussions of digital surveillance. But as this pioneering edited volume makes clear, the continent is becoming a major arena for the deployment of new technologies that track and collect data about people. American, Chinese, Israeli, and European corporations have supplied spyware to collect personal data, facial recognition capabilities for use in public spaces, artificial intelligence pattern recognition to sort through private messages and social media posts, and other surveillance technology across Africa with little oversight from the permissive regulatory bodies of African governments and little attention from civil society organizations. In the process, increasingly authoritarian regimes across the continent have developed new powers of repression. The volume contains case studies by local experts on the use of digital surveillance in Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, and Zambia. What emerges is a disquieting picture of a growing technological panopticon that funnels profits to foreign companies and empowers African governments to surveil and repress their populations, often flouting toothless domestic privacy protections.

The Age of Change: How Urban Youth Are Transforming African Politics
MICHELLE D. GAVIN. Bloomsbury, 2025, 192 pp.

African demographic trends continue to divide observers. Fear of the continent's growing youth population motivates both restrictive Western immigration policies and the attempts of aging African autocrats to suppress youth-led popular dissent. In 2012, however, the Mozambican anthropologist Alcinda Honwana published a prescient reconsideration of African youth, arguing that they were stymied by forces beyond their control, including bad governance, poor economic prospects, and political instability. Since then, scholars and analysts started taking a broader view of Africa's young people, noting the ways they are disrupting and reinvigorating African cultural and political life. Gavin's slim book offers a useful primer. Marshaling evidence from a wide variety of sources, including social media and academic studies, Gavin shows how in countries such as Uganda, where more than three-quarters of the population is under the age of 30, the 81-year-old President Yoweri Museveni has ruled for almost 40 years while regularly cracking down on youth-led protests calling for democratic reforms. But Gavin, a former U.S. ambassador to Botswana and a senior director on the National Security Council during the Obama administration, misses an opportunity to examine why Western leaders continue to prop up figures such as Museveni rather than support the youthful opposition.

The Elements of Power: A Story of War, Technology, and the Dirtiest Supply Chain on Earth
BY NICOLAS NIARCHOS. Penguin Press, 2026, 480 pp.

The green transition runs through the bedeviled Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country that has played a central role in every phase of global capitalism from the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade to today. In Congo, companies from around the world seek the cobalt, copper, and lithium that make modern battery technology possible. Those batteries promise to help the world turn away from fossil fuels. This compelling narrative argues that the Congolese people bear the brunt of this well-intentioned and necessary transition. Niarchos, a journalist, hops from the development of lithium-ion batteries in Japan and the United States to China's domination of rechargeable battery manufacturing to the mines in Congo that provide the necessary materials for making batteries. At every stage, he focuses on the individuals involved: inventors, businessmen, politicians, and ordinary miners. In this way, Niarchos grounds the geopolitical and technological drama of resource extraction in Congo in the stories and lives of real people. As the green transition shapes geopolitical competition, Niarchos offers an important reminder that its costs and benefits have never been equally shared.

Dream the Size of Freedom: How African Liberation Mobilized New Left Internationalism
BY R. JOSEPH PARROTT. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025, 392 pp.

Portuguese colonialism in Africa began with the conquest of Ceuta, a Moroccan territory, in 1415, and ended in 1975 with the liberation of Portugal's remaining colonies. That made Portugal the first, last, and longest-running European colonial empire on the continent. Yet compared with events in British and French colonies, relatively little is known about the struggles of African liberation movements against Portuguese domination. Parrott's lively study focuses on African resistance while delving into the transnational networks that made it possible. With the help of churches and university campuses in the United States, as well as more radical Black Power and leftist networks across the Atlantic, Lusophone African activists from Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique developed a robust global solidarity movement that inspired the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. Correcting conventional narratives that portray the liberation of Portugal's African colonies as an unintended byproduct of the 1974 Carnation Revolution that toppled the Portuguese dictatorship, Parrott shows how African activists were central to the fall of that empire.

The Institutionalization of Islam in Southern Senegal: Intermarriage, Qur'anic Education, and Jihad
BY ALY DRAMÉ. University of Michigan Press, 2025, 224 pp.

In this short yet dense book, Dramé, a historian, plumbs the global currents that transformed the remote middle Casamance region of southern Senegal. Proposing an alternative account of the history of Islamization in West Africa, Dramé challenges accounts that describe the arrival of Islam as a sudden shift brought by missionary outsiders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing on multiple sources, including a novel use of oral testimony, he instead finds that a hybrid form of Islam took hold in the region in the seventeenth century, before mystics associated with the Sufi traditions and jihadist warriors arrived in the region in multiple waves from as far away as Morocco. Through intermarriage with local women and hospitality extended to Islamic travelers in the region, these early Muslim pioneers, Dramé contends, set the stage for the later waves of conversion that transformed the region into a part of the Islamic world. By reframing this history, Dramé reconceptualizes the Islamization of the region as an evolutionary and inclusive process rather than a sudden rupture imposed by outsiders.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

The Rise of the Russian Hawks: Ideology and Politics From the Late Soviet Union to Putin's Russia
BY JULIETTE FAURE. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 386 pp.

Faure's wide-ranging and penetrating research traces the evolution of Russian conservative intellectuals from their informal ideological pursuits in the 1970s to their involvement in policymaking under Russian President Vladimir Putin. The book focuses on the various proponents of what the author calls "modernist conservatism": Orthodox monarchists, imperialists, Eurasianists, and others united by vehement anti-Westernism and a commitment to an alternative, specifically Russian model of technological modernity. Alexander Prokhanov, a flamboyant writer and journalist since Soviet times, looms large in Faure's narrative. In 2012, he founded the Izborskii Club, an "idea network" that brought together modernist conservatives of diverse strains. The club's principal idea—that Russia should rely on its technological and military might to assert its civilizational distinction from the West—initially seemed too radical for the Kremlin. Yet since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin has increasingly adopted this political thinking. Still, Faure argues that, despite the Putin regime's growing reliance on ideology, the current Russian leadership, unlike its Soviet predecessors, does not have a government institution in charge of ideological production and instead relies on think tanks outside the halls of power.

Imperfect Equilibrium: Civil-Military Relations in Russian Defense Policymaking
BY KIRILL SHAMIEV. Hurst, 2026, 280 pp.

In this comprehensive study, Shamiev, a political scientist, explores cycles of defense reform in post-Soviet Russia by examining the interaction of presidential authority, military leadership, and civilian oversight. On the eve of Vladimir Putin's election to the presidency in 2000, the armed forces were underfunded and badly in need of modernization. Initially, Putin focused on eliminating society's checks on his power and did not prioritize defense reform. Then, in 2007, he appointed civilian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who embarked on a sweeping modernization program. Some of Serdyukov's decisions, such as dismissing thousands of officers, triggered fierce resistance from the military. Five years later, Putin replaced Serdyukov with a staunch loyalist, Sergei Shoigu, who reversed some of Serdyukov's contentious changes, moved decision-making securely out of public view, and oversaw a massive rearmament with ample financial support. But the armed forces' impressive façade concealed serious flaws that became evident after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; the military was unprepared for combat. Subsequent improvement in military performance required Putin's deeper involvement in decision-making, most significantly through the major militarization of the national economy.

Excessive Loyalism in Putin's Authoritarian Regime: The Costs of Sycophancy
BY ALEXANDER LIBMAN. Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 258 pp.

In his original analysis, Libman sheds light on a vulnerability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's autocracy that has rarely been studied systematically. With public opposition effectively eliminated, the regime is confronting a different problem: the excessive zeal of its own loyalists. In their eagerness to demonstrate loyalty and attract the attention of superiors, officials and administrators may misinterpret the Kremlin's intentions and inadvertently act against the regime's interests. This risk is heightened by the Kremlin's deliberate use of ambiguity in its pronouncements, a practice driven by a desire to preserve flexibility in decision-making. For example, some local administrators responded to citizens' complaints about rising prices by counseling them to stop "whining" and look for better-paid jobs or by stating that "the government does not owe you anything." These officials apparently sought to sound patriotic at a time when economic resources are increasingly diverted to the war, but their callous remarks were starkly at odds with Putin's avowed dedication to ordinary Russians. Still, the regime cannot afford to punish its sycophants, for fear of discouraging displays of loyalty.

World Enemy No. 1: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Fate of the Jews BY JOCHEN HELLBECK. Penguin Press, 2025, 560 pp.

Opening the Gates of Hell: Operation Barbarossa, June–July 1941 BY RICHARD HARGREAVES. Osprey Publishing, 2025, 496 pp.

Two new books explore the circumstances surrounding the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. In his monumental research, Hellbeck emphasizes that Adolf Hitler understood the German-Soviet war as a fundamentally ideological conflict. To Hitler, he argues, Jews and the Bolsheviks were inseparable evils—the "world enemy no. 1"—to be exterminated. The murder of Jews in the Soviet territories occupied by Nazi forces in 1941 preceded the genocide of European Jews. During the first year of the war, about two million Red Army soldiers were shot or starved to death in German captivity. After the Allied victory in 1945, Moscow glorified the heroism of the Soviet people and the preeminent role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and did not linger on the suffering of the Jews. Western powers, by contrast, focused on the Holocaust and the remembrance of its victims and, later, downplayed the Soviet role in vanquishing Nazi Germany and the immense sacrifices made by the Soviet people. Today, some European institutions, including the European Parliament, treat Nazism and Soviet communism as equally abhorrent.

Drawing on extensive research, Hargreaves, a journalist, meticulously reconstructs the first weeks following Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, in June 1941, presenting the unfolding events through the eyes of Soviet and German soldiers, military and political leaders on both sides, and the civilian population. As German forces advanced across the Baltics and through parts of Poland and Romania—territories annexed by the Soviet Union under the 1939 treaty with Hitler—the communist authorities fled in haste, and the Soviet security police slaughtered the "class enemies" held in overcrowded prisons, including women and children. As soon as the communists fled, locals engaged in savage anti-Jewish pogroms. For them, Jews were seen as the embodiment of the reviled Bolshevik regime, while the invading Nazis were greeted as liberators. In 1941, Hitler's forces held a clear advantage over the ill-trained and ill-equipped Red Army. Yet within weeks of the invasion, it became evident that Hitler's expectation of a blitzkrieg had not materialized. The dogged resistance of Soviet soldiers, despite heavy losses and immense physical hardship, began to slow German progress.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Can Europe Survive? The Story of a Continent in a Fractured World
BY DAVID MARSH. Yale University Press, 2025, 528 pp.

Marsh, a leading commentator on European affairs, draws on an unsurpassed store of journalistic contacts, economic insight, and knowledge of how the EU really works to analyze its responses to various crises since 1989. This meaty yet readable book is essential for anyone engaged with European politics. To be sure, no single work can cover all the dimensions of the European project. Migration, enlargement, the rise of the far right, and other transformative forces in modern EU politics receive little or no attention. Marsh's assessment of German reunification in 1990, Russian President Vladimir Putin's increasing hostility to Europe, and defense cooperation among European powers are familiar. Yet his analysis of the intricacies of monetary cooperation (and its relation to Brexit) is uniquely insightful; he shows that through managing rather than resolving internal conflicts, EU member state leaders have ensured the survival of the euro despite large underlying weaknesses in the continent's economy. The book concludes with optimism about Europe's future, a sentiment that seems to rest more on hope than on experience.

On My Watch: Leading NATO in a Time of War
BY JENS STOLTENBERG. Norton, 2025, 480 pp.

Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian prime minister, served as secretary-general of NATO from 2014 to 2024, longer than all but one of his predecessors. His tenure saw two Russian invasions of Ukraine, U.S. President Donald Trump's first term in office, the accession of four new members, and a steep increase in defense spending across the continent. In this honest and sober insider account, Stoltenberg sketches one critical, tense negotiation after another, describing how he helped allies reach agreement. Overall, however, his tale reveals his inability to buck geopolitical reality in an era of great-power politics. He sought to blunt Trump's hostility toward NATO allies by disingenuously crediting the president for increases in European defense spending—but that only delayed Trump's seemingly inevitable drift away from Europe. He supported more intense negotiations to avoid a war that came anyway. In the end, Western countries supported Kyiv against Moscow to defend Ukrainian democracy and, he insists, Ukraine's right to be a NATO member. Yet despite his efforts, Ukraine did not receive Western aid as quickly as it needed, and the country's future remains uncertain.

Blind-Spot Politics: Appeasement, Authoritarianism, and Hypocrisy in Europe
BY PAUL LENDVAI. Hurst, 2025, 272 pp.

In analyzing contemporary European politics, Lendvai draws on more than seven decades of journalistic experience, deep knowledge of central Europe, and the courage to call it like he sees it. Why, he asks, did national and EU leaders, specifically those in Austria and Germany, so long discount the threat posed by authoritarians, not just in Russia but among far-right EU governments? He contends that politicians willfully ignored the basic lesson of Western policy in the Balkans and, a half century before, the failure to deter Hitler (whose regime Lendvai survived as a child): authoritarian power is corrupt and violent. Yet in recent years, some European leaders have appeased authoritarians such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, some acting out of naiveté but most, Lendvai charges, out of an opportunistic desire for material gain. Among those he charges with fraud, corruption, and opportunism are recent leaders of Austria, Germany, and Hungary. Although his vignettes about politicians are engaging, readers learn little about why European publics elect and reelect such politicians.

Debt Trap Nation: Family Homelessness in a Failing State
BY KATHERINE BRICKELL AND MEL NOWICKI. Agenda Publishing, 2025, 192 pp.

Income inequality is widening in countries throughout the developed world, but the United Kingdom is among the most unequal. Rising living expenses and shrinking government assistance trap ever more people in a deteriorating quality of life. That decline is evident in unequal access to childcare, schooling, transportation, medical care, and, perhaps most important, housing. Each form of inequality renders the others more likely, further immiserating people. The statistics and stories recounted here are shocking: children shunted into mass state care facilities akin to orphanages, one-seventh of British public housing not meeting minimum government standards, and a striking correlation between substandard housing and domestic abuse. Those affected are disproportionately women, children, and racial minorities. Many individuals and organizations in the United Kingdom profit from the systems that disadvantage such people, and even those sympathetic to their plight, such as the current government, seem unable or unwilling to alleviate their misfortune.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

Chile's Struggles for International Status and Domestic Legitimacy: Standing at the Liberal Order's Edge
BY CRISTÓBAL BYWATERS. Routledge, 2025, 244.

In this valuable, timely study, Bywaters, an emerging Chilean scholar of international relations, documents how Chile's highly educated political elites stabilized their democracy by integrating the country into the U.S.-led liberal international order. For 20 years, beginning in the early 1970s, Chilean society was gripped by extreme polarization, first during the administration of the socialist Salvador Allende and then under the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. But with the end of military rule in the 1990s, Chile saw a great improvement in its international standing and, eventually, secured a reputation as a stronghold of democratic capitalism. In the United States, Democrats and Republicans alike supported Chile's bid for status abroad and democratic stability at home—two closely intertwined goals—by rewarding the country with a bilateral free trade accord. Not surprisingly, Bywater worries that Washington's recent drift away from liberal internationalism risks leaving Chile, and other liberal-oriented states, in limbo. He laments, "Chile again confronts its long-perceived condition as a small and vulnerable nation in an increasingly unpredictable world." In this less favorable international context, the recent election of the conservative José Antonio Kast will be a stress test for Chilean democracy.

Popular Politics and Protest Event Analysis in Latin America
EDITED BY MOISÉS ARCE AND TAKESHI WADA. University of New Mexico Press, 2024, 352 pp.

This illuminating compilation of case studies examines protest movements in ten Latin American countries over the last half century. The surprising findings run counter to the pessimistic notion that the region is characterized purely by rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. Although economic liberalization over the past decades had weakened traditional labor organizations and their associated political parties, it also deepened democracy in many countries by galvanizing an ever-widening spectrum of civil society groups, including those to do with women, LGBT people, and indigenous peoples. The contributors, predominantly sociologists, categorize protests in Latin America as either "reactive" or "proactive." The former consist of battles against austerity, privatization, and other neoliberal measures, while the latter seek to expand human rights, civil liberties, and democratic freedoms. Protesters have changed their methods over time as land seizures and labor strikes have gradually given way to rallies, road blockages, and artistic performances. Significantly, elites have come to perceive popular protests not as dire threats but as a form of ordinary democratic expression.

Ore and Empire: Conquistadors to Guggenheims on the Camino Real
BY MARTIN STUPICH. University of New Mexico Press, 2026, 232 pp.

El Paso: Five Families and One Hundred Years of Blood, Migration, Race, and Memory
BY JAZMINE ULLOA. Dutton, 2026, 352 pp.

Two new books explore the past and present of the Texan border town of El Paso. As the world's great powers again compete for access to raw materials, Stupich's photography captures some of the social and planetary impacts of extraction. Over 15 years, Stupich documented a 100-acre copper smelter in El Paso that was once part of the Guggenheim family's global mining and processing operations, which stretched from Colorado to Chile. In some places, Guggenheim mines stood atop earlier mines dug by Spanish colonialists and indigenous peoples. The Guggenheim family's American Smelting and Refining Company demolished the sprawling El Paso complex in 2013 and, in an encouraging example of environmental remediation by a major corporation, embarked on a cleanup effort. Rather than emphasizing environmental catastrophe, Stupich's melancholic images transform industrial architecture into high art, its remnants as nostalgic as the fallen columns of decaying Greek temples.

In her beautifully woven history of El Paso, Ulloa notes that of the 17 Americans executed by the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa in his 1916 cross-border raid, nine were engineers at the El Paso copper smelting plant. A journalist with deep roots in El Paso, Ulloa beautifully weaves together the history of the southwest U.S.-Mexican border with the stories of five families, including her own. In contrast to the European immigration through Ellis Island, the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso portal facilitated movement in two directions; deportations of Mexican families periodically accelerated as U.S. immigration policies vacillated between inclusion and rejection. As Ulloa underscores, the jingoistic rhetoric of U.S. President Donald Trump is just the latest iteration of this ugly side of American history. And yet as the Mexican government still fails to provide security and opportunity for its citizens, the pull of the American dream remains powerful.

The Nine Lives of Christopher Columbus
BY MATTHEW RESTALL. Norton, 2025, 368 pp.

In this well-researched, rakish debunking of the many myths surrounding Christopher Columbus, Restall demonstrates that conspiracy theories, far from originating with modern social media, are recurrent throughout history. No, Columbus was not a converted Jew. No, he was not the first to argue that the world was round. And no, there is no evidence to suggest he was gay or had sex with sea creatures. While dispelling rumors passed down through the ages, Restall also resists Great Man iconography, preferring to paint Columbus as very much a product of his late-medieval times.

Born of humble origins in Genoa, and obsessively self-promoting, Restall's Columbus was primarily motivated by the desire to gain wealth and status, for himself and his offspring. Although Norse expeditions reached North America centuries earlier, Columbus does indeed get credit for being the first European explorer to establish lasting transatlantic routes to the Americas. And he deserves opprobrium for having butchered and enslaved indigenous populations. Columbus was also lucky: the Spanish crown, his patron, had just conquered the Canary Islands—a convenient port of call on his way to the New World.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

The Price of Democracy: The Revolutionary Power of Taxation in American History
BY VANESSA S. WILLIAMSON. Basic Books, 2025, 352 pp.

Those on the American right who equate taxation with "tyranny," Williamson writes, are perpetuating a myth. They have their logic upside down: across time and place, authoritarian governments tend to impose lower taxes, and democracies higher ones. Tax revenues both enable a government to function and endow a democracy with legitimacy, conferring the feeling that all who pay for the government own it. Americans have never been viscerally antitax; they understand that taxes are what Williamson calls the "key ingredient" of representative government. The colonists who dumped tea into Boston's harbor were protesting a tax imposed by another entity, not taxation in principle. Throughout U.S. history, Williamson argues, hostility toward taxation has consistently come from rich white elites, not the broader public, and fights over taxes have actually been fights over who gets to be part of the politically empowered public. An extreme antitax posture, like the one the Republican Party has recently adopted, becomes an opposition to government itself. Williamson provides illuminating history and a powerful political analysis of the current moment.

The Kissinger Tapes: Inside His Secretly Recorded Phone Conversations
BY TOM WELLS. Oxford University Press, 2026, 640 pp.

Few are aware of the stunning fact that, when Henry Kissinger served as the United States' national security adviser between 1969 and 1975 and secretary of state between 1973 and 1977, he secretly had his phone calls transcribed and, later, taped. He began two years before President Richard Nixon installed his own secret recording system and continued for three years after Nixon's system was dismantled. Wells has performed a major service in editing the 20,000 pages of Kissinger's transcripts—selecting important calls, organizing them by subject and date, and explaining their context. Together, the recordings bolster Kissinger's reputation for brilliance, wit, and strategic thinking. They also reveal his proclivity to backstab and battle nonstop with senior colleagues; his manipulation of and lying to journalists; his mistrustful relationship with Nixon, an equally facile liar; his self-described preference for "brutal" behavior; and his intention to "browbeat" to get his way. Wells provides unparalleled insight into the premier American diplomat of the twentieth century as well as minute-by-minute accounts of U.S. foreign policy decision-making in a momentous era, including during the Vietnam War, the 1971 Bangladesh genocide, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Nixon's opening with China, the Watergate scandal, various Cold War crises, and much more.

2024: How Trump Retook the White House and the Democrats Lost America
BY JOSH DAWSEY, TYLER PAGER, AND ISAAC ARNSDORF. Penguin Press, 2025, 416 pp.

In an unusual collaboration, three veteran political reporters from competing newspapers (*The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*) pooled their sources and experience to produce a definitive account of the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign. Unlike most post-election tell-alls, this narrative is neither the winner's story nor the loser's, giving equal weight to the three main campaigns—Joe Biden's, Donald Trump's, and Kamala Harris's. It does not support the widely held view that a Trump win was inevitable. A major finding is that the ambivalent ex-president decided to run again because the many prosecutions underway against him convinced him that retaking the White House was his best hope of evading jail. That fear made Trump a better, more focused candidate than he had been in 2016. By contrast, the Biden campaign seems to have been sleepwalking, listening only to itself, even though key advisers were fully—shockingly—aware of their candidate's weakness as they prepared for what turned out to be a catastrophic debate with Trump.

The American Revolution
DIRECTED BY KEN BURNS. PBS, six episodes, 2025.

The American Revolution and the Fate of the World
BY RICHARD BELL. Riverhead, 2025, 416 pp.

As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, two works offer valuable, fresh views of the American Revolution. Burns's 12-hour film sweeps across the long struggle with the command and artistry viewers expect from his earlier treatments of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the American Civil War. Even without photographs, he brings the war alive with clever uses of paintings, maps, reenactments, and the sound of gunfire to hammer home the fighting's extent and brutality. As always, Burns puts equal focus on people whose voices are not generally heard in such histories, illuminating what motivated Native Americans, enslaved people, women, and ordinary soldiers to support or oppose the rebellion.

The film's central thesis is that the Revolution was not "something that unified Americans" but a true "civil war." The split between Loyalists and Patriots is well known. The divide between enslavers and the enslaved, and between colonists and Native Americans, is not. In large numbers, both of the latter believed British leaders' promises of a better future under their rule. Understanding that the Revolution had losers beyond the British only deepens the American origin story.

Like Burns, Bell pays ample attention to the nameless, the powerless, and the unknown in this lively history. His larger purpose is to reveal that the American Revolution was a "world war in all but name." France, the Netherlands, and Spain provided the weapons, supplies, and, most important, the cash and credit essential to the American uprising. They also took the opportunity to launch direct military action to weaken the British Empire in North America, the Caribbean, and as far away as India. Global trade patterns were disrupted. Naval clashes spread from the Atlantic and the Caribbean to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mediterranean, and the English Channel. For its part, Great Britain recruited tens of thousands of German and Irish troops to fight on American soil. Even after the revolution ended, its impact persisted, prompting other insurgencies against imperial rule and leading Great Britain and Spain to tighten control over their remaining colonies. In all, Bell comes close to justifying Thomas Jefferson's description of the Declaration of Independence as an instrument "pregnant with . . . the fate of the world."

FOR THE RECORD

Because of an editing error, Fredrik Logevall's essay "The Fog of McNamara" (January/February 2026) mischaracterized U.S. Undersecretary of State George Ball's critique of U.S. negotiations to end the Vietnam War. Ball accused the Johnson administration, not U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, of "following the traditional pattern for negotiating with a mule."

Foreign Affairs (ISSN 00157120), March/April 2026, Volume 105, Number 2. Published six times annually (January, March, May, July, September, November) at 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065. Print subscriptions: U.S., $59.95; Canada, $71.95; other countries via air, $94.95 per year. Canadian Publication Mail–Mail # 1572121. Periodicals postage paid in New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Foreign Affairs*, P.O. Box 324, Congers, NY 10920. From time to time, we permit certain carefully screened companies to send our subscribers information about products or services that we believe will be of interest. If you prefer not to receive such information, please contact us at the Congers, NY, address indicated above.

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THE ARCHIVE

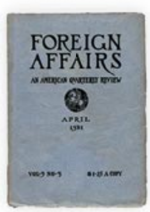
April 1931

"The United States and the Other American Republics"

HENRY L. STIMSON

The Trump administration has pronounced the return of the Monroe Doctrine, even invoking a "Trump Corollary" ahead of the U.S. military's seizure of the Venezuelan president in January. Nearly a century ago, Secretary of State Henry Stimson argued in these pages that the Monroe Doctrine should be a means not to achieve U.S. domination of the Western Hemisphere but to advance equality and "democratic idealism"—despite the "occasional dark spots" of U.S. actions in Latin America.

During the past two years widespread economic depression and consequent unemployment have brought instability and unrest to many of the countries of the Western Hemisphere. Since March 1929, there have been Revolutions in no less than seven Latin American republics, resulting in the forcible overthrow in six of them of the existing governments. These changes, and the armed contests by which some of them have been accompanied, have presented to the State Department of this country a rapid succession of critical problems for decision....



From the beginning we have made the preservation of individual independence of these nations correspond with our own interest. This was announced in the Monroe Doctrine and has been maintained ever since. That doctrine, far from being an assertion of suzerainty over our sister republics, was an assertion of their individual rights as independent nations. It declared to the world that their independence was so vital to our own safety that we would be willing to fight for it against an aggressive Europe. The Monroe Doctrine was a declaration of the United States versus Europe—not of the United States versus Latin America.

In taking this position in the Western Hemisphere, our policy has coincided with the basic conception of international law, namely, the equal rights of each nation in the family of nations. The law justly regards this conception as the chief protection of weak nations against oppression.