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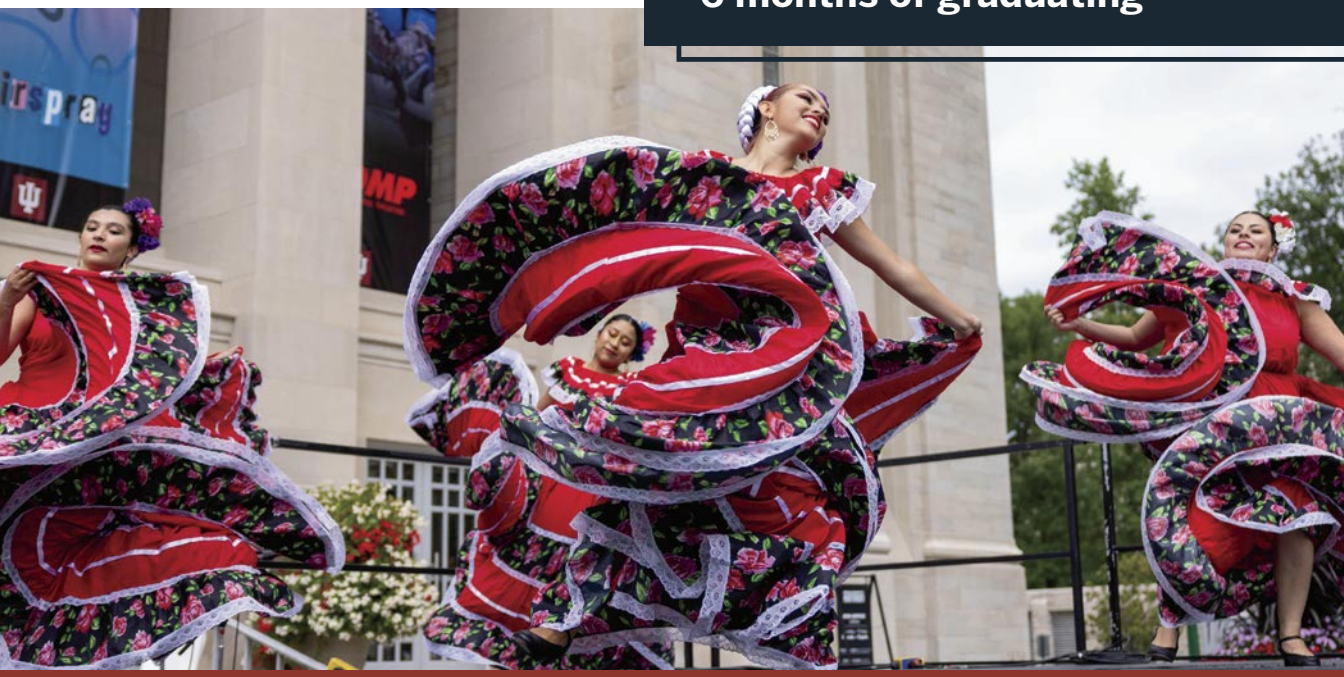

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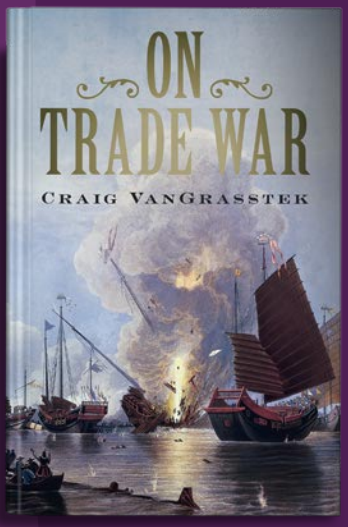

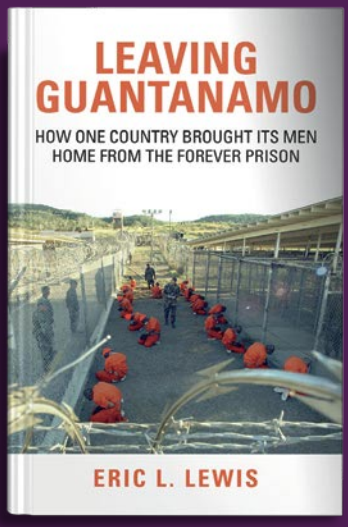

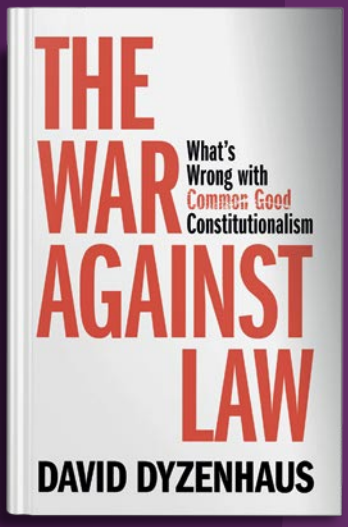

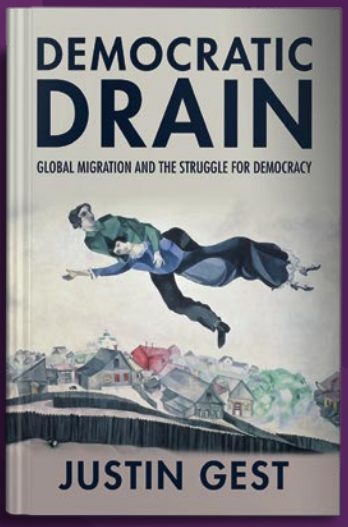

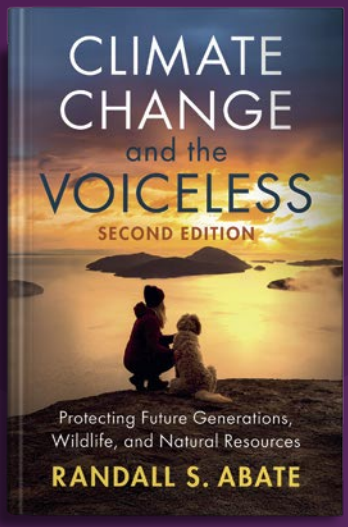

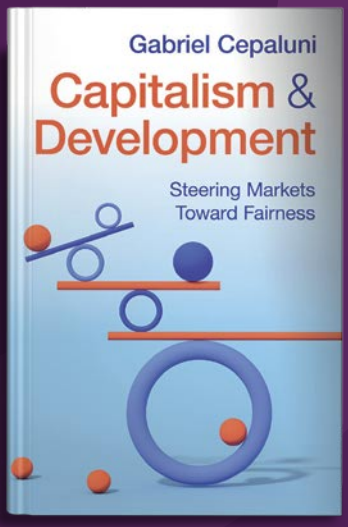

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Losing the War of the Future

How New Technologies Threaten America's Military Advantage

PAUL SCHARRE

In its recent campaign against Iran, the United States dominated the skies using its traditional airpower. The U.S. military pounded Iranian targets, conducting over 13,000 strikes. That prowess and devastating firepower did not stop Iran from hitting back. Over the course of the 39-day conflict that began on February 28 and stopped on April 8, Iran launched over 2,200 missiles and 4,400 drones against countries in the region. At least eight U.S. aircraft were destroyed or damaged by Iranian attacks. Multiple U.S. radars were hit, and seven U.S. service members were killed. And at the time of this writing, the Iranian regime remains in place and maintains a stranglehold over the Strait of Hormuz. The United States has not achieved its objectives in the war, even though it is by every metric far more powerful than Iran.

PAUL SCHARRE is Executive Vice President at the Center for a New American Security. He served in the U.S. Department of Defense in the George W. Bush and Obama administrations and in the U.S. Army, with multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is the author of *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*.

Illustration by Daniel Downey

The technological dominance that the U.S. military has long counted on to give it an advantage over competitors is waning. Unlike in past eras, when the United States maintained major leads in stealth and precision-guided weapons, the current age will not afford the United States an advantage in the technologies that are now transforming warfare: drones and artificial intelligence.

The conflict with Iran was the United States' first taste of a new era of warfare. Emerging technologies are leveling the playing field between Washington and its adversaries. The diffusion of affordable drone technology and artificial intelligence capabilities is allowing smaller states and nonstate actors the chance to punch above their weight. Such adversaries can now hit U.S. rear bases, inflicting casualties and damaging expensive U.S. aircraft. Iranian missile attacks on U.S. bases in the Gulf destroyed one E-3 Sentry early warning aircraft. That loss is even greater than the airplane's $300 million cost, since the U.S. fleet of E-3 aircraft is now down to only 15 and a replacement program is years away. Iranian missiles struck five KC-135 Stratotanker refueling aircraft, as well as multiple U.S. ground radars.

Drones have transformed not just the dynamics of warfare but also its economics. In the Gulf and elsewhere, low-cost air and naval drones and missiles can take out far more expensive assets. Ukraine used kamikaze drone boats and antiship missiles to eviscerate Russia's Black Sea Fleet, sinking 13 ships after two years of war and damaging dozens more. A $300,000 drone boat can cripple a navy warship that costs hundreds of millions of dollars.

The United States still has the most powerful military in the world, but it is not yet prepared for a new age of warfare defined by these realities. It needs to produce more low-cost drones and interceptors, and it needs to better adapt to the imperatives of AI competition. Just as the military can't amass airpower without building planes and can't dominate the seas without floating ships, it can't win in the AI age without harnessing data, buying computing power, and learning how best to use AI models. To maintain an edge on the battlefield, the U.S. military must find ways to efficiently assimilate these new technologies. That will require overcoming cultural and bureaucratic barriers within the armed services, forging closer relationships with the private sector, and finding new ways to assess military power. But if the U.S. military does not adapt in this way, it will increasingly find itself closely matched on the battlefield. After decades of dominance

assured by its technological edge, the United States will be diminished because it has let its lead perilously slip.

GAME OF DRONES

The United States has long relied on technological innovation to gain an advantage over its adversaries. Early in the Cold War, U.S. defense planners counted on nuclear weapons to offset the Soviet military's superior numbers in Europe. In the 1970s, the United States ushered in the information revolution in its military planning, and advances in semiconductors, computer networks, and satellites gave it a lead in stealth systems, precision-guided weapons, and GPS. These technologies proved invaluable in the 1990–91 Gulf War, when the United States systematically dismantled the Iraqi military. Their effect was even more impressive during the 2003 Iraq invasion, when U.S. forces seized Baghdad in just three weeks. In 2014, the Pentagon launched the "third offset" strategy, which sought to use robotics and AI to make up for the numerical superiority of Chinese and Russian forces. This strategy pushed the U.S. military to harness AI technology emerging from the commercial sector and persuaded U.S. officials that they could cement an enduring technological advantage over adversaries.

But this time, such a strategy will not work. The United States no longer has a discernible advantage in emerging technologies and will not be able to gain one.

Take, for instance, uncrewed vehicles. Cheap drones are widely available around the world, and the United States will not be able to prevent competitors from fielding them in large numbers. Iran has emerged in recent years as a major producer of cheap drones and has supplied thousands of drones to Russia for its war in Ukraine. Based on Iranian designs, Russia has produced tens of thousands more.

In theory, the United States should be able to produce a huge number of these weapons. Low-cost drones don't rely on any special technology. But in practice, the U.S. military has struggled to field cheap drones in any significant numbers. Ukraine produces four million drones every year, while the U.S. Army is acquiring only 50,000.

Pentagon leaders in both the Biden and the Trump administrations have made the production of low-cost drones a priority, but structural problems have gotten in the way. Small military drones rely on technology originally developed for the commercial hobbyist market, which is dominated by the Chinese company DJI. The U.S. military rightly

does not want to depend on military hardware from its chief competitor, so it ends up buying far more expensive U.S.-made drones (which still often use Chinese components).

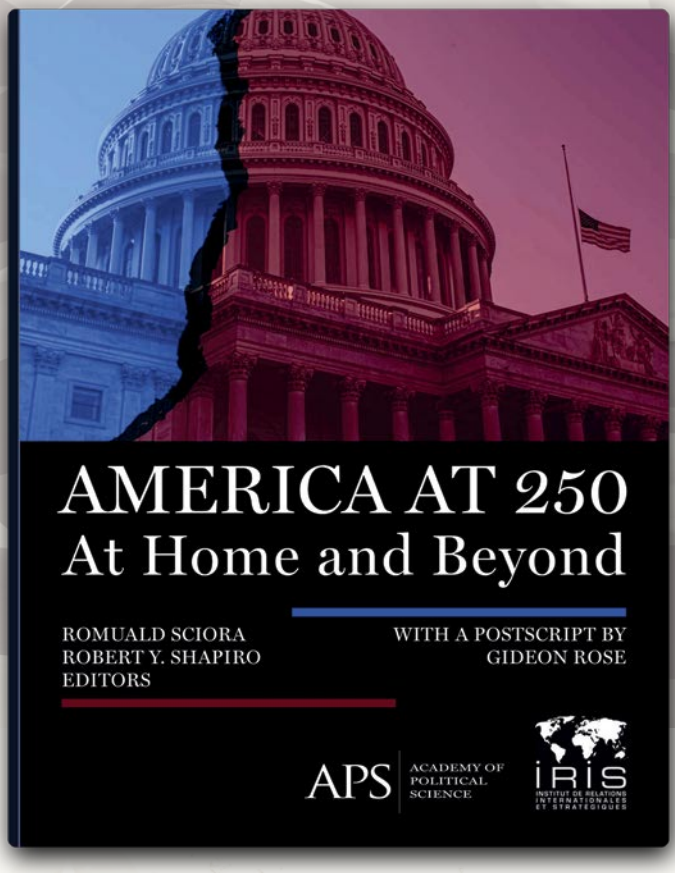
More damning, the United States simply isn't good at building anything cheaply, responding quickly, or scaling up rapidly. For decades, U.S. defense production has marched steadily up a cost curve toward ever more "exquisite" defense platforms—military parlance for advanced, expensive, and low-volume weapons. Drones, by contrast, have tilted the military landscape toward low-cost, attritable (or expendable) weapons that can be produced in great quantity.

The United States has been slow to adapt. The Defense Department's 2023 Replicator initiative aimed to field thousands of low-cost autonomous systems quickly but yielded only hundreds. The current Pentagon leadership has announced plans to expand the production of low-cost drones, committing over $1 billion to produce 340,000 drones by 2027. The army has set an even more ambitious goal of producing at least a million drones by 2028. To achieve these goals, the military will need to deliver consistent and substantial funding to build an industrial base for small drones that does not yet exist at significant scale.

But drone technology is not standing still. Soon, these vehicles will be able to operate with greater autonomy and in closer coordination with other machines. Most drones today are remotely piloted or use simple automation, such as by following designated waypoints or returning to base if they lose the connection to a human pilot. Ukraine has become a testing ground for more sophisticated autonomous features. For instance, many Ukrainian drones have autonomous terminal guidance, allowing the uncrewed aircraft to navigate several hundred meters on its own to the target if enemy jamming breaks the communications link between the machine and the human pilot. Ukraine is also producing long-range strike drones that can travel up to 600 miles and autonomously navigate without GPS by matching images from onboard cameras to preloaded satellite imagery. These innovations will be adopted far beyond Ukraine. More countries and nonstate actors will soon possess similar drones that can hit targets even when adversaries can block communications and prevent the drone from accessing GPS. Drones will be equipped with ever more sophisticated autonomous guidance systems that will allow them to search wide areas and identify and attack targets all on their own.

These advances will change warfare in profound ways. What today are simple drones will become tomorrow's intelligent swarms: thousands

AMERICA AT 250



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of drones reacting in real time to changing conditions on the battlefield. Swarms will be used to hunt mobile targets, conduct simultaneous attacks to overwhelm defenses, and build communications and logistics networks that are resilient to enemy jamming, disruption, or attacks. Autonomous robot swarms will be able to act with a speed, coordination, and dynamism that human pilots could never replicate.

Taking full advantage of drone swarms will require radically rethinking military command and control, organizational structures, and how human commanders direct military forces on the battlefield. Military operators won't pilot drones directly. They will command entire swarms of hundreds or thousands of drones, with the drones themselves autonomously coordinating their behavior. Militaries will need to figure out what types of directions to give swarms and how autonomous drones should coordinate among themselves. That will require quite a change from traditional models of command in the military, replacing hierarchical structures with more decentralized ones.

Compute is analogous to manufacturing capacity in the industrial age.

Drones are already changing dynamics on the battlefield in ways that the United States has not yet grappled with. In the war in Ukraine, for instance, persistent drones overhead have made it hard for either side to mass forces. Drones are now responsible for the majority of Russian casualties, supplanting artillery. The war in Iran has shown how drones have made bases far from the frontlines vulnerable. The U.S. military will have to adapt to this new reality, investing more heavily in camouflage, decoys, and other methods of hiding from detection and dispersing forces to reduce risk.

The United States also needs more cost-effective ways to defend against the vast numbers of missiles and cheap drones that adversaries can launch. Missile defense has come a long way in the 35 years since the Gulf War, when U.S. Patriot batteries were almost entirely ineffective in shooting down Iraqi Scud missiles targeting Israel. But offensive missile technology has evolved, too, and the threat from drones has mushroomed. The net effect has been that the United States has lost ground despite running faster. Missile defenses today are effective but costly. The United States, Israel, and the Gulf countries shot down 1,700 Iranian ballistic missiles and drones since the end of February, but the cost-exchange ratio has heavily favored Iran. Intercepting a $35,000

(or, according to some recent estimates, $7,000) Shahed drone with a $4 million Patriot missile will only ever be a Pyrrhic victory. Washington sees the losses mounting on the balance sheet.

The American military doesn't have enough missile interceptors, and the war against Iran has badly depleted U.S. stockpiles. Just since the war began, the United States has used roughly half of its Patriot missiles and between 50 and 80 percent of its THAAD interceptor missiles. The Trump administration is taking steps to expand production capacity, but it will take years to replenish the losses. The depletion of these stockpiles will leave U.S. forces vulnerable not only in the Middle East but also in Asia and Europe.

As with low-cost drones, the Pentagon is taking steps to develop and scale production of low-cost interceptors. U.S. Coyote drone interceptors cost around $125,000 apiece, while Merops drone interceptors cost around $15,000 each, a major improvement over million-dollar missiles. Washington will need to scale up production of these cheaper interceptors just to keep pace with the growing threat.

NEXT TOP MODEL

AI will bring even more sweeping changes to warfare. Although the United States is home to the world's leading AI companies, advances in the field will further accelerate the erosion of American military technological superiority. Washington is gripped by the supposed "AI race" between the United States and China, but the reality today is essentially technological parity.

Chinese AI models trail leading American ones by only a few months. Chinese companies such as DeepSeek, Moonshot, and MiniMax effectively piggyback on U.S. models, using them to train their own models at a fraction of the cost. Anthropic, OpenAI, and Google have all caught and reported foreign competitors that were conducting large-scale efforts to extract information from American models in violation of those models' terms of service. Chinese companies make up for their limited access to advanced AI chips—constrained by U.S. export controls—by copying the gains made by U.S. firms that possess the most powerful and advanced chips. This technique, called adversarial distillation, functionally negates the American advantage in the most cutting-edge AI capabilities.

Another area in which the United States has until recently enjoyed an edge is in using AI to transform its intelligence analysis

and operational planning. Large language models are integrated into Palantir's Maven Smart System, which pools intelligence from multiple sources into a single interface for analysts to assess the battle space. AI allows intelligence analysts and planners to synthesize vast amounts of data and plan strikes. The Israeli military reportedly used machine learning systems to process data and recommend targets for strikes in Gaza, but the U.S. military's operations against Iran are likely the first significant use of large language models on the battlefield. In Iran, where U.S. warplanes have frequently been redirected to new targets midflight, the U.S. military has used AI to prioritize targets and build strike packages amid a fluid and dynamic battle space.

But within a few months, China's military will have access to AI models with the same capabilities. In fact, every military and nonstate group on the planet will have access to these kinds of tools; after all, AI is not the closely guarded secret of particular governments, but the work of the commercial sector, and such innovations proliferate worldwide fairly quickly. Even though leading American companies are willing to work with the U.S. military, AI technology spreads faster than the military can reasonably integrate and adopt it, never mind use it to transform operations. Indeed, what matters more for militaries is not which country first develops a new AI tool or capability, but which military can first adopt it.

During periods of disruptive technological change, what determines a military's relative success is how well it employs new technology. In the early twentieth century, for instance, all the leading military powers of the age had access to new weapons such as tanks, submarines, and airplanes. The challenge was figuring out how best to use them.

The period between World War I and World War II saw militaries experiment with new technologies and invent new organizational structures, doctrines, and training to harness these weapons. The United Kingdom was the first to innovate with aircraft carriers but fell behind Japan and the United States in the run-up to World War II. British aircraft technology was among the most advanced, but cultural and bureaucratic obstacles within the British military, such as its misguided decision to give responsibility for naval aviation to the Royal Air Force rather than the navy, slowed technological adoption.

That matters because methods, more than cutting-edge equipment and systems, make the difference on the battlefield. After all, most wars are fought between adversaries that have approximate technological

parity. In a study of land wars from 1956 to 1992, the scholar Stephen Biddle found that the time gap between adversaries in military technology was on average less than three years.

AT THE BLEEDING EDGE

Restraining China's computing power is essential to edging out Beijing in AI adoption and allowing the U.S. military to use AI more effectively, even if China has access to AI models with the same capabilities. Computing power is essential for deploying AI at scale. Using the most advanced AI models takes a lot of energy and computing power, and tech companies are pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into building massive data centers to meet AI demand. Today, computing power is roughly analogous to manufacturing capacity during the industrial age. Just as a country's manufacturing capacity determined its economic growth and military prowess, aggregate "compute" will determine a country's AI power—and, consequentially, its strength.

The most powerful tool the United States has to slow China's progress in AI is export controls that prevent Chinese firms from procuring advanced chips and semiconductor manufacturing equipment. Chips are essential for training and using the most advanced AI models, and U.S. companies occupy key chokepoints in the chip production supply chain.

Under the first Trump administration and the Biden administration, the U.S. government steadily ratcheted up export controls on advanced AI chips and chip-making equipment to China. But in January 2026, the Trump administration reversed course and approved Nvidia's H200 chip for sale to China. As of April 2026, the chips had not yet been transferred to China, even though the Commerce Department had issued licenses for limited quantities and Nvidia had received orders from Chinese customers. Given overall constraints in the supply of chips for AI development and surging demand in the United States, every chip sold to China represents a loss for Washington and a boon for Beijing. The Trump administration should reinstate the ban on advanced AI chips to China rather than give up the United States' lead to a strategic competitor.

The Trump administration should also work with Japan and the Netherlands to tighten export controls on chip-making equipment to China. Advanced chip fabrication plants rely on technology from Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States. China is desperately trying to increase its domestic semiconductor manufacturing capacity to reduce its dependence on foreign chips. But without access to critical

chip-making equipment, China will not be able to produce leading-edge chips. The first Trump administration put significant pressure on the Netherlands to halt sales of extreme ultraviolet lithography equipment to China, machines that are needed to make the most advanced chips. China has nevertheless continued to make progress by using older, deep ultraviolet immersion lithography technology that is not restricted.

Of course, trying to restrict China's access to hardware, such as chips and chip-making equipment, will do little to limit its gains from adversarial distillation. The U.S. government should also work with AI companies to crack down on foreign competitors that extract the capabilities of American models. Congress should pass legislation to protect U.S. companies from antitrust liability when they share information about adversarial distillation with one another, similar to existing legislation addressing cyberthreats. Better cooperation among American AI firms could improve defenses against adversarial distillation by sharing best practices and threat information. And Washington should sanction Chinese entities involved in illicitly extracting the capabilities of AI models belonging to U.S. firms. Sanctioning specific Chinese companies would prohibit U.S. firms from working with them and, in the most extreme case, cut the offending Chinese companies off from the global financial system.

In some cases, AI labs themselves may want to keep some of the most advanced AI capabilities from public release, which could slow proliferation. OpenAI and Anthropic have taken this approach when delaying the release of their latest models, such as Anthropic's Mythos, out of fear that bad actors could use them for offensive cyberattacks. Anthropic has partnered with several leading technology companies in Project Glasswing to use Anthropic's AI model to find and patch cyber-vulnerabilities before more dangerous capabilities proliferate. OpenAI has created a "trusted access" program that allows thousands of verified cybersecurity experts to access OpenAI's tools for cyberdefense.

These approaches can give cybersecurity professionals a head start in fending off the dangerous AI capabilities that are coming, but the clock is ticking. As of October 2025, the AI research group Epoch AI assessed that the most capable open-weight models—that is, models available for anyone to download—trailed state-of-the-art models by only three months. Restricting release will slow proliferation by making adversarial distillation more challenging, but it will not be a permanent solution. Jack Clark, the co-founder of Anthropic, estimated in April

2026 that what counts as state-of-the-art AI cyber-capabilities today will be broadly available and openly sourced within 12 to 18 months.

Washington cannot halt the proliferation of AI capabilities, but it can still gain a little bit of an edge. Stretching a three-month lead into 18 months buys more time for cybersecurity experts and the U.S. military to adopt the latest AI technologies. In that sense, the right approach to technology won't give the United States an enduring advantage, but it will offer Washington a small lead in what will be a constant race.

The United States needs to use that time to innovate, experiment with AI, and adapt its own organizations and doctrine to make the most of the latest technology. Doing so will require a mindset shift, steering away from the ponderous, deliberate approach the U.S. military usually takes in peacetime to a wartime approach based on swift iteration and adaptation. The U.S. military rapidly revised its practices during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, quickly fielding equipment and modifying tactics to counter the threat from improvised explosive devices and to fly drones to surveil insurgents. Traditional bureaucratic Pentagon processes for establishing requirements for military systems, budgeting costs, and procuring technologies won't keep pace with AI and stay ahead of adversaries. Motivated by an existential sense of urgency, Ukraine has scaled production to four million drones a year. With 140 times Ukraine's GDP, the United States should be able to come close to that number. Although it took years for the Pentagon to invest sufficiently in armored vehicles to seriously counter the threat from roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, once Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made it a priority in 2007, the military fielded 10,000 armored vehicles in about a year and a half.

Washington cannot halt the proliferation of AI.

Fortunately, the current leadership in the Pentagon is willing to break the mold. The Department of Defense has put large language models on its classified and unclassified networks, giving three million military and civilian users across the defense establishment access to AI models. Pentagon leadership is also expanding the number of models available across networks, giving employees access to a diversity of AI platforms. Initial signs are positive. The Defense Department has reported that over one million users have used AI models. But the department will have to do more to create the right bureaucratic and cultural incentives

for adoption. This includes giving employees the freedom to experiment with AI and accepting failure and mistakes.

The department's AI strategy, released in January, emphasized the importance of speed. To help cut through red tape, the strategy established a monthly "barrier removal board" to waive nonlegislative restrictions that might impede AI adoption. To allow greater access to data, the strategy directed that data be shared with authorized users and that any denial of a request for data be justified within seven days. These are welcome moves to speed up the Pentagon. But speed alone won't be enough.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Some of the biggest obstacles to fully harnessing the advantages of new technology are cultural. Technological advances require new ways of waging war, and these can sometimes challenge ingrained habits and deeply held identities within the military services. The U.S. Navy resisted the transition from sail to steam in the nineteenth century and even regressed on steam adoption after the Civil War. Debates about how to most effectively use tanks persisted in the U.S. Army throughout World War II. As late as 1943, Lieutenant General Lesley McNair, the commander of Army Ground Forces, wrote a memo to General George Marshall, the army chief of staff, arguing that Germany's blitzkrieg through France three years earlier was an aberration, and that the proper role of tanks was to support the infantry, not lead an armored assault on their own.

Today's military services are no less hidebound. Each service's culture and conception of airpower shape how it has adopted drones. The army was the first to embrace more automated flight controls, including for takeoff and landing, and to use enlisted personnel as drone controllers. The air force resisted these innovations, which challenged its conception of drone controllers as "pilots." Yet the air force was innovative in piloting drones from bases in the continental United States while the army chose to forward deploy drone operators to Iraq and Afghanistan, a much less efficient use of personnel. Concentrating drone operators on bases in the United States allows them to operate drones continuously, while the army's policy of forward-deploying drone operators during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan meant roughly two-thirds of army drone operators were stateside between deployments and not flying. But in the army's view, soldiers shouldn't telecommute to war.

Enthusiasm for uncrewed and robotic systems has varied widely in the navy. The navy's submarine force has largely embraced undersea

robotic vehicles, which are a complement to submarines, not a substitute for them. In naval aviation, however, aircraft carrier deck space is limited. Each drone added to a carrier deck supplants a traditional crewed fighter aircraft. Even though a stealthy combat drone could dramatically extend the carrier's reach, the navy downgraded its carrier-based drones to tanker aircraft that would transport gas to support, not replace, crewed fighter aircraft. In doing so to save pilots' jobs, the navy chose to sacrifice the aircraft carrier's reach and striking power.

Artificial intelligence presents an even greater challenge to the self-images of military services than do drones. AI raises fundamental questions about the roles of humans and machines. The same fears about AI taking jobs across society will play out in the military, where service members' identities are strongly connected to the tasks they perform—so strongly that they sometimes persist even after technology has long rendered a task obsolete. Naval personnel are still called "sailors" even though they no longer climb masts, lower or raise sails, or handle rigging. The army still has soldiers who identify as "cavalry" even though they no longer ride horses. These identities persist as historical artifacts even as the jobs of military personnel change—and the same could happen as AI transforms the armed services. But the history of military technological adoption, from steam-powered ships to tanks to drones, suggests that identity and culture can be powerful forces preventing militaries from unlocking the true benefits of new technologies.

SINKING THE ARMADA

Another force in the United States is essential to ensuring the country's military technological lead: the private sector. Adopting AI that works will require deep partnership with the broader industry, the companies developing AI, and third-party evaluators who are experts in AI capabilities and limitations. To do so, Pentagon leadership will need to repair relationships with Silicon Valley that have grown strained in recent months by the falling out with Anthropic over the terms of its contract with the Defense Department—the Pentagon insisted it wanted unrestricted access to Anthropic's technology for "any lawful use," while Anthropic wanted to put guardrails around the potential use of its technology for domestic mass surveillance and for powering fully autonomous weapons. At stake is much more than just the military's ties to one company. The public dispute has fed a backlash among AI engineers, who are now increasingly opposed to working with the

military. Over 1,000 employees at Google and OpenAI signed an open letter urging their companies to "stand together to continue to refuse the Department of War's current demands." In April 2026, more than 600 Google employees signed an open letter urging the company not to allow its AI models to be used for any classified work at all. Senior defense leaders have mismanaged this crisis and reignited long-standing tensions between the military and the AI industry.

The Defense Department cannot afford to alienate the engineers who are building the most powerful technology that will shape the future of war. The military must have access to leading-edge AI, but coercing U.S. companies, as the Pentagon tried to do by labeling Anthropic a "supply chain risk," won't help encourage collaboration. After Google discontinued work on the Defense Department's early machine-learning and data-integration initiative known as Project Maven in 2018, the Pentagon went on a charm offensive. It produced the AI Ethical Principles, the department's guidelines for responsibly adopting AI, that not only helped address many AI researchers' concerns about the military applications of their work but also improved the military's processes for using AI. Today's Pentagon leadership must urgently change course to defuse tensions and build bridges, not burn them.

AI is powerful but has many flaws. Large language models today have subtle biases, tend to make things up, and engage in sycophancy—telling the user what the AI believes the user wants to hear. The effective use of AI requires grappling seriously with these limitations. AI agents, which can take independent actions on computers and networks, will accelerate productivity. They can also go badly awry. In April 2026, an AI agent deleted one company's entire database in nine seconds. (The AI agent had the grace to apologize afterward.) The military will need to set guardrails for AI systems and agents, as well as provide training for human users to ensure that AI does not lead to damaging mistakes. The military needs not just to win over AI researchers but to actually listen to them to better understand the technology's limitations. Partnership with industry is essential to establishing the benchmarks, standards, and testing processes needed to make the military's use of AI successful.

Finally, the armed forces must update its metrics for measuring military power in this new era. The navy counts the number of ships; the air force, the number of aircraft. These are industrial-age metrics. (The army counts the number of soldiers—a pre-industrial metric.) For one thing, planners must do a better job of factoring low-cost drones into

these counts. Often, these vehicles are not considered powerful enough to count as aircraft, but excluding them risks understating military capacity and skewing planning toward legacy systems.

But far more important than these figures now are measures of the digital components that empower and connect military platforms: sensors, radars, computers, networks, and algorithms. The Defense Department should begin tracking AI-relevant metrics. These could include the amount of computing power it has available at any one time on classified and unclassified networks and how much that computing power is being used. It could also track active monthly users, token usage on AI models to show how widespread and frequent AI use is, and the amount of data available across the Defense Department and how it is being used. These figures would give planners a more detailed understanding of the extent to which military and civilian workers are using AI and where additional investments or initiatives are needed to accelerate adoption. Just as the number of ships, aircraft carriers, planes, and service members are points of discussion in the Defense Department budget, so, too, should the number of H100-equivalent GPUs the department has access to. To lead in AI, the military will need to invest in AI power. The military should also conduct detailed assessments of the use of AI to measure whether the technology has increased efficiency and accuracy, improved costs, and accelerated workflows, as well as to determine what lessons can be applied to other applications.

History is full of cautionary tales of militaries that struggled to shift and reform after the advent of disruptive technologies. When English and Spanish fleets clashed in 1588, Spain was at the height of its power. But the English navy had more successfully capitalized on the new technology of the day: cannons. The Spanish Armada, by contrast, was still designed around the imperative of closing with and boarding enemy ships, their decks packed with infantry. As a result, the vast Spanish fleet was hopelessly outgunned and was defeated. The war between England and Spain dragged on for 16 more years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, but the peak of Spain's naval power had passed, as had the peak of Spain's power as a global empire.

The United States can remain the world's leading military if it acts now to adapt to the changing contours of modern warfare. But if the Pentagon fails to push its operations in the necessary directions, it will be eclipsed by competitors that are more dogged and intrepid in adjusting to the realities of a new age.

The Mirage of China's Military Edge

Panic Is Misguided—and Counterproductive

DENNIS BLAIR

If China were to seize control of Taiwan by force, it would be a disaster, not only for Taiwan but also for the United States. A nearly $1 trillion economy would leave the free-market system and be incorporated into China's state-directed, mercantilist one. A vibrant democracy nurtured and defended by the United States for many years would be snuffed out. American power and influence would be gravely diminished in East Asia, and China would become the region's dominant power. Other governments there would be pressured to accommodate China's political, economic, and even territorial demands. Beijing would certainly insist that they kick out U.S. forces. China's global ambitions, meanwhile, would only grow.

Whether any of this might come to pass, however, hinges on China's ability to take and hold Taiwan. The high-paced military buildup

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Illustration by Matt Murphy

Beijing has undertaken over the past 30 years has yielded impressive improvements, and China's interest in expanding its power and influence is obvious. But until China can be confident that an invasion of Taiwan would succeed—a lofty threshold to reach—improving capabilities and clear ambition are not enough reason for Beijing to use force. Military aggression short of a full-scale invasion would be foolhardy: it would not deliver the Chinese Communist Party the political ends it seeks, and it would risk the party's grip on power.

The reality today is that China is not capable of conquering Taiwan. Nor is it likely to gain this capability any time soon. China's buildup once threatened to shift the military balance in Beijing's favor, but trends in military technology now favor Taiwan and the United States, not China. Recognition of China's threat has motivated not just Taiwan and the United States but also Japan, the Philippines, and other countries both in the region and beyond to act to deter aggression by Beijing. Chinese leaders can still issue threats, run simulated attacks, and violate Taiwan's maritime borders. For the foreseeable future, China can at any time inflict massive damage on Taiwan with military force. The danger is great enough to constrain Taiwan's policies, deterring Taipei from declaring independence and compelling it to make the occasional political concession. Yet without the ability to conquer, China is constrained, too, and any rational Chinese government will avoid taking military action in the first place.

This stalemate has persisted for the past three-quarters of a century, since Chiang Kai-shek lost the Chinese Civil War on mainland China and fled to Taiwan. Maintaining it depends, in part, on understanding the current military balance. Alarmist predictions that China is outpacing the United States and will soon be able to win a war for Taiwan can encourage China and discourage combined action by Taiwan and its supporters. These pessimistic readings make it more difficult for Chinese leaders to accept the reality of the stalemate and return to their strategy of biding time when it comes to Taiwan.

Taiwanese, American, Japanese, and Philippine leaders must be confident but not complacent. Deterring the formidable but not superior Chinese military will require resources and commitment. For the United States, this means military modernization programs that put China in a position where it must invest more just to keep up. It means continued forward basing and deployments, regional coordination, and sending a clear message to Beijing that unprovoked aggression against

Taiwan will lead to a fight it will not win. The elements of such a strategy are all in place. If they can be sustained, there is every reason to believe that the United States and its partners will preserve the peace.

COMING UP SHORT

Around 1990, Chinese leaders decided that the country was sufficiently wealthy to increase its military spending. The question was what to spend the money on. If Beijing had been single-mindedly focused on "reunification" with Taiwan, it would have put all its defense resources into a short-range amphibious and air assault capability to invade and conquer the main island. This would have included short-range antiaircraft and antisubmarine defenses to protect the invasion force against Taiwanese and American counterattacks until it could defeat the Taiwanese army and occupy the entire territory. China's People's Liberation Army would have invested in thousands of landing craft and hundreds of amphibious ships to transport tanks and other vehicles. It would have procured surface-to-air missile systems to shoot down targets in Taiwanese airspace, as well as nonnuclear submarines, antisubmarine mines, and maritime patrol aircraft to take out enemy submarines near the Chinese coast.

But that is not what China did. Instead, it distributed its investments to serve multiple objectives. It built a force that could project modest maritime power globally; help China better defend its maritime borders, where Beijing has long felt vulnerable; and harm Taiwan but not conquer it.

To project power, China built blue-water amphibious ships capable of deploying worldwide—but not enough of them to land the forces necessary to invade Taiwan. It also built large, expensive aircraft carriers, which are useful for diplomatic signaling and shows of force in peacetime but require too much support and defensive protection to be used in a Taiwan invasion. It invested heavily in space capabilities, which are needed for global operations but not a localized conflict. And more recently, it has been expanding its nuclear arsenal. Before this buildup, its arsenal was perfectly adequate for deterring potential American nuclear escalation in a conflict over Taiwan. Yet Beijing now seeks nuclear parity with Moscow and Washington to ensure that China's interests and demands are taken seriously in every region of the world.

To bolster its maritime defenses, China developed long-range missile systems and submarines, supported by surveillance systems, to engage U.S. air and naval forces in Japan, Guam, and the western Pacific. Today,

its air-independent propulsion submarines can remain underwater for about two weeks, and its nuclear submarines for months, enabling them to attack American battle groups thousands of miles from China's coast. Its medium- and long-range missiles can strike fixed targets ashore and surface ships at sea. These investments in submarines and missiles gave China an advantage because it costs much more for the United States to defend against them than it does for China to produce them. China also built formidable air and missile defenses to protect its forces and bases in the military districts along its coasts. Beijing's strategy in this case was to overcome an enemy's offensive advantage with quantity, amassing a thick belt of radars and missile batteries. Finally, China has developed and deployed space- and ground-based long-range reconnaissance systems (used to find and track American battle groups) and sophisticated electronic warfare systems. All this would be useful in a potential invasion of Taiwan—Chinese systems could target the American forces that would come to Taiwan's aid—but the capabilities are designed primarily to protect China's maritime frontiers.

On the whole, China's military buildup is not as dazzling as it may appear. The People's Liberation Army in 1990 had virtually no maritime power-projection capability, so although it is advancing at a rapid pace, in absolute terms it is now roughly comparable to those of France, Japan, or the United Kingdom. And despite the recent emphasis on maritime capabilities, the PLA is still dominated by the army and led by officers with education and experience in ground operations. In my conversations with Chinese army generals since 1999, many have shown breathtaking ignorance of the basics of maritime warfare. Long-range antiship missile systems are not even operated by the navy or integrated with other naval forces, which will hamper their effectiveness in combat. Meanwhile, massive corruption has not only wasted some of China's military investment but also undermined the combat leadership skills of senior PLA figures. An aptitude for bribery and displays of personal loyalty do not transfer to mastery of maritime operations. Finally, and most important, China's military buildup alarmed Taiwan, the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. All four have responded with military buildups and tighter cooperation.

This is not to say China's military buildup has not produced weapons systems that would eventually be valuable in conquering Taiwan; it has. And in the meantime, it has deterred the Taiwanese government from declaring independence and raised the military cost of U.S. intervention

on Taiwan's behalf, thereby undermining Taiwanese confidence in the likelihood of American support in the event of conflict. But China's large submarine and surface combatant fleet, modest numbers of amphibious ships and aircraft carriers, arsenal of medium- and long-range missiles, dense air and missile defenses, and worldwide surveillance and electronic warfare systems do not add up to the capability to take and hold Taiwan. The most important shortfall, as a December 2025 Pentagon report highlighted, is amphibious lift—the ships and aircraft needed to transport vehicles and troops in sufficient quantities to invade the main island. China's navy does not have enough guns to soften up landing areas and neutralize defending support forces ashore, either. Its air force cannot fill the gap with precision airstrikes. And the PLA's large-scale exercises do not emphasize improvisational skills among lower-level commanders; the ability to take initiative is often decisive in amphibious assaults that never go according to plan.

American war games confirm that, although the new systems the PLA has fielded in recent years have cut into Taiwanese and American advantages, they have not overcome them. China, in these simulations, has been able to inflict increasing levels of damage on Taiwanese and American military forces and on Taiwan itself, but not to seize and hold the large, strongly defended island. A few well-publicized war games conducted by American civilian think tanks using unclassified data resulted in Chinese victories. These results occur when the United States is slow to respond to an attack and when the game models give too much weight to China's superior numbers of long-range missiles and do not account for various countermeasures that can render these Chinese systems ineffective. These models simply cannot replicate decisive maritime battles that involve an invasion and engage large naval forces. In more sophisticated simulations of a Taiwan invasion that the Department of Defense held in the past decade, played with all the highly classified systems from both sides, China was consistently thwarted in achieving its objective of conquering the island.

NO GOOD OPTIONS

Chinese forces could successfully conduct offensive operations against Taiwan short of a full invasion. The trouble for China is that these limited military options, even if initially successful, would not achieve its goal of reunification. In fact, they would make reunification more difficult for Beijing to achieve—and undermine the party's authority at home.

Consider air and missile strikes. With its present capabilities, China can strike a variety of targets in Taiwan, and Taiwanese defenses can only partially blunt the attacks. The most likely targets would be military bases. Yet the damage would be limited because Taiwan has buried many of its important military sites and developed plans to disperse and conceal mobile systems such as aircraft, missile launchers, and armored vehicles. Strikes against critical infrastructure, industrial sites, or government facilities are also possible. But they would damage property and kill or injure the citizens that China claims as its own, encouraging international opposition to China's actions and hardening Taiwanese determination not to surrender. American campaigns against Serbia in 1999 and Iran this year have shown the limits of relying on airstrikes to bring about rapid capitulation to political demands.

It is also within China's power to impose a sea and air blockade; Taiwan alone cannot prevent it from doing so. Yet blockades come with complications that undercut their coercive power. There is no legal justification for a blockade that stops neutral merchant vessels with nonmilitary cargoes, and such a blockade invites international retaliation. When shipping is threatened, insurance rates increase, but the Taiwanese economy has the capacity to adjust. The United States and other countries in the region friendly to Taiwan would most likely help it lift a sea blockade by organizing a convoy system. These countries would send their own naval forces to escort and protect merchant vessels, following a northern route that could run largely through Japanese territorial waters and a southern route through Philippine territorial waters. China could announce an air blockade, but the only way to enforce it would be to shoot down airliners. Countries that have done so—such as Russia in its downing of a passenger jet flying over Ukraine in 2014—have paid a heavy price in international condemnation.

Another option would be to seize outlying Taiwanese islands. Taiwan administers and defends scores of islands, including some that are close to the Chinese coast, a large cluster in the Penghu archipelago off the Taiwanese coast, and several in the South China Sea. Taiwan cannot prevent the PLA from occupying some of the islands, but none is vital to the Taiwanese economy. Nor does Chinese occupation affect Taiwan's defense of the main island.

A final option would be to decapitate Taiwan's leadership and then bring about a coup. China actively courts and rewards friendly politicians

and citizens in Taiwan and undoubtedly has recruited agents among them. If these agents, with the assistance of Chinese special forces, could capture or assassinate elected Taiwanese leaders, it might be possible for China-friendly politicians to subvert Taiwan's legal succession mechanisms and take power. This would be an extremely high-risk gamble for China. Success would depend on its ability to neutralize Taiwan's security forces, both military and police—a difficult feat.

Any of these operations would almost certainly draw a strong global response. In addition to diplomatic censure, many countries would likely introduce sanctions and suspend trade and investment. China is especially vulnerable in the energy sector; the country imports a large portion of its energy, much of it by sea, and the United States could quite easily block China-bound oil and liquefied natural gas from passing through the Strait of Malacca. Sanctions that curtail China's access to the international financial system and to commodity markets could set back the country's growth, too. Beyond economic punishment, Chinese military aggression would provoke a rapid military response. Washington's current limitations on military assistance to Taiwan would end. The United States would quickly supply weapons and munitions to the Taiwanese military and deploy reinforcements to Japan, the Philippines, and probably Taiwan itself.

China's military buildup is not as dazzling as it may appear.

The only favorable outcome for China from any gambit against Taiwan would be Taipei's capitulation to Beijing's political demands. But the chances of any concession—much less Taiwan's agreement to become a province of China—are slim. The populations of countries under attack tend to become angry, patriotic, and supportive of their governments' efforts to stand up to the aggressor, and the Taiwanese public would likely be no different. Encouraged by worldwide condemnation of and economic pressure on China, military reinforcements from the United States, and the support of Japan and the Philippines, Taiwan would most likely defy China.

Some analysts cast doubt on whether Taiwan would fight back if it came under attack. They point out that Taiwan's military budgets have been inadequate for years, its reserve forces are poorly trained, and its civil defense measures have atrophied. They contend that many citizens do not think Taiwan has an effective deterrent against China

other than Washington's ambiguous security guarantee. In their view, if deterrence failed, Taiwan would surrender.

Yet I have been visiting Taiwan since 2002 and have seen more cause for optimism. The Taiwanese armed forces have serious defensive plans that are backed by impressive capabilities. They carry out exercises to test these plans under realistic conditions, and they will defend their country. Elected politicians have been raising Taiwan's defense budget substantially, from roughly $10 billion in 2015 to $18 billion in 2025. Taiwanese defense planning is now based on the assumption that Taiwan must hold off a Chinese attack for several weeks until American forces can arrive in numbers. The government has extended the term of conscription for military service in Taiwan from four months to a year, and civil defense planning and drills have been incorporated into Taiwan's annual defense exercises. It would be reckless of China to count on quick Taiwanese capitulation.

And if Taiwan does not make concessions after a Chinese military operation, Beijing's remaining choices are risky. It could back down: stop the air and missile strikes, pause its amphibious operations against outlying islands, or withdraw the blockade. China would of course cover its retreat with a barrage of propaganda telling its population that it had taught Taiwan a lesson and set back Taiwanese independence, that China can endure international sanctions, that reunification will happen someday. Yet these claims would ring hollow, and much of the Chinese public would see the military action as reckless and unsuccessful. Their support for the party would weaken.

The other option for China would be to escalate. It could strike more targets in Taiwan, invade another outlying island, or enforce a blockade by engaging U.S. and other forces deployed to circumvent it. As long as Taiwan did not capitulate, however, China would continually face the same choice of retreat or escalation. With each escalation, China would find it harder to back down. Eventually, China would have to decide whether to invade. Only by that point, the political and military risks would be even higher than before. International diplomatic and economic penalties against China would have risen, as would the expectations of the Chinese public. There would have been time for Taiwan to mobilize its forces and deploy planned defenses, for the United States to deploy forces to bases in Japan and operating locations in the Philippines, and for the Japanese and Philippine armed forces to prepare their own defenses. American forces might well have

deployed onto Taiwan itself. What was previously a difficult military operation for the PLA would become virtually impossible.

SHOCK, NOT AWE

As an alternative to a time-consuming escalation sequence with a high likelihood of failure, China might consider a surprise attack on Taiwan. Its objective would be to secure control of the main island quickly, before American help could arrive, thus deterring the United States from what would be a challenging counterinvasion. China would be betting, too, that it could withstand international economic sanctions for as long as they are in place.

Yet a surprise invasion runs significant risks of its own. To preserve the element of surprise, an invasion force and its support must be smaller in scale than a full mobilization of the Chinese military. If China used a routine PLA exercise around Taiwan as cover, it would still need to use a smaller force to maintain the deception that it was planning an exercise, not an invasion. As Russia learned in 2022, ahead of its attack on Ukraine, large-scale military preparations are difficult to hide. Chinese planners could not be sure that China's communications networks had not been penetrated by Taiwanese or American intelligence services, as were Russia's. Even if communications were secure, the movement of major forces, logistic preparations, and measures such as clearing airspace and establishing security zones would be detectable. Intelligence analysts can distinguish peacetime force buildups from invasion preparations. A few days of warning would provide plenty of time for the Taiwanese armed forces to move troops and set obstacles on the beaches and landing fields it has long been preparing to defend. The United States, too, would have more than enough notice to arm and deploy its substantial naval and air forces in the region and strengthen the defenses of its bases before the invasion could begin.

Once the attack got underway, China would face additional disadvantages. A surprise attack would forfeit the option of a preinvasion campaign to establish air and sea superiority and to degrade coastal defenses. The invasion force would therefore need to fight its way across the Taiwan Strait, and whatever forces landed would face dug-in and well-supplied defenses at their full strength. Most preparations for follow-on attack waves would also need to be delayed until the first attack was launched. This means that the assembly and loading of units for later attacks would be slower and conducted under fire.

In amphibious and airborne operations, the first attack simply establishes a beachhead. It is the subsequent reinforcements that break out to secure territory, including ports and airfields, and then to defeat counterattacking forces and occupy the area. Anything that reduces the speed or size of follow-on forces jeopardizes the success of the invasion. Ultimately, China would have no guarantee that the element of surprise would give its smaller and more slowly mobilized forces enough of an advantage to take Taiwan.

LOSING GROUND

The military balance is only growing less favorable to China, further diminishing the prospect of a successful military operation against Taiwan. The United States is gaining combat experience and developing and deploying new generations of maritime, air, and weapons systems that take advantage of PLA vulnerabilities. Taiwan is making improvements in its defenses, inspired by Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion. Japan and the Philippines are stepping up their own security measures in response to Chinese aggression.

The war with Iran has demonstrated several of Washington's advantages. U.S. Navy battle groups were operating within range of Iranian missiles, and both China and Russia were attempting to track American ships and pass the information to Iran, yet in the nearly six weeks of fighting before the April 8 cease-fire, no long-range missile struck an American ship. Beijing must now be wondering how effective its own missile systems would be against American warships. American military commanders and forces have also gained further experience in conducting complex, long-range air and maritime attacks; many Chinese senior commanders, meanwhile, have little operational experience, especially after Chinese leader Xi Jinping's recent purges of military leadership. What is more, contrary to the fears expressed by some analysts, the war with Iran has not cost the United States too many of the precision weapons it would need to defend Taiwan. As of this writing, U.S. forces have used only a small portion of their antiship missile inventory against Iranian ships, and U.S. submarines fired just a single torpedo. Although they used larger numbers of surface-to-air missiles, an adequate supply to defend Guam and U.S. battle groups remains.

Military trends were favoring Washington before the war in Iran, too. The United States was not idle during the early years of China's buildup. New and more capable fighter jets, airborne

command-and-control units, and maritime patrol fleets replaced earlier models. New generations of antiaircraft missiles and long-range reconnaissance drones were sent to the Pacific. Submarines were deployed to Guam, where U.S. bases have been extended and fortified. More recently, the United States' military buildup has been explicitly designed to take advantage of Chinese vulnerabilities. The shift began around 2016, when the Department of Defense first publicly described China as a serious threat. It accelerated in 2019, when the first Trump administration withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, allowing the United States to develop missiles that could strike targets in the South China Sea and eastern China from naval ships and from launch sites in Japan and the Philippines.

The Department of Defense has pursued modernization programs that are reversing China's relative military gains. Procurement has reflected the priorities highlighted in the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, which included faster and more effective long-range weapons and missile defense; improved space and cyberspace capabilities; more flexible forward deployment locations and expeditionary bases and better-defended forward bases and logistics supply lines; and ongoing improvement of autonomous vehicles and what is known as C4ISR: command, control, communications, and computers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems. The U.S. military has rapidly improved its long-range ground attack missile systems, expanded its presence in the Philippines and the Ryukyu Island chain, reinforced its submarine fleet's substantial advantage over China's antisubmarine systems, and developed more resilient space systems, such as jam-resistant GPS III satellites. All these capabilities are specifically designed to counter China's improved military in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.

Recent U.S. investments are also taking advantage of developments in military technology that favor the United States and Taiwan. One is long-range hypersonic missiles. Both China and the United States are deploying these missiles, which cannot be intercepted by current missile defense systems and can strike fixed targets—airfields, command centers, naval bases, radars, space control centers, and weapons. The entire military infrastructure in southeast China that would support an invasion of Taiwan is therefore at risk. Beijing has deployed capable air-defense systems around these locations, but American ground-launched hypersonic missiles already in the Pacific (and air- and sea-based versions that will soon be deployed) can overcome them.

The American systems could swiftly neutralize the seven Chinese fortified reefs in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea or destroy the piers in ports along the coast of southern China from which Chinese invasion forces would be loaded to invade Taiwan. Even without hypersonic missiles, the United States and Israel neutralized most of Iran's air defenses, which are based on the same Russian technology as China's, in a few hours using electronic, cyber, and direct attacks. The addition of hypersonic missiles to the American attack capability creates an advantage that will persist for at least a decade until new generations of air defenses—which the United States also has a lead in developing—can be deployed.

The geography of a conflict over Taiwan gives the United States an additional advantage. Long-range strikes against moving targets, ashore and at sea, are more difficult than those against fixed targets. Tracking is complicated, and the technology used to guide missiles to their targets is vulnerable to countermeasures. The American ships and mobile ground systems that China would need to neutralize if it were to invade Taiwan are spread across thousands of miles—from Guam to the Ryukyu Islands, from Kyushu to Luzon. The most important Chinese mobile targets that the United States would attack are the few dozen amphibious invasion forces crossing the less than 100-mile-wide Taiwan Strait and maneuvering along a few hundred miles of the Chinese coast opposite Taiwan. This concentration would make American long-range reconnaissance and strike systems far more effective than the Chinese systems trying to cover a much larger area.

> It would be reckless of China to count on Taiwanese capitulation.

Technological trends in ground defense also favor Taiwan. Over the last three years, Ukraine has developed devastating new tactics for defending home territory. Drones have made it suicidal for attacking ground forces to operate in large formations. The determined, innovative, and fast-adapting Ukrainian defenders have held back numerically superior Russian forces. Ukrainian drones have also proved effective in a confined maritime area against surface ships, forcing Russia's Black Sea Fleet back to its base.

Employing methods like Ukraine's, Taiwanese maritime and ground forces would have an advantage defending the island. Chinese amphibious ships that must come close to shore to offload landing craft and

helicopters would be extremely vulnerable to drone and short-range missile attacks. Any units of a Chinese assault force that made it ashore would also be vulnerable to Taiwanese drone-equipped defenses reinforced by dug-in and concealed artillery. They would struggle to break out from beachheads to capture Taiwanese cities and ports. Taiwan is preparing to mount a drone-centric defense: its focus is shifting from traditional platforms—ships, aircraft, and tanks—to expanding its arsenal of drones and missiles. In November 2025, the Taiwanese government proposed an eight-year, $40 billion special defense budget for these weapons. Even if the main opposition party succeeds in reducing the size of this budget, the additional spending and industrial production will still provide the Taiwanese army with a much greater defensive capability than it already has. As Ukraine has demonstrated, a numerically inferior force employing these weapons systems can halt an invader. And as Iran has demonstrated in its closure of the Strait of Hormuz, an inferior military can also keep a larger and more powerful air and maritime force from operating freely near its shore.

Recent moves by Japan and the Philippines are further undercutting China's ability to invade Taiwan successfully. Alarmed by Chinese aggression, Japan's leaders have been strengthening their country's security policies. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said late last year that a Chinese military operation against Taiwan would be a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan. Over the past decade, Japan has increased its defense budget, purchased counterstrike weapons with a range that includes eastern China, and deployed air and sea fortifications in the Ryukyu Islands that are strong enough to prevent Chinese air and naval forces from breaking out into the Pacific. Philippine leaders, too, have grown wary of China under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., who was elected in 2022. The Philippines has challenged China's incursions into contested waters in the South China Sea, and in 2022 it authorized upgrades to the military facilities the United States operates on its territory under the two countries' 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Washington allocated roughly $100 million for the projects.

STAY THE COURSE

For at least the next decade, favorable trends in hypersonic weapons, drone systems, electronic warfare, and cyberwarfare put the United States and its allies and partners in a strong position to deter China

from an attack on Taiwan. China would need much greater military expenditures to overcome these advantages. Yet these positive trends are not self-sustaining. The technology of warfare does not stand still, and maintaining deterrence will require investment in innovation, particularly in space operations and artificial intelligence systems. Taiwan, the United States, Japan, and the Philippines must continue to commit resources, engage in effective military planning and exercises, and respond to China's aggressive actions. When China fortifies another reef in the South China Sea, the United States must deploy more hypersonic missiles to the Philippines' Palawan Island. When China closes air and sea space around Taiwan for weapons demonstrations, the United States, Japan, and the Philippines must counter with their own live-fire exercises. When China protests the passage of American naval ships through the Taiwan Strait, the United States must send more ships through.

As long as Taiwan and its defenders stay on their current paths, the gap between China's aspirations and its ability to realize them will only increase in the coming years. Beijing's public rhetoric will continue to highlight its determination to accomplish the historic mission of taking Taiwan, but Chinese leaders will recognize that conquering Taiwan is unrealistic in the near term. They will understand that it is dangerous to base the government's legitimacy on a goal it cannot achieve. There will still be competition between authoritarian China, with its state-directed economy and aggressive mercantilism, and the democratic United States, Japan, Philippines, and Taiwan, as well as their other allies and partners, with their market-based economies and commitment to the international economic system. But it will be a primarily economic and ideological contest, not a military one.

Keeping the competition stable and peaceful requires that both Beijing and Washington change the way they perceive and talk about the military balance. China must acknowledge the high risks and low probability of success of an attack on Taiwan, and tone down its nationalistic boasts of military prowess and exaggerated claims of American weakness. The United States must continue to devote attention and resources to maintaining its military edge and display confidence in its abilities rather than give credence to alarmist and hyperbolic warnings of imminent defeat. If all sides recognize the military reality, they can avoid outright conflict—and even preserve the possibility of cooperation that benefits them all.

The Next Russia Threat

Moscow's Military Power After Ukraine

MICHAEL KOFMAN

The war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year, has reached another inflection point. Russian forces are visibly struggling on the battlefield as Kyiv's strategy of making the war futile for Russia is working. But the future of European security does not hinge on the outcome of this war alone. Even if defeated, Russia will remain the primary threat in Europe for years to come. Despite its stagnating economy, poor demographics, and ossifying authoritarian regime, Russia remains the main power capable of and invested in upending the continent's security architecture. Moreover, Russian military reconstitution after the war is not a question of if but of when.

Defense planners and analysts are divided on the severity of the future danger that Russia's military poses and how soon the threat could grow. Some fear that Moscow will be capable of continued aggression soon after the war in Ukraine ends. Others believe that it may take many years to reconstitute its weakened and degraded

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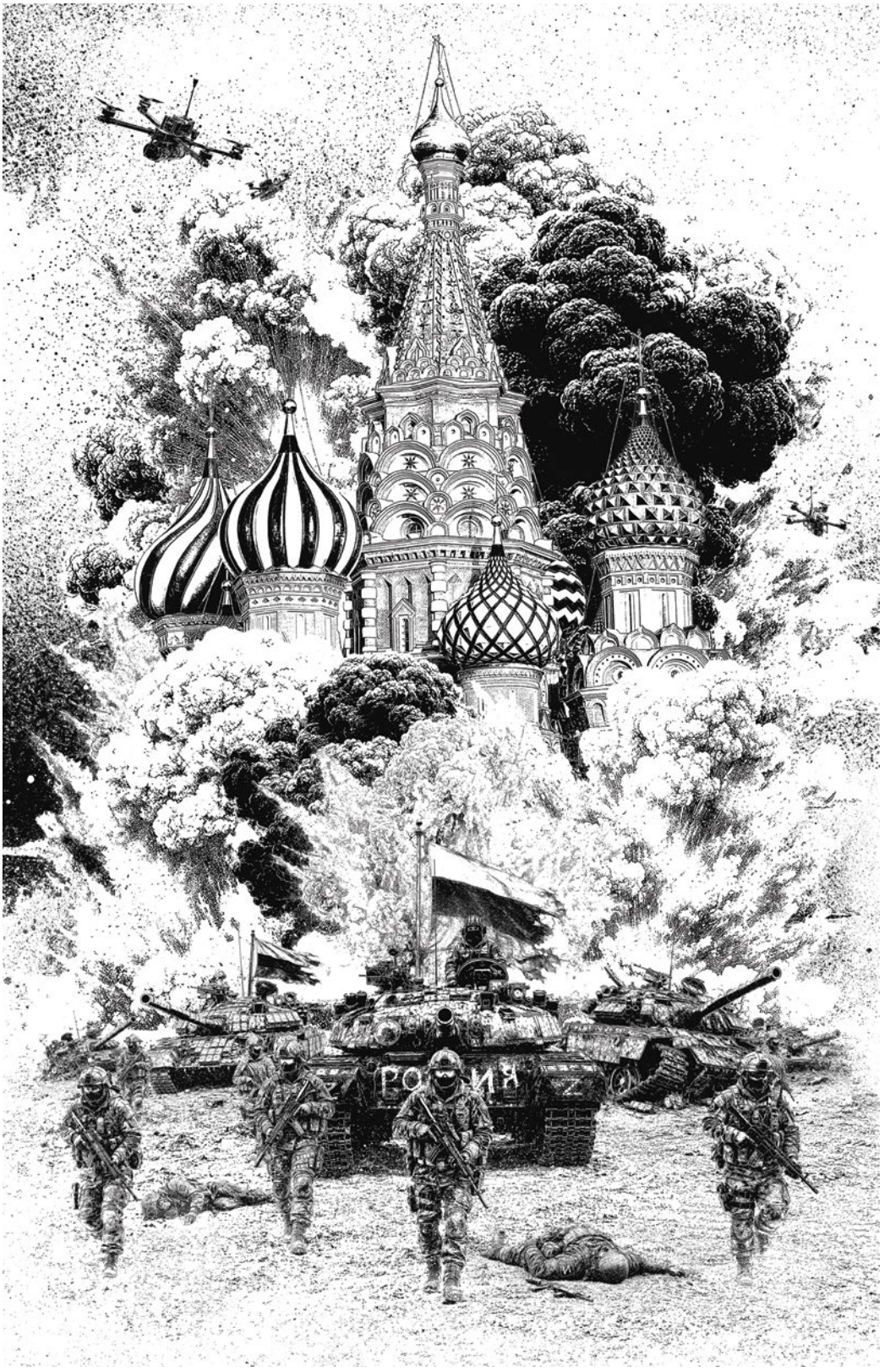

Illustration by Gregori Saavedra

military. There is a sense that Russia's losses of troops and equipment have left its forces in tatters and that a military incapable of making significant advances in Ukraine can't possibly threaten Europe.

Current trends suggest that Russia will reconstitute its military enough to pose a major threat faster than analysts expected back in 2022. It will likely take five to seven years, with Russia able to use force to threaten NATO members or Ukraine in more limited ways shortly after the current war comes to a close. Even if full reconstitution takes a few years longer, such a time frame is still short by defense planning standards. Russia will field a larger force with more drones, deep-strike capabilities, and personnel than before the war. It will continue to prioritize defense spending and maintain higher levels of defense industrial production. But the path to reconstitution will not be easy. Historically, Russian force development has been riddled with compromises, overly ambitious designs, insufficient resources, and poor execution. It is often a process of two steps forward and one step back.

Russian military reconstitution after the war is not a question of if but of when.

As the United States and many European states focus on ensuring Ukraine's success, they must also think beyond this war and begin preparing for the enduring challenge that Russia poses. Russia's military will remain strong enough to threaten NATO members' territory and undermine the alliance, especially if continued U.S. commitment becomes uncertain. Rather than fight the way the Russian military has in the last two years in Ukraine, where the battlefield has been defined by entrenched defenses and positional fighting, Moscow will try to rebuild its capacity to conduct large-scale offensive maneuvers. It will retain a traditional focus on firepower, including artillery and precision-strike capabilities, while adding a large number of drone formations to the force. NATO forces remain superior overall but have yet to adapt to some of these changes, which could lead to higher losses in the opening days of a future war with Russia.

The Russian military is a force in transition. In the coming years, it will continue to have one foot in the future and the other in the past. A NATO-Russian conflict would undoubtedly play out differently than the war in Ukraine has, but poor Russian performance and observable weaknesses should not be cause for complacency among

NATO countries. The enduring threat from Moscow is not one that Washington should readily dismiss or simply hand off to Europeans. The United States and its European allies need a more grounded conversation on the future Russian military threat and how to deter it.

RECONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Military reconstitution is not something that takes place only in the wake of intense fighting. A country's forces are in a continuous state of transformation. As the military analyst Dara Massicot has explained, reconstitution should not be measured "only through the restoration of prewar numbers of personnel and equipment." Rather, it is a "process of regaining combat functions, proficiency, and capabilities" to execute combat missions. Moreover, military power cannot be understood in the abstract; it depends on the specific scenario being considered. When NATO members put forward competing timelines for Russian military reconstitution, for instance, they may be basing their assessments on different scenarios. The force required for a limited Russian cross-border incursion into a Baltic state could be starkly different from that needed for an invasion of Poland.

The baseline for analyzing Russian military reconstitution should be large-scale combat operations because they pose the greatest threat to NATO and the greatest challenge for U.S. forces in Europe. To conduct operations at scale, the Russian military will need to restore not only its manpower and materiel but also its ability to command and support larger formations such as armies, corps, and divisions, and to integrate different branches. The ability to conduct more complex operations is one of the most significant differentiators among modern militaries and an area in which Russia stumbled at the opening of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, NATO must also consider other threats that Russia poses, including a much more limited ground campaign backed by intense missile and drone strikes.

Analysts also need to realize that the Russian military will not be reconstituted to its prewar size and structure. It will pursue an expansive redesign to accommodate a larger force composed of traditional artillery, motorized rifle and tank formations, and drone units. The future Russian military will have more infantry—reversing prior cuts—and more drone formations to provide fire support or conduct precision strikes. It will still be a force seeking to balance capability, capacity, and readiness that will remain dependent on a

mix of conscripts, contract service personnel, and partial mobilization of reserve soldiers. Some percentage of the standing formations will be able to deploy on short notice without conscripts, depending on the scenario, while others will require a call-up of reservists to get to full combat strength. Whether the Russian military is forced to keep a large ground force along the 800-mile frontline with Ukraine even after the war ends will also determine what units it has available to deploy elsewhere.

One reason for the uncertainty about how Russian forces will develop is that members of the older generation of military leaders, such as Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff, have set the trajectory. Gerasimov concluded from Russia's failures early in the Ukraine war that the military was not Soviet enough—that is, it lacked sufficient troops, equipment, reserves, and formations capable of sustaining a war of attrition. In late 2022, before many of the developments in the ongoing war in Ukraine, including the decisive role of drones on the battlefield, the military brass announced that it would significantly expand the force. It also sought to undo prior reforms and remove command structures that enabled the armed forces to better conduct joint operations between branches, in some cases obviously misdiagnosing problems as it did so. But these leaders are not going to be the future of the Russian military. The vision of what Russia's forces should look like might change as those with current combat experience rise through the ranks.

QUANTITY OVER QUALITY

Defense analysts need to carefully examine the notion that the Russian military has been badly depleted by this war and will take a long time to recover. Although they have suffered massive losses, Russia's armed forces have expanded over the course of the war, and the country's production of key munitions and weapons systems has increased. Russia's military has been degraded significantly in some areas, especially in the quality of its officers and overall personnel, but it has also demonstrated an ability to adapt and evolve.

At least 400,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in action in Ukraine—a British intelligence report released at the end of May suggests nearly 500,000—and another 600,000 to 800,000 have been seriously wounded. Despite these massive casualties, the size of the force has grown from approximately 850,000 active personnel

before the war to 1.3 million now. Many formations have doubled or tripled in size, and most of these have added drone, reconnaissance, assault, and electronic warfare units. Following Ukraine's example, Russia has also introduced a new combat branch dedicated to drone warfare called Unmanned Systems Forces. Although many of the current units will shrink after the war, and assault detachments and reserve formations will be eliminated, the military is unlikely to go back to its prewar size.

At the same time, Russian equipment losses in the war have been staggering. According to open-source accounts, as of the beginning of May 2026 the Russian military has lost more than 14,000 armored combat vehicles, 2,100 pieces of artillery, and thousands of other items. Because of Ukraine's increasingly successful strikes, Russia is now losing air defense systems in much greater numbers than it was earlier in the war, which raises questions about how it will compensate for the more expensive systems it cannot easily replace. Between the losses to aircraft and air and missile defenses, the war is degrading the Russian armed forces in significant ways. In the near term, this will make them more vulnerable to NATO's airpower and its superior long-range precision-strike capabilities.

Nevertheless, in the last four years, the Russian military has pulled thousands of vehicles and artillery pieces from its stocks. It has refurbished or newly produced thousands of vehicles, and North Korea has supplied over 300 pieces of artillery. Today, the Russian military likely has as many, or perhaps slightly more, armored combat vehicles, including tanks, than it did at the start of the war. These may not be as modern as those it had in 2022, but Russia continues to increase new vehicle production. Estimates suggest that it is now annually producing more than 200 T-90M tanks, the most advanced tank in its arsenal; at this rate, half the tanks in Russia's armored fleet could be T-90Ms within seven to eight years. Russia also continues to rapidly produce air defense systems and will probably modify future air defense designs based on what it has learned from the war in Ukraine.

Russia now makes millions of tactical drones each year, and it can produce far more cruise and ballistic missiles than it could at the start of the war. The increase in production of large one-way attack drones, of which the military is launching an average 6,500 per month in Ukraine, is especially notable: in 2025, Russia made more than 70,000 of them, and for 2026 it has contracted to obtain

at least 100,000 more. The capability of these weapons continues to increase. The Russian military has improved its ability to conduct strikes and addressed difficulties it had when the war started, such as the delay between detecting and engaging a target. It may ultimately end the war with a similar amount of equipment, more personnel, and expanded drone and precision-strike capabilities than it had when it first invaded Ukraine. And at current rates of production, Russia could have a stock of millions of tactical drones and hundreds of thousands of larger one-way attack drone systems within a few years after the war ends. Assessments of Russian military capability must account for these significant expansions of its capacity to conduct deep strikes and the threat they pose to units, bases, and critical infrastructure.

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

Although quantity of materiel may be the easiest metric to estimate, it is equally important to consider the quality of the armed forces when assessing the future Russian military threat. As the military historian Stephen Biddle has long argued, how a military uses its forces matters more for determining combat effectiveness than the numbers of troops and weapons it has on the books.

The Russian military is and will remain a patchwork force that is uneven in quality and capability. Over the course of the war in Ukraine, the armed forces have become much better at dynamic targeting, precision strikes, integrating drones into combat operations, and employing long-range precision-guided weapons in more sophisticated ways. The Russian military's ability to execute concepts such as recon-fire and recon-strike contours, which involve the real-time integration of reconnaissance systems with artillery and precision strikes, has also matured. Combat experience, investment in organizational capacity, and adaptations to the force structure have made the Russian armed forces more capable of employing drones and precision-guided weapons at scale.

The Russian military has also evolved to better deal with some of the Western capabilities it has confronted in Ukraine and, in select cases, developed effective ways to counter them. Russia has reorganized its logistics and command-and-control systems to reduce the efficacy of more traditional U.S. long-range precision strikes. The net effect is that, over time, Ukraine has already realized much of the shock

value from the weapons systems it has previously deployed, including long-range mobile rocket systems such as HIMARS. Conversely, new types of cheap, one-way attack drones with automated targeting are currently wreaking havoc on Russian logistics in Ukraine, but NATO militaries have yet to acquire these systems in substantial numbers.

Despite the difficulties it is facing in Ukraine, the Russian military has shown that it can adapt. In the current war, adaptation cycles typically take three to four months, with one side replicating the tactics or technologies used by the other. Although slower at tactical innovation than Ukraine, the Russian military has demonstrated that it can scale solutions across a large force. It is also making progress in the more challenging question of military learning, which is a longer-term process than wartime adaptation. As Massicot wrote in these pages, "By early 2023, Moscow had quietly constructed a complex ecosystem of learning that includes the defense manufacturing base, universities, and soldiers up and down the chain of command. Today, the military is institutionalizing its knowledge, realigning its defense manufacturers and research organizations to support wartime needs, and pairing tech startups with state resources."

Russia now makes millions of tactical drones each year.

But the Russian military has historically underinvested in people. Instead, it has placed its trust in technology. Military exercises are frequently scripted, and readiness checks and training are treated as hoops to jump through. The results have been mixed at best and have often fallen woefully short of what is officially claimed. At times, Russian forces lack the quality to readily execute the concepts that the military is developing, so the military struggles to adopt the lessons it learns. After it intervened in Syria, in 2015, for example, the Russian military trumpeted the experience it had gained and cycled air crews and senior officers through the combat zone. In some areas, the experience helped the Russian military improve, but on the whole, officials overstated the positive effects on the force.

The Russian military has also learned some of the wrong lessons. During a period of reform before the war in Ukraine, for example, the Russian military instituted Joint Strategic Commands—unified headquarters above the level of the army that could command different types of troops—to better integrate the branches

of the armed forces and improve their ability to conduct operations together. After failing to use the Joint Strategic Commands as intended, the general staff eliminated them and returned control of the branches to their respective service headquarters. The result is that the Russian military is less integrated and will require more ad hoc command-and-control structures in wartime. This is a case of misdiagnosing a problem and adapting in ways that make the situation worse.

Despite improvements in some areas, the Russian military has visibly lost the capacity for large-scale combined-arms maneuvers. Many of the officers and trained personnel required to conduct major combat operations have been killed in the war. In their place, Russian forces have relied on newly contracted assault troops who are often given no more than two weeks of training before being sent into battle. Since 2024, Russia has been fighting with smaller and smaller detachments of troops. It first relied on infantry assault groups of six to eight soldiers; more recently, it has been sending one to two soldiers at a time to infiltrate Ukrainian positions. Russian forces have been conducting small-scale operations on a broad front, grinding their way forward at huge cost. Moscow has built a pipeline to replace the infantry it is losing, but it will take years to replace the quality and experience it once had. The military has learned how to guide individual soldiers with drones and fight with small groups of assault infantry, but these are not substitutes for the cohort of lost battalion and regimental commanders who knew how to conduct offensive maneuvers at scale. As a result, Russia's military will struggle to use the advantages provided by its growing drone force and improving strike capabilities to support offensive ground operations.

SUNK COSTS

Russia's military reconstitution faces major obstacles from weakening domestic capacity. Most obvious, the country lacks enough qualified people to staff its military. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin has increased the upper age limit for the service from 27 to 30 and once again raised the official ceiling for the Russian armed forces to about 1.5 million active-duty personnel, Moscow is unlikely to reach this number. The country's unfavorable demographic profile has further worsened because of the high excess mortality during

the COVID-19 pandemic and the casualties from the war. Russia also has a skilled labor shortage and an unemployment rate of 2.2 percent, and the defense sector is competing with the military for skilled labor. As the Russia analyst Alexander Kolyandr wrote in May, "The army needs men to fight. The arms factories need men to supply them. The result is a labor market so tight that ordinary employers can barely function."

The Russian economy has been militarized, but Moscow has not put it on a wartime footing that would involve full mobilization of its defense industrial base. According to the economist Alexandra Prokopenko, Russia is spending 40 percent of its budget, or eight percent of GDP, on the military. This is roughly double what Russia was spending on defense before the war in Ukraine but well below Soviet expenditures during the latter part of the Cold War. Since 2025, the Russian economy has stagnated. Regional budget deficits are growing, and the national government is borrowing more. The recent boost in oil export revenue resulting from the U.S. war with Iran cannot resolve the structural problems in the Russian economy. The Russian state has sought to raise more revenue to cover the costs of the war, but this will further tax the productive parts of the economy to purchase military goods and to give payouts to soldiers. Moving forward, Moscow will struggle to keep current economic policies, balance inflation, and maintain high levels of defense spending.

Since 2022, Russia has significantly expanded defense industrial production. But it has done so unevenly, producing far more munitions, precision-strike missiles, and drones than major weapons systems. Production capacity has leveled off considerably since an initial surge between 2022 and 2024. Western sanctions and export controls continue to constrain Russia's production of machine tools and components. Moscow has set up an effective repair and refurbishment pipeline, but much of its ground force equipment draws on legacy stocks that it inherited from the Soviet Union. This means that most of what the Russian military is using now cannot be easily replaced again. As it consumes its reserve stocks to outfit the expanded force currently fighting in Ukraine, it is sapping its equipment reserves—and therefore the army's future mobilization potential.

But NATO must consider the investments that Russia has made and their implications for the future. Moscow has already paid to

ramp up defense production and shift hundreds of thousands of people into its defense industrial complex. After the war, such spending will continue at a high rate, even if it is reduced from wartime levels. And despite efforts to block its access to technology, Russia continues to acquire components and machine tools that are good enough for many defense applications. In 2026, Russian defense spending is projected to reach $180 billion. Because Russia pays for much of its procurement in rubles rather than dollars, when accounting for purchasing power parity, the effective amount it will spend is about $400 billion to $500 billion. This is how Moscow has been able to sustain the war, expand defense production, and contract over 400,000 soldiers per year since 2023.

PAST IS NOT PROLOGUE

Historically, the problem for Russia's military has not been force design but force development. What may have looked promising initially ends up faltering as lofty ambitions and futuristic concepts run into resource constraints, insufficient training, and weak organizational capacity. The force design and operational concepts may be sound, but the military lacks resources to realize them, resulting in a set of compromises.

Current Russian military thinking still emphasizes a permanent standing force, higher readiness, and more precision-strike capabilities. The military continues to see NATO as the primary threat and remains focused on being able to fight a regional or large-scale war. It has concluded that its failures in Ukraine were not because its concepts were incorrect, but because its forces couldn't execute them. What has changed are prior assumptions that the battlefield would be fragmented and that forces would be more dispersed. An earlier emphasis on maneuver defense is shifting back toward a focus on positional warfare and the kind of fighting seen in Ukraine.

Besides force design, the hardest part of a military to change is its culture, which can supersede doctrine in wartime. The Russian military suffers from overly centralized decision-making, which discourages and punishes soldiers' initiative; a reliance on coercion instead of professionalism to ensure discipline; distrust between soldiers and commanders; the frequent falsification of combat reports; and a lack of empowered noncommissioned officers who can manage the force. Corruption has become endemic, with some soldiers paying to avoid

participating in assaults. Russia's military continues to lag behind its Western counterparts because it fails to make sufficient investments in the people, the training, and the changes to organizational culture that would enable it to fight more effectively.

But these shortcomings and the weak performance observed in Ukraine do not mean that the Russian military should be dismissed. Certainly, Ukrainian officers and commanders take the Russian military threat seriously. There is also a strong tendency to see the last war a country fought as a good proxy for its next one. After Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, for instance, analysts were slow to adjust their views on Russian military reform and modernization, which left them unprepared for the subsequent Russian military actions in Crimea in 2014 and Syria in 2015. And after the intervention in Syria, analysts overcorrected and failed to account for the enduring problems and compromises that bedeviled the Russian military. Every war is shaped by its specific context. It is appealing—but dangerous—to generalize from Russia's performance in Ukraine in 2026 what the opening days of a NATO-Russian war might look like.

Although it is true that the way Ukraine fights is not how NATO would fight in a potential future war with Russia and therefore that NATO is in many ways well positioned to take on the Russian military, the alliance has its own challenges. Much of NATO's presumed capacity and capability depends on the United States providing both its armed forces and the logistical and technical support and organizational capacity that NATO needs. NATO militaries evolved to work in conjunction with the United States and are not set up to independently conduct large-scale combat operations. This is not a matter of simply increasing defense spending. Current NATO defense plans presume a strong U.S. role and continued American leadership in managing European security, which Washington has in recent years signaled it is trying to reduce.

The United States and NATO have significant advantages in air and naval power, precision-strike capabilities, force quality, and intelligence. But they lack Ukraine's experience of dealing with a battlefield saturated by the drones, pervasive surveillance, and new strike capabilities that the Russian military is now using. Conversely, Russia has adapted its force structure, organizational capacity, technology, and tactics so that it can employ these capabilities on a large scale against the NATO formations it would encounter. Russia also remains

a leading nuclear power with a major advantage in tactical nuclear weapons, which are intended to offset NATO's conventional superiority. In the absence of traditional arms control agreements such as New START, which expired in February, Russia's now unconstrained strategic nuclear arsenal—combined with its tactical nuclear weapons—looms large over any future contingency.

It is imperative that defense planners take into account how the future Russian military might fight, adjusting for the fact that drones and other emerging technologies might prove more decisive than modernized Soviet tanks. Airpower remains highly relevant, but it may take time to adapt to the challenges that Russian military developments present. NATO could find it difficult to use its traditional air superiority to suppress dispersed drone teams or handle Russia's large volume of cheap one-way attack drones. NATO ground forces lack sufficient air defenses and counterdrone technologies to protect their formations and enable mobility. It remains uncertain how NATO's existing advantages and operational concepts will fare against a Russian military that has acquired these capabilities in large numbers and learned how to use them.

It is dangerous to generalize from Russia's performance in Ukraine.

Consequently, NATO militaries might incur much higher losses than they would need to in a future war. Many of them are too small to afford high casualties, especially in the opening days of a conflict. Over the past year, Ukrainian drone units have been joining NATO forces on exercises. The results have been consistent: NATO members do not know how to operate in an environment characterized by the presence of mass precision—that is, a battlefield dominated by cheap uncrewed or autonomous systems that can conduct both reconnaissance and precision strikes in real time. They are not ready for a situation similar to the one that has developed in Ukraine, where drones are so numerous that they significantly outnumber personnel and equipment, nor are NATO forces prepared for how these drones—in combination with traditional weapons systems—can deny or enable maneuver. The issue is not just that the weapons have become precise, but that militaries such as Russia's have invested in the tools required to use them effectively on a large scale. Despite its overall poor performance against Ukrainian forces, the

Russian military of 2026 poses a different threat to NATO than did the Russian force that began the war in 2022.

To address the problems that Russia's military poses, American and European defense planners must learn the right lessons from the war in Ukraine. They have been slow to absorb Ukraine's experiences and reckon with how mass precision is changing the battlefield. Planners and military leaders are often too focused on what technology can do, which leads them to overlook the changes they need to make to force structure and organizational capacity to integrate that technology into how their military fights. Strategy requires making choices: if militaries need more drones, electronic warfare units, or cheaper forms of air defense, they have to decide which types of units they will eliminate. They could swap traditional reconnaissance units for uncrewed ones, for example, or reduce the size of some support formations to expand drone teams. In general, NATO militaries need to get bigger: thorny challenges such as air and missile defense require building an ecosystem of both high-end and low-end sensors and shooters to reduce costs and address the increasing threat of cheap, one-way attack drones that can saturate the skies and overwhelm defenses. Military leaders and defense planners say the right things about strengthening military preparedness, but they are often not ready to take the concrete actions or make the hard decisions needed for investments that may take years to bear fruit.

The Russian military challenge needs to be put in proper perspective. Russia has been and remains a power in decline. This was true before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022, and it will remain true regardless of how the war unfolds. But that decline is happening slowly, not suddenly. This gradual erosion will affect Russia's ability to reconstitute its military, but it will not necessarily prevent such an outcome. Russia also has a history of restoring its military faster than expected after a defeat or a period of decline. The armed forces remain the strongest instrument of national power in Russia's toolkit and the one Moscow has reached for with alarming consistency. Even if Ukraine, with Western help, decisively defeats Russia, Washington and its NATO allies should not dismiss the future Russian military threat or eschew necessary investments in rearmament. They need to start now to make forward-looking preparations for the challenge that a reconstituted Russian force will pose.

The Middle East Power Paradox

How the Iran War Will Transform America's Military Role

DANA STROUL

Throughout the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, Washington has relished the display of its conventional military superiority. President Donald Trump's administration has boasted of its quantitative achievements: before the April 8 cease-fire, the United States alone flew more than 10,000 air sorties, hit over 130,000 targets, and intercepted 1,700 Iranian missiles and drones. According to U.S. Central Command, the campaign demolished more than 85 percent of the facilities that Tehran used to produce missiles and drones, sank the majority of Iran's naval vessels, and eliminated 70 percent of its missile launch infrastructure.

But degrading Iran's military capabilities was not the broad strategic goal Trump laid out in the early days of Operation Epic Fury. He variously promised to achieve the complete surrender of the

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regime, to protect the Iranian people from their leaders' brutality, to rid the region of Iran's malign influence entirely, and to wrest a better nuclear deal from Tehran than the one U.S. President Barack Obama reached in 2015. All these aims remain elusive. The regime in Tehran survived. And it has cleverly adapted toward an attrition strategy that has badly strained the U.S. arsenal, threatened civilian infrastructure across the Middle East, and added a new dimension of power projection by effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz and pressuring the global economy.

Although the U.S. military's approach to the region has delivered many operational successes, the Iran war has exposed its serious shortcomings and created new challenges. As it demonstrated an unmatched ability to rapidly deploy massive air and sea power, the Pentagon also deepened its relationships with Middle Eastern militaries, especially with the Israeli armed forces, with which it fought its first truly joint campaign since World War II. But Washington's tactical successes could not make up for its strategic missteps. Its failure to build a fighting coalition beforehand—or even to make the case on the global stage that Iran had become an imminent threat—left it struggling to build international consensus to confront Iran's asymmetric tactics and finalize a strong postwar deal. And the conflict dangerously ran down the U.S. arsenal. The United States simply cannot afford to fight another war like this one.

Most important of all, the war compromised the United States' status as the Middle East's main security guarantor. For decades, U.S. policy toward Iran focused on the three pillars of Iran's power projection: its nuclear program, its missile arsenal, and its network of proxy militias. Yet degrading each of these pillars was not enough to topple the Islamic Republic or force it to accept a deal that safeguarded either the United States or its partners. Fundamentally, the nature of Iran's threat has changed in ways Washington was not fully prepared to counter, and Epic Fury only accelerated Tehran's adaptation. Throughout Epic Fury, Middle Eastern militaries continued to rely on the United States for air defense support and intelligence. But Washington could not fully neutralize Iran before its retaliatory aggression shattered the Gulf's reputation as a calm, safe, business-friendly haven. Nor could it effectively curb the Islamic Republic once it decided to halt freedom of navigation through the region's most vital waterway.

In a bitter paradox, the Iran war revealed opportunities for U.S. Central Command to work much more effectively with regional militaries. But the trust deficit that has opened between the United States and its Gulf partners will make it far harder to take advantage of those opportunities. The Gulf states need clearer security commitments now more than ever. These countries, however, are losing faith that Washington is committed to ensuring their security, and both the American public and U.S. political leaders have lost what appetite they had for the costly, sustained work of countering Iran's threats.

The Middle East after Epic Fury is not safer, more stable, or more prosperous. And if the United States fails to achieve the grand goals Trump set out before the war, its ability to rally partners in other theaters will be undermined, and its adversaries will be emboldened. To properly learn the war's lessons, the United States has to change how it fights. The U.S. defense industrial base will need to innovate faster and pair with trusted partners in developing and coproducing an arsenal that can meet the demands of future wars. In the Middle East, the Pentagon will need to accelerate changes to its force posture and basing, and update the way it works with allies. Gulf countries are already looking for supplemental defense partners, and Washington must redouble its efforts to transition from being the region's sole security guarantor to its security integrator. If it fails to do so, it could entrench the idea that the United States will be an impediment, not an asset, to allies as they seek to ensure their security.

TOUR DE FORCE

The United States had already begun to adjust its military posture in the Middle East years before Epic Fury. After the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. military rotated forces through bases across eastern Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—and positioned equipment in preparation for another conventional war. This network of bases subsequently supported the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century; in the 2010s, the campaign to defeat the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, and efforts to counter Iranian influence sustained the existing basing structure. But as Washington became more aware of Iran's growing missile and drone arsenal and the threat it posed to U.S. bases in the Gulf, it began to plan a more agile basing network along the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. By

2020, the Pentagon was developing the Western Access Network, a system of bases intended to circumvent maritime chokepoints and Iran's short-range threats. It also started to move elements of its aboveground coordination hub from the al-Udeid base in Qatar to South Carolina.

Ahead of Epic Fury, the United States did not mass forces or materiel in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, or the UAE. Indeed, it anticipated that Iran would attack military facilities in those countries with short-range missiles and evacuated troops and military platforms in advance. Instead, Central Command leaders coordinated the war from within U.S. territory and launched operations from the western side of the Middle East, including from bases in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as from offshore naval platforms. This allowed the United States to avoid major casualties and operational slowdowns after Iran attacked legacy U.S. bases.

U.S.-Israeli military coordination in Iran was unprecedented.

The Iran war also showed that the United States can effectively coordinate a multinational air defense throughout the Middle East. Central Command had spent years working to better integrate its Middle Eastern partners' radars, threat warning systems, and defenses, building on the political opening generated by the 2020 Abraham Accords between Bahrain, Israel, and the UAE. The investment paid off: to defend against Iran, during Epic Fury, U.S. partners in the region relied on U.S. and Israeli intelligence and equipment to successfully intercept the majority of attacks on their territories. In fact, Iran's efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and its Gulf allies had the opposite effect, strengthening military cooperation. Gulf countries were previously reluctant to be associated with offensive U.S. military operations against a state. During this war, some Gulf countries permitted Central Command to launch strikes from their territories, and reporting suggests that at least Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined the United States and Israel in striking Iran.

The war also stress-tested an unprecedented kind of military coordination between the United States and Israel. In the previous wars Washington fought in the Middle East, even when it led a coalition, U.S. strategists were firmly in charge: they designed the campaigns, built the logistics backbone, and provided most of the

troops. In this war, Israeli and U.S. strategists designed the military campaign together, divided the target sets, and shared risk equally. Israel took the lead initially by suppressing Iranian air defenses and conducting the decapitation strikes that killed nearly 40 top Iranian political and military leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Only after Israel had achieved air supremacy did U.S. fighter jets start traversing Iranian airspace.

In preparation for the war, the United States stationed fighter jets and refueling aircraft within Israel. Israeli search-and-rescue teams supported Washington's recovery efforts after Iran downed a U.S. plane, and Israeli intelligence informed U.S. operations. This peak of military collaboration was the culmination of years of U.S. investments in a partner force that showed it had become a military peer, capable of sharing the burden in confronting Iran and addressing other emerging threats.

CALL TO ARMS

The critical assistance that U.S. equipment provided to Israel and the Gulf states during a crisis, and the massive investments they have already made into purchasing and training on U.S. systems, means that these militaries will almost certainly continue to buy American and train with Central Command. Epic Fury also showed that maintaining a static troop presence in legacy bases in the Middle East is no longer necessary, validating earlier efforts to update the U.S. military's regional posture. Moreover, the military ecosystem that supported counterterrorism missions in Syria and Iraq, which was for years based in Kuwait and Jordan, can evolve as those missions are reduced in scope. And the Pentagon is likely to accelerate its efforts to develop the Western Access Network by inking access agreements with Israel and positioning equipment and bases along the Red Sea and in Israel.

There is a challenge in updating the U.S. force posture in the Middle East, however: local partners, already anxious about their security, may well perceive changes in the U.S. military presence as a diminished U.S. commitment. To reassure these partners, Washington will need to pursue new paradigms for basing and training. The Pentagon can signal its continuous investment in the region by permanently assigning a set level of forces to the Middle East, similar to the arrangement it has in the European and Asia-Pacific

theaters. This will send a reassuring signal, as well as help with U.S. defense planning and funding. These forces might rotate throughout the region to conduct exercises and training, sharing facilities with partners by establishing joint use, pooled maintenance, and cost-sharing agreements.

Epic Fury also put a stark spotlight on the immense material demands of modern warfare—and the United States' unreadiness to fight for a sustained period. That the economics of war is changing had already been illuminated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent protracted war. High-end air defense systems and cutting-edge munitions are financially and operationally unsustainable against low-cost, long-term drone attacks. The Pentagon's current inventories enabled it to overmatch Iran during Epic Fury. But it did so at a cost to other theaters and priorities. Washington expended an extraordinary amount of munitions striking targets within Iran itself: as the defense strategist Mackenzie Eaglen has pointed out, the U.S. military fired more than 1,000 Tomahawk cruise missiles in a few weeks—but it can produce only 90 to 100 per year. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to counter Iranian missile fire, the United States expended at least 190 THAAD interceptors and 1,060 Patriot interceptors between February 28 and April 8 alone. Those figures represented around 53 percent and 46 percent of the United States' prewar inventories, respectively. At the rates that it can replenish these interceptors, the United States could not counter air threats in multiple theaters if it needed to.

To stay ahead of the innovation curve, the United States will need to both speed its acquisition processes and innovate more with other countries. It must lower the regulatory barriers that prevent technology transfer to and from its partners and tackle the industrial, contractual, and funding bottlenecks that stymie the development and production of cost-effective munitions. The United States could benefit much more from the innovations Ukrainian and Israeli militaries have made to modern warfare if policies are changed and bureaucratic hurdles are removed. Washington will also need to transform its frustratingly slow and inflexible foreign military sales processes. Arms and technology sales that take years to finalize risk becoming irrelevant. As the United States adjusts its regional basing arrangements and accelerates reforms to its acquisition processes, it should invite its Gulf partners to

join coproduction and codevelopment arrangements—a move that would ease its own funding and production challenges while adding valuable new dimensions to the partnerships.

A MOVING TARGET

In Epic Fury, Israel and the United States ran an expanded version of the playbook they used during last June's devastating strikes on Iran's nuclear and missile programs (the so-called 12-day war). But Iran had changed its own strategy, confounding the operation. After the 12-day war, Tehran absorbed key lessons. First, it determined that its overly centralized decision-making structure slowed its ability to respond effectively to U.S. and Israeli strikes, especially given that Israel and the United States targeted its top leaders and communications networks. Second, it saw that directing most of its retaliation toward missile attacks on Israel—alongside a single, performative assault on the United States' al-Udeid base in Qatar—would not deter Israel or the United States, weaken their resolve to return to military operations, or spook Qatar and other Gulf countries into imposing limits on how Washington uses their territory or airspace. Tehran also learned from how Russia has used drones in the war in Ukraine, especially drones' ability to hit civilian centers and energy infrastructure, drain interceptor stockpiles, and test radar coverage to set up more destructive strikes.

So between last year's war and this year's, Iran changed its playbook. Iran's leaders pre-delegated response authority downward and preauthorized target sets that could rapidly expand the scope of a countercampaign—what it calls a "mosaic defense." Despite U.S. and Israeli leaders' claims that the regime's command-and-control structures were fracturing, Iran's military responses remained coherent. Consider its swift and timely response to the March 18 Israeli strike against its offshore South Pars gas field. Within hours, the regime had escalated by attacking Gulf energy infrastructure, targeting the Qatari side of the same offshore gas field but also striking Saudi and Kuwaiti oil installations.

Iran also changed course from imposing costs directly on Israel and the United States to attacking all U.S.-aligned countries in its neighborhood. And it used its drones not only to strike targets directly but to deplete its adversaries' interceptor stockpiles and probe their radar coverage. These attacks often caused little physical damage,

but they imposed operational burdens and forced the United States and its partners into a resource-intensive defensive posture. Tehran expanded the scope of its strikes to civilian infrastructure such as hotels, airports, desalination plants, ports, and oil terminals; psychological and economic warfare became an increasingly important element of its response. Civilians across the Middle East endured constant missile and drone warnings, a vital commercial shipping route was disrupted, and threats to regional energy flows proliferated, drawing military focus and political attention from Epic Fury's operational momentum.

Iran discovered its greatest advantage in the maritime domain. As it has with drone tactics, Tehran has demonstrated a capacity for creative innovation in maritime warfare. In 2019, in response to "maximum pressure" sanctions by the first Trump administration, it attacked oil tankers in the Gulf; in 2023, the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen shut down Red Sea transit to protest Israel's operations in Gaza. Tehran's 2026 closure of the Strait of Hormuz was the culminating demonstration of an ability that the regime had developed years in advance. This time, realizing that it could not contest U.S. naval superiority directly, Iran instead used small boats, drones, mines, and onshore firing units to create persistent navigational uncertainty in the strait. These tactics generated enough risk to disrupt transit in a waterway that handles 20 percent of the world's shipping, raised shippers' insurance costs, and put extraordinary pressure on global markets.

ADAPT OR DIE

The U.S. military demonstrated that, together with Israel, it was able to significantly degrade the capabilities of an adversary in a short time. But the recent war made it clear that Iran can project power in new ways—and even more important, that its ability to adapt in the midst of an ongoing conflict is much greater than the United States had planned for. So instead of diminishing the broader Iranian threat, the war generated new perils for the Gulf states and the global economy.

The greatest problem for the United States in the Middle East now is its inability to turn military achievements into strategic wins. Tehran's newfound willingness to directly threaten its Gulf neighbors, and its eagerness to use global economic coercion, means the United States must retain a military presence in the Middle East and keep backing

its longtime partners' efforts to defend themselves. But Americans are not sold on deepening these military partnerships. Over the past few years, polling has consistently shown that Americans want to fight fewer foreign wars and retrench from the Middle East specifically. A March Reuters/Ipsos survey showed that most Americans wanted a quick exit from Iran, even if a strategic victory had not been achieved. U.S. political leaders will likely balk at reinforcing security commitments in the Middle East precisely when the region will seek them.

America fired more than 1,000 Tomahawks but can produce only 90 to 100 per year.

Project Freedom, the United States' short-lived effort to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, illustrated that U.S. military partnerships are vulnerable not only to American political pressure but also to political pressure from Gulf countries. After the U.S. military successfully guided two commercial vessels out of the strait on May 4 to challenge Tehran's blockade, Iran struck a UAE oil terminal to signal its willingness to attack Gulf energy interests. It attacked a South Korean commercial vessel to threaten non-Arab commercial shipping. And it unsuccessfully targeted two U.S. Navy destroyers to test Trump's willingness to return to war. Yet the Trump administration insisted a cease-fire was still in place and did not respond to Iran's attacks beyond defending its naval vessels.

Unlike during the 12-day war, when an Iranian attack on Qatari territory did not disrupt the country's close relationship with the U.S. military, within 24 hours Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had closed their airspace to U.S. military aircraft and placed other restrictions on how the Pentagon used their bases. These Gulf states feared that Trump's lack of response to the attack on the UAE's oil terminal, in particular, would continue to embolden Tehran. Without military cooperation from geographically close countries, Project Freedom could not continue, and for the first time during the war, Iran forced open a temporary fissure between the United States and key Gulf partners.

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia quickly restored the U.S. military's access. But such episodes of distrust and rupture are likely to recur. And even before the war, Middle Eastern leaders were looking for more diversity in their military acquisitions and defense partnerships. This search is now accelerating. At the height of Iran's retaliation, the UAE requested that Israel deploy troops and additional air defense systems

to its territory. Ukraine sent teams of counterdrone experts across the Middle East and, in late March, signed long-term security agreements for counterdrone training, technology transfers, and joint defense production with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. NATO countries that had prewar defense relationships in the Middle East fulfilled their commitments and supplemented U.S. defensive support during the war. The United Kingdom provided defense support to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other states in the region and flew missions within the effort coordinated by Central Command. France also deployed fighter jets to intercept Iranian drones and missiles targeting the UAE and sent its sole aircraft carrier group to the Red Sea to prepare to help reestablish freedom of navigation in the region. And in late April, France and the United Kingdom convened a maritime security summit, attended by more than 30 countries, to initiate military planning for a multinational maritime mission to support unfettered transit in the Strait of Hormuz.

This diversification trend will continue. Other countries are ready to fill gaps the United States leaves open. (South Korea, for instance, recently revised its defense export policy to accelerate equipment sales, particularly to the Middle East.) Washington needs to embrace its partners' desire for a broader variety of defense partnerships by leaning into a coordinating role, looking to its own history for inspiration. Previous U.S. administrations have sought to multilateralize the region's security cooperation through formal structures such as the 2015 Camp David summit, which strengthened U.S.-Gulf security cooperation after a nuclear agreement with Iran was struck; the first Trump administration's proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance initiative, which aimed to create a new structure for Gulf countries to collaborate along with the United States; and the Biden administration's 2022 Jeddah Security and Development Summit, which accelerated Middle Eastern regional air and defense cooperation.

These efforts all worked from the same premise—that multinational security commitments could better support a collective defense against Iran. In the aftermath of Epic Fury, Washington should work with Asian and NATO allies, and especially military innovators such as Ukraine, to formalize multilateral security cooperation. The goal should be to assemble a new security construct that integrates the operations of different military systems from various national defense industries, protects participating countries' classified information,

and initiates theater-wide planning for future air defense equipment purchases and operations. The United States needs to convene actors interested in defending against Iran's threats before Chinese and Russian engagements tip the balance of influence to the United States' disadvantage.

Over time, such arrangements could help the United States become the Middle East's security coordinator within a more balanced system of burden sharing. Gulf states also want more agency in their security arrangements. Back in 2000, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries signed a joint defense agreement that stipulated that an attack on one was an attack on all. Although they did not activate this provision during the Iran war, regional leaders show renewed interest in creating an Islamic or Middle Eastern NATO and aligning with other nearby states such as Egypt and Pakistan. By midwifing the 2020 Abraham Accords, Washington has shown that it can help facilitate new strategic frameworks in the region.

The 2023 Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement between Bahrain and the United States is another valuable model. It expands the definition of security beyond defense to include economic and technology cooperation and contains a NATO-like provision that requires parties to work together to confront "external aggression against the territorial integrity" of any signatory. The agreement was left open for other countries to join. The United Kingdom joined in 2025, and the agreement's three signatories should not let this moment pass without encouraging other interested parties within and outside the region to join.

During Epic Fury, the U.S. military proved its operational value to Middle Eastern partners and confirmed its unique conventional capabilities. Shared wartime experience ought to give the United States a good foundation from which to rebuild and expand its partnerships. But the discordance between the strong relationships the United States continues to enjoy with regional militaries and its increasingly tense political relationships is growing. The Trump administration must leverage Central Command's accomplishments to deliver an agreement that blunts Iran's threat. And it must make systemic changes to how Washington works with regional partners. If it falls short on either front, Epic Fury will stand as the defining contradiction of U.S. power—a display of unequaled military might that ushered in a post-American Middle East.

The Strange Defeat of Nuclear Deterrence

And the Coming Crisis in Strategic Stability

ROSE GOTTEMOELLER

In June 2025, Ukraine's security services staged an audacious strike inside Russia. They infiltrated the country and hid short-range attack drones in cargo trucks near a slew of Russian air bases as far away as the Amur region on the border with China. Most of these bases were home to Russian strategic heavy bombers—aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Using Russia's mobile phone network, Ukrainian operatives remotely launched the drones, successfully destroying at least ten of the bombers and damaging a total of 41 planes, including some used for nuclear command and control, according to Ukrainian assessments.

Known as Operation Spider's Web, this assault was a remarkable gambit. The most significant aspect of the attack, however, was not

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its astonishing cost ratio—as one analyst put it, "a single drone costing just $500 destroyed a strategic bomber worth tens of millions of dollars"—or its ingenuity in hijacking Russian telecommunications, but the fact that it could happen at all. As part of its long-standing doctrine, Moscow had insisted that a conventional attack on its strategic assets could provoke a nuclear response. But that did not stop Kyiv. Ukraine was willing to go after Russia's nuclear capabilities, and Russia was unable to prevent their destruction.

The bomb may invite new forms of peril.

The Ukrainian operation was a spectacular example of a wider trend: nuclear deterrence is not working. Countries have long assumed that the possession of nuclear weapons was the surest guarantee of their security. Indeed, many observers saw the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as proof that Kyiv had erred in 1994 by agreeing to give up the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union. If Ukraine had the bomb, they suggested, Russia would not have dared to attempt such an attack. Similarly, if Iran had already developed its own arsenal of nuclear weapons, Israel and the United States would not have been able to strike the country as they have since February, killing Iranian leaders and leveling Iranian military infrastructure. From that argument inevitably flows the conclusion that more countries will reasonably want nuclear weapons as insurance against aggression. States ultimately need these weapons of mass destruction to deter their greatest adversaries.

But recent conflicts more clearly advertise the reverse. Ukraine is not just hitting targets deep within Russia but also targets directly related to Russia's nuclear capabilities. Iran and its proxies have repeatedly attacked Israel, which is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons. Tehran has aimed missiles and drones at Israeli cities and even nuclear facilities. And India and Pakistan, which both possess nuclear weapons, engaged in the most serious conflict between the two countries in this century, attacking far across each other's borders in May 2025. In all these cases, the possibility of nuclear escalation and retribution did not prevent conventional and hybrid warfare. Indeed, state and nonstate actors are in effect calling the bluff of nuclear-armed powers.

Nuclear weapons can appear impotent in the face of sustained conventional and hybrid attacks; in today's warfare, an arsenal of nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles, a flotilla of nuclear

submarines, and squadrons of strategic bombers can do little to deter salvos of cheap drones—as long as those nuclear states remain unwilling to use their weapons. That should give pause to both existing nuclear powers and those that may want to acquire the weapons.

The strength of the nuclear taboo was tested in the early months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Russian President Vladimir Putin evidently came close to using tactical nuclear weapons to stop a rout of his troops in southeastern Ukraine. He was prevented, it seems, by a combination of advice from his own military leaders and public pressure from his Chinese and Indian counterparts—and doubtless private pressure from Washington. Although the taboo is not an absolute bar against the use of nuclear weapons, leaders who flirt with the idea of deploying them experience heavy pushback. They also must reckon with the fact that they would be remembered as only the second human being to drop the bomb in combat, earning them a dauntingly infamous place in history.

For nuclear states, the lessons of this moment must be jolting. State and nonstate adversaries are increasingly willing and able to hit nuclear powers with conventional weapons. That scrambles the traditional logic of nuclear deterrence. Deterrence by threat of nuclear retaliation, the traditional tool that has ensured nuclear stability for decades, is weakening. Deterrence by denial—that is, discouraging an attacker by making an attack seem futile—may become more valuable.

That approach will demand different priorities for governments. Instead of investing vast sums in modernizing existing platforms, nuclear states could be better served by strengthening defenses around their nuclear facilities, focusing on resilience rather than nuclear capacity. And they should find ways to uphold and strengthen norms governing conventional targeting—by pledging, for instance, never to strike nuclear power plants and military nuclear facilities. These measures will help slow escalation during crises when warring parties feel emboldened to strike enemy nuclear facilities. For nonnuclear states, the waning of traditional nuclear deterrence should offer a more general warning. Rather than bringing the certainty of security, the bomb may simply invite new and disconcerting forms of peril.

THE WANING OF DETERRENCE

Beginning in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, now Russia, have deployed a triad of nuclear systems to both threaten

and deter their rivals: ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, ballistic missiles launched from submarines, and heavy bombers. These systems can deliver warheads at a range beyond 3,400 miles, which is the basis for describing them as "strategic offensive forces." The United States can directly target the Russian homeland, and the Russians can target the continental United States. China's rapid nuclear buildup in recent decades has sought to bring Beijing on par with Moscow and Washington. By maintaining this arrangement of systems, a country can ensure that it will not suffer a "splendid first strike"—a nuclear attack that prevents any retaliation—retaining the capacity to hit back. The possibility of nuclear retribution serves as the key deterrent to nuclear states using their weapons against one another in the first place. And it is the combination of capacities that has traditionally undergirded strategic stability, the notion in international relations that nuclear-armed states should never have the incentive to use their apocalyptic weapons.

When a country faces an adversary that does not possess nuclear weapons, it can resort to nuclear posturing to intimidate its foe. Take, for instance, Russia's strategic bombers. The aircraft can be used to deliver conventional bombs, but Moscow has emphasized their continuing nuclear purpose, stating in 2024 that any attack on Russian strategic assets could provoke a nuclear response. That ambiguity was supposed to provide Russian leaders with flexibility. They were not obliged to resort to nuclear weapons in responding to Ukrainian attacks, but they also hoped that the possibility of nuclear use would make Ukraine think twice and refrain from striking their strategic assets.

In Operation Spider's Web, Ukraine tested Russian ambiguity and found it to be a cover for caution. After the shock of the destruction of its strategic bombers, the Russians did not reach for the nuclear button. They did not even respond with another round of overt nuclear saber rattling. Instead, they launched a conventional attack on Kyiv using 400 drones and 40 missiles.

Indeed, that Russian retaliation epitomized the dynamic at work, the collision of an old logic of nuclear deterrence with the realities of warfare today. As Ukraine has demonstrated since 2022, simply possessing nuclear weapons does not protect an aggressor from conventional retaliation. Having the most powerful weapons on earth will not shield a large state from a smaller state determined to defend itself.

Israel is learning a related lesson. Israeli leaders are tight-lipped about their country's nuclear capabilities, but they have long harbored a quiet confidence that nuclear weapons would safeguard Israel by preventing attacks from states or nonstate actors.

Hamas's rampage in Israel on October 7, 2023, ran roughshod over that notion. So, too, have subsequent events. Israel has faced an onslaught of missile attacks from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen in recent years and since the joint U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran began in February. Neither states nor nonstate actors see Israel's nuclear capability as a reason to refrain from attacking its territory. Indeed, in March, Iran targeted the Israeli plutonium production reactor at Dimona, highlighting that the Israeli nuclear deterrent is not only failing to serve its putative purpose but has also become a magnet for attack.

Israel's response to these missile attacks had been to significantly and steadily bolster missile defenses at multiple levels, from the Iron Dome system designed to counter short-range attacks, and the David's Sling system, which intercepts medium- and long-range missiles, to the Arrow missile defense system that defends against long-range ballistic missiles. These multilayered missile defenses are designed to handle a variety of strikes, from single missiles to significant barrages, and can quickly distinguish projectiles that are homing in on their targets from those that are falling harmlessly.

HARRY HAYSOM

The irony of this situation is twofold. First, the proliferation of cheap and accurate missiles, drones, and uncrewed aerial vehicles among Israel's neighbors and even among its nonstate enemies has resulted in an unfavorable cost-benefit relationship with more advanced defense systems, such as Iron Dome. Israel, like other countries in the Middle East, has looked to the experience of Ukraine in developing effective and low-cost shields to defend against low-cost drones, even as the Israeli government has studiously avoided providing advanced missile defenses to Ukraine throughout its war with Russia.

The second irony is that Israel, by developing sophisticated layered missile defenses, has been pursuing a strategy of "deterrence by denial." In theory, its adversaries would be deterred from attacking it because they would recognize the futility of any attack: Israel's missile defense prowess would render ineffective any attempt to hit targets in the country. But that theory is being sorely tested in the current war with Iran, as Israel's foes have rained down missiles and drones on Israeli cities and troops, some invariably getting through to cause damage. The relative cheapness and accessibility of modern conventional weapons now force Israel to look for cheaper defensive systems.

Meanwhile, Israel's other deterrent—the threat of nuclear retaliation—has receded far from view. Even in official comments on the Dimona attack, the Israeli government did not breathe a word that could be construed as nuclear saber rattling. Israel seems to be sticking to its strategy of nuclear ambiguity, perhaps to prevent a regional nuclear arms race or avoid facing any new international sanctions. Israel's opponents, whether state or nonstate actors, therefore have no reason to take notice of its nuclear capability or be deterred by the specter of an Israeli bomb.

NEW CONVENTIONS

To be sure, nuclear weapons still encourage restraint in certain circumstances. Since 2022, the United States and its NATO allies have steadily increased their military assistance to Ukraine in a measured way that does not spur an escalatory response from Russia. Russia, in turn, has avoided touching NATO territory throughout the war, although NATO shipments of weapons have become fair game for attack once they cross into Ukraine. Both Russia and NATO have been wary of entering any direct confrontation that could escalate.

In this context, the traditional theory of nuclear deterrence still holds. It is possible that the sheer number of nuclear weapons in the

U.S. and Russian arsenals—each side has approximately 4,000—forces Moscow as well as Washington and its allies to exercise tremendous caution. Any exchange of nuclear missiles between the two sides risks rapid escalation to global annihilation. A related answer may be found in the peculiar nature of the nuclear relationship that the United States and the Soviet Union developed during the Cold War. The United States and Russia keep their nuclear forces on high alert, ready to launch quickly. But neither is capable of pulling off a completely destructive or "splendid" first strike against the other that would eliminate its capacity to retaliate. This tenuous "first strike stability" has locked Washington and Moscow in a high-risk nuclear embrace that neither side is willing to break.

Nuclear weapons do not shield a large state from a small one.

During the Cold War, each superpower rival feared the other would foist on it a "strategic surprise," a new weapon or defense system that would upset first-strike stability. That did not happen, but the fear that it might persists to this day. It manifests now in U.S. concerns about China's nuclear buildup, which could eventually put the United States in the position of facing off against two nuclear peers that have immense nuclear arsenals. Were that to happen, the United States might not be able to respond to any aggression from either China or Russia as it would like. The U.S. nuclear umbrella could weaken, leaving allies vulnerable to conventional Chinese and Russian attacks. Until now, the extended U.S. nuclear deterrent has staved off conventional conflict in Europe and East Asia, but it may fail in the future as China ramps up its nuclear capabilities.

In South Asia, nuclear weapons have not prevented conventional warfare. India and Pakistan both possess nuclear weapons, but in 2025 descended into their most serious conventional conflict since 1999. The direct clashes of these two nuclear powers always raise alarms in their region and beyond. The United States has stepped in swiftly on a number of occasions to help broker a cease-fire, most recently in 2025. China, too, claims to have helped end the fighting last year. The threat of nuclear escalation spurs outside powers to intervene. In this case, nuclear weapons do not deter conventional conflict, but the fear of their use has helped bring fighting to a rapid end.

In short, recent events have surfaced contradictory trends regarding nuclear deterrence. Nuclear stability between the two Cold War–era superpowers seems to keep conventional conflict at bay in Europe and East Asia. The new contender, China, may upset that stability, but for the moment, it holds. In South Asia, by contrast, conventional warfare occurs despite both sides having nuclear weapons. These realities suggest that existing nuclear powers must continue to maintain their nuclear weapons, even as conventional threats from an increasing number of actors become more numerous. Some elements of deterrence depend on a stable nuclear balance and will continue to do so for as long as nuclear weapons exist. At the same time, all nuclear states, whether they are signatories of the Nonproliferation Treaty or not, should pledge to limit and reduce their nuclear stockpiles in the right circumstances. It remains an essential goal of humanity to get rid of nuclear weapons.

The current climate may encourage this process, since the ongoing wars raise doubts about the utility of nuclear weapons in keeping the peace. Iran, Ukraine, the Houthis in Yemen, and other groups are certainly behaving as if the risks of nuclear retaliation are negligible. After all, the nuclear taboo has proved strong, with no leader so far willing to break it. As more state and nonstate actors acquire capable missile and drone systems, they will be better able to launch ever more daring attacks, even against states that possess the most powerful weapons.

This nuclear impotence should inform those U.S. allies in Europe and Asia that doubt the reliability of Washington's extended nuclear deterrence commitments and have started to muse publicly about acquiring nuclear weapons. The president of Poland has suggested that his country should get the bomb, and several German politicians have said that their country should, as well. In East Asia, polls show that the public in South Korea is increasingly in favor of Seoul developing its own nuclear arsenal, and even the public in Japan—the only country to have suffered a nuclear attack—seems more willing to countenance debate about acquiring nuclear weapons. In the Middle East, countries are worried about possible attacks from Israel, the United States, or their neighbors. Saudi Arabia might pursue some form of nuclear capability, pressing for the right to enrich nuclear materials and concluding a security agreement with Pakistan that may involve the provision of fissile material or even warhead technology to Riyadh.

But more nuclear weapons in the hands of more countries will not prevent conventional conflict. Nuclear weapons are not stopping the destruction of Russia's strategic bombers. They are not protecting Israeli cities from intense and repeated missile attacks. They are not discouraging India and Pakistan from raining devastation on each other's territory.

Nuclear proliferation carries severe risks. Even though the nuclear taboo has held strong since 1945, it is not a guarantee against nuclear escalation, particularly as technologies such as artificial intelligence transform decision-making in warfare and may increase the risks of accidental escalation. A growing number of nuclear players will produce more opportunities for the unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons. New nuclear states will not be as experienced as existing nuclear powers in ensuring the safety and security of their nuclear weapons. And a profusion of nuclear weapons also gives nonstate actors more opportunities to acquire one, summoning the specter of the terrorist nuclear threat that so haunted policymakers in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

LESS IS MORE

Nuclear weapons are costly, too. States that already have vast nuclear arsenals are investing huge amounts in building up their nuclear forces. The United States, Russia, and China, the three largest nuclear powers, are modernizing their intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines, and strategic bombers—at significant cost. Such investment may not be worthwhile. Of more use will be investment in resilience, survivability (through the strengthening of deployment sites and more mobile nuclear systems), and defenses, especially integrated air and missile defenses that will deny attacks on critical nuclear infrastructure. As nuclear deterrence is becoming more uncertain and as conventional attacks grow more accurate and devastating, such investments may prove to be more valuable and long-lasting than pouring more resources into nuclear modernization.

As Russia has found during its war against Ukraine, the homeland is no sanctuary these days, and bases that host strategic nuclear weapons systems may come under attack. If adversaries, whether states or nonstate actors, are able to launch accurate drones or short-range missiles, such bases could be threatened by conventional attacks. This threat implies that nuclear bases need air and missile defenses able to

operate on short warning and at short ranges. Ideally, such defenses would resemble the highly cost-effective drone defense systems that the Ukrainians are building and deploying—today, even supplying the Gulf states in the Middle East. The defense systems will have to be cheap and plentiful to deal with modern missile barrages and drone swarms.

States deploying nuclear weapons must be prepared to protect and defend them from conventional attacks. Strong and multilayered resilience measures seem a better bet than traditional deterrence theory, which has only offered empty threats of nuclear retaliation. For this reason, nuclear powers must reconsider their declaratory policy—that is, a government's public messaging on how and when it might use its nuclear weapons. Russia has found that the Ukrainians simply ignored Russian nuclear doctrine related to conventional attacks on nuclear targets. Although Russia has threatened a nuclear response for such attacks, it has not followed through, even after heavy damage to its nuclear bomber force. Such empty messages either neuter the deterrent power of nuclear forces or create unbearable pressure to escalate to nuclear use.

Investments in nuclear modernization may not be worthwhile.

Instead, nuclear states and others should promulgate normative principles that would erect further barriers to nuclear escalation. For instance, in the wars in both Ukraine and the Middle East, nuclear power plants have become targets. The International Atomic Energy Agency has been urging states to pledge not to attack nuclear plants during war. India and Pakistan have already agreed not to attack nuclear-related facilities belonging to the other side; every year on New Year's Day, they exchange lists of nuclear facilities that they agree not to target with conventional weapons. As some analysts have suggested, countries should generally pledge to avoid targeting areas in the vicinity of facilities housing nuclear warheads. Such pledges could be extended to all military nuclear facilities and could be embraced by states deploying nuclear weapons. Later, the pledge could be adopted globally, with all states given the chance to sign on.

The goal would be to extend the nuclear taboo to include conventional attacks on nuclear targets, whether civil ones (nuclear power plants) or military ones (nuclear weapons facilities). Both nuclear-armed states and states without nuclear weapons should

find such pledges in their interest. Even for nonnuclear states, such a move would strengthen the norm against nuclear use by addressing the danger of unintended escalation. It would also prevent a radiological disaster, which could ensue from a conventional attack on a nuclear facility.

Nonnuclear states that are now contemplating acquiring nuclear weapons should think again. Israel's ambiguous nuclear deterrent has proved to be no barrier to conventional attacks, nor has Russia's overt and gigantic nuclear deterrent. Would-be nuclear states might instead build up conventional defenses and resilience against conventional and hybrid attacks. U.S. allies should do their best to ensure that the extended deterrence capabilities based on their territories are well maintained and kept well prepared through regular exercises. Allies cannot be sure of the behavior of any U.S. president, but they can be sure that the nuclear extended deterrent capabilities deployed on their territory are fit for purpose and ready for action.

In this confused nuclear moment, countries may grapple with its uncertainties and come to the wrong conclusions. The worst-case scenario is that nuclear states will ignore the lessons of the current season of warfare and continue blindly building up nuclear force posture without taking into account that new conventional threats will come at them from all quarters—and not only from their traditional nuclear foes. Even nonstate actors, before too long, are likely to have significant numbers of cheap but accurate fast drones and missiles. The next terrorist attack on a U.S. target may not be on high-rise towers in a major coastal city, but against nuclear deployment sites, perhaps—as terrorists acquire longer-range missiles—even in the American heartland.

The solution to such threats is not to acquire more nuclear weapons, since their power to deter has become manifestly doubtful. Instead, countries need to recognize the changing landscape of conventional war and how drones and ballistic missiles threaten the central strategic role of nuclear weapons. Governments must develop better defenses, building a resilient bulwark against conventional attacks on their nuclear forces. And they should work to promulgate norms that discourage nuclear use and stave off radiological disasters. In that way, nuclear weapons can continue to do their job: deterring other nuclear powers from attack and preventing the kind of escalation that could lead to catastrophe.

The Broken Nuclear Umbrella

What Comes After Extended Deterrence

JENNIFER LIND AND DARYL G. PRESS

For decades, American allies in Asia and Europe have relied on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence for their safety. They forswore acquiring their own nuclear weapons, agreeing instead to live under the protection of the United States' nuclear umbrella. This arrangement worked during the Cold War because the stakes of that competition were so high that the United States could credibly—if just barely—say that it would wage nuclear war, even at catastrophic risk to itself, to prevent the conquest of its allies.

But the world that created the U.S. extended deterrence system is long gone. The United States retains important interests in Europe,

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Illustration by Daniel Benneworth-Gray

but Russia's threat is far more limited than when the Soviet Union was poised to conquer much of Europe and Asia. A war today would be about the precise boundaries of Moscow's influence in eastern Europe, not the global balance of power. Similarly, the Korean Peninsula was once a battleground for rival Cold War blocs; today, that conflict is largely local, with Pyongyang desperately seeking to hold on to its power. And the Trump administration's view that the purpose of alliances is first and foremost to enhance the United States' core national interests is at odds with promises to jeopardize American cities to defend allies. In a world in which wars are largely regional and Washington is pulling back, it strains credulity to believe that the United States would wage nuclear war for faraway allies.

NATO should increase European control over its collective deterrent.

U.S. allies are thus increasingly worried that the extended deterrence system is now a bluff. Their fears are justified. Leaders in Latvia, Poland, and South Korea cannot be confident that the United States would risk its own destruction for their safety. Those in North Korea and Russia may be drawing the same conclusion. If Washington's nuclear commitments are no longer credible, U.S. allies need new arrangements to ensure their most critical security needs.

The crisis of extended nuclear deterrence has developed gradually since the end of the Cold War. When allies have questioned the credibility of American promises, Washington has sought to soothe their concerns. The United States issues official statements declaring its commitment to its partners and conducts military demonstrations, such as submarine port visits or bomber overflights, to underscore U.S. power and commitment. But it's dangerous to try to convince allies that all is well when it's obviously not. Refusing to address the weakness of the existing extended deterrence strategy could embolden adversaries to attack. And fearing for their safety, allies in Asia and Europe could rush to cobble together their own nuclear programs, which could in turn trigger preventive strikes and the rapid escalation of conflict.

The United States must accept that it can no longer be a credible nuclear guarantor for all of its allies around the world. It needs to get comfortable with its partners seeking solutions more suited

for today's geopolitical realities, including, in some cases, acquiring their own nuclear weapons. In Asia, this could mean establishing a nuclear sharing agreement with South Korea, modeled on the one between Washington and NATO, in which the United States would promise to transfer control of tactical nuclear weapons to Seoul if North Korea were to attack. Or if Seoul ultimately chooses to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to build its own nuclear arsenal, Washington should support this decision and use its influence to insulate South Korea from the dangers of such a transition. In Europe, the best option for the United States and its partners is to modify the existing NATO nuclear sharing program to increase European control over the alliance's collective deterrent. France and the United Kingdom—the two other nuclear-armed NATO states—could enhance their role in NATO's nuclear plans to reduce Europe's dependence on Washington and better protect the bloc's most vulnerable members.

Helping U.S. partners develop stronger and more autonomous deterrence postures is anathema to many in Washington, who fear nuclear proliferation and do not want to give up the United States' leverage as a global security provider. But this may not be Washington's decision. U.S. allies are vulnerable, and they are right to take concrete steps to reduce the real dangers they face, whether that means developing their own nuclear deterrent or making other moves that violate outdated U.S. prohibitions. Washington should support them along whichever path they choose for protection.

CREDIBLE ARRANGEMENTS

The U.S. extended deterrence strategy grew out of two conflicting Cold War imperatives. The United States recognized that nuclear weapons were essential for preventing Soviet attacks against American allies around the globe. Yet Washington and its partners did not want scores of countries to have their own weapons because they feared a world of competing nuclear-armed states. The solution was a system of extended nuclear deterrence in which the United States opened its nuclear umbrella over its most important allies in Asia and Europe. Although France and the United Kingdom decided to acquire their own arsenals, American nuclear weapons served as the strategic deterrent for the rest of the U.S. alliance system during and after the Cold War.

From its inception, this strategy had credibility problems because it seemed far-fetched that the United States would risk nuclear catastrophe to defend its allies. Indeed, in 1961, French President Charles de Gaulle scoffed at the notion that the United States would sacrifice New York City to defend Paris. If anything, de Gaulle greatly understated the extent of the challenge: U.S. policy effectively required Washington to put every major American city at risk to protect its allies.

To enhance the credibility of extended deterrence, the United States devised an array of military actions and diplomatic maneuvers. Washington deployed troops and tactical nuclear weapons near the border between East and West Germany and just south of the dividing line between North and South Korea. By stationing nuclear weapons directly in the path of a potential invasion, where they would surely become entangled in any fighting, the United States made it clear that a major attack risked catastrophic escalation.

Leaders of both U.S. political parties buttressed those deployments with rhetoric that signaled the inseparability of American and allied interests. In 1963, when President John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, stood in Berlin and declared, "Ich bin ein Berliner," he was emphasizing that Washington and its key NATO allies were one. More than two decades later, President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, struck the same note when he told a European audience, "An attack on you is an attack on us. . . . An attack on Munich is the same as an attack on Chicago."

Underlying these military deployments and this diplomatic rhetoric was a deeper truth: the geopolitical stakes during the Cold War were so great that allies and adversaries alike could believe the extraordinary threat of waging nuclear war. A successful Soviet invasion of Western Europe would have given Moscow control of the territory stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the English Channel—an outcome that American strategists believed posed a grave threat to U.S. security. North Korean advances, too, could be construed as a major victory for the Soviet-led bloc. In that context, it was plausible that the United States would risk nuclear Armageddon to hold the Soviet Union and its allies at bay.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s began to erode the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. Facing regional security challenges, rather than near-existential threats,

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the United States became less inclined to risk nuclear war on behalf of its partners. But few allies paid attention. In Europe, for instance, nuclear weapons were seen as a legacy problem from the Cold War until renewed Russian aggression reminded countries on the continent of their need for a stronger deterrent. Moscow's threat to use nuclear weapons against NATO countries after it invaded Ukraine, in 2022, was a particularly jarring lesson.

The recalibration of American foreign policy, which has played out over two Trump administrations, has further driven allies to question the reliability of the United States' nuclear promises. The essence of President Donald Trump's "America first" policy is to assess alliances in terms of how much they contribute to U.S. national security. The administration's 2025 National Security Strategy, for instance, declared that U.S. policy is now aimed singularly at promoting core American interests. A pledge to put "America first" directly contradicts a pledge to wage nuclear war on behalf of allies.

Countries around the world may hope that whoever is elected president in 2028 will recommit Washington to supporting their defense. But regardless of who sits in the Oval Office, it is no longer sensible for the United States to wage a major nuclear war to help far-flung allies enmeshed in regional conflicts. Trump's reorientation of U.S. foreign policy has also shattered any illusions that Washington is permanently committed to its allies' defense. It was always a risk for allies to rest their core security needs on American promises of nuclear war, even when a bipartisan consensus of U.S. leaders publicly supported such a position. With Washington divided over the direction of its foreign policy, allies would be taking an extraordinary gamble to continue to rely on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.

Indeed, this system is under increasing strain worldwide. Rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait, for instance, have raised concerns in Japan about being caught in a nuclear crossfire if Washington and Beijing were to come to blows, and in Australia about being drawn into the fighting if it were to allow the United States to use its bases in a potential war. But nowhere are extended deterrence concerns as urgent as on the Korean Peninsula and in eastern Europe, the frontlines of the two theaters where aggressive, nuclear-armed adversaries are threatening escalation.

SEOUL FLYING SOLO

Since North Korea tested its first nuclear device in 2006, Pyongyang has amassed between 50 and 90 nuclear weapons, and its arsenal continues to grow. The North Korean government has ordered its armed forces to integrate nuclear forces into the country's conventional war plans, which implies that any major war on the peninsula will become nuclear. Technological advances are making North Korea even more dangerous. In 2017, North Korea tested a device that was an order of magnitude more destructive than its previous atomic bombs, suggesting that the country is on the path to developing potent fusion weapons capable of destroying entire metropolitan areas in a single blast. And progress toward intercontinental nuclear delivery systems will soon put American cities directly in Pyongyang's cross hairs. If North Korea's nuclear weapons can target American cities, U.S. policymakers will think twice before using nuclear forces on behalf of South Korea.

Meanwhile, the United States has gradually dismantled the arrangements that once bolstered the credibility of extended deterrence on the peninsula. Washington has reduced the number of troops stationed there and moved them farther south, away from the demilitarized zone dividing the country from North Korea. And in 1991, when the Cold War ended, Washington removed its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea.

The Trump administration's rhetoric and policies have further fanned South Korean fears of abandonment. Trump has adopted hardball trade policies toward Seoul and denigrated the value of the alliance, complaining that the United States has been protecting South Korea "free of charge." In 2025, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers raided a Hyundai-LG battery plant under construction in Georgia and detained hundreds of South Korean engineers, many of whom were in the United States on business visas. Images of their shackled compatriots enraged South Koreans. Most recently, Trump's decision during the Iran war to move U.S. missile defense batteries from South Korea to the Persian Gulf, over Seoul's objections, exemplified South Korea's growing concern that the United States would put its own security over the needs of its ally. Extended nuclear deterrence requires the opposite: a willingness to sacrifice dearly on behalf of one's partners.

As conditions have eroded, South Korean strategists have debated three main options for strengthening nuclear deterrence. Seoul could ask the United States to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. Alternatively, Washington and Seoul could create a nuclear sharing system, which would mirror the arrangement between the United States and its NATO allies: the United States would station nuclear bombs at U.S. military bases in South Korea and promise to transfer control of those weapons to Seoul in the event of a crisis or war. Or in what would mark a more significant shift, South Korea could exercise its legal right to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and build its own nuclear arsenal.

So far, South Koreans have been committed to the principle of nonproliferation, and many South Korean security experts still reject nuclearization because it risks economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, or even a North Korean preventive attack. But given the uncertain credibility of the United States, leaders in Seoul may soon decide that they cannot gamble their country's survival on the promises of a wavering ally. South Korea may accept a nuclear sharing agreement as enough protection, but it is increasingly possible that Seoul may feel it needs an independent nuclear deterrent. Numerous polls over the past decade have revealed that a supermajority of South Korean citizens support such a move.

Seoul has been laying the groundwork for an independent nuclear capability for decades. It has already built the delivery systems needed for a secure and effective nuclear retaliatory force. South Korea is the only nonnuclear country in the world to possess ballistic missile submarines; it owns three of them and is building three more. Additionally, its air force operates a large and growing fleet of modern fighter aircraft, dispersed across a dozen military airfields and protected by hundreds of hardened shelters—the ideal infrastructure for an air-delivered nuclear deterrent. And South Korea operates dozens of mobile land-based missiles. In short, it has already paid for and built the main elements of a nuclear arsenal minus the weapons themselves.

U.S. policymakers have long opposed an independent South Korean arsenal and instead sought to reassure Seoul that the existing system remains strong. In 2023, for instance, the Biden administration responded to questions from Seoul about the reliability of

the U.S. deterrent by hosting the South Korean president at a summit, reiterating the United States' commitment to South Korea's defense, and sending a nuclear missile submarine to visit the South Korean port of Busan. U.S. officials and foreign policy elites have also tried to dissuade Seoul from plotting an independent course by noting the consequences required by U.S. law for countries that seek nuclear weapons, including automatic sanctions and the loss of access to civilian nuclear fuel and technology. But as American credibility wanes, South Korea's growing vulnerability may lead Seoul to proceed anyway. The result would be a higher risk of war during the period in which Seoul tries to develop nuclear weapons because North Korea would interpret such a move as a threat and might attack.

Seoul has the main elements of a nuclear arsenal—minus the weapons.

If South Korea requests a nuclear sharing arrangement, the United States should welcome that solution. This would enhance deterrence on the Korean Peninsula without forcing Washington to deal with the diplomatic and strategic challenges that would arise from an ally acquiring nuclear weapons. Alternatively, if South Korea decides it needs its own nuclear weapons, the United States should help Seoul acquire them safely. Washington could strengthen extended deterrence during the transition period in which South Korea nuclearizes by temporarily positioning tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula and redeploying American troops closer to the demilitarized zone. The United States could agree to staunchly defend Seoul in international forums in which sanctions might be debated. (There is a legitimate basis for South Korea's need for nuclear weapons because the threat it faces comes from a North Korean arsenal that was obtained by flouting numerous UN Security Council resolutions.) Washington could also waive the sanctions written into U.S. law, similar to what it did for India and Pakistan in 1998–99.

If U.S. leaders acknowledge the real deterrence challenges that have developed on the Korean Peninsula and help South Korea do what it needs to protect itself, the United States can emerge with a stronger alliance—one that resembles the close partnerships it maintains with nuclear-armed countries such as France, Israel, and the United Kingdom.

SPARE KEYS

In the past two decades, a reenergized Russia has invaded Georgia, seized Crimea, and launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine. But despite Moscow's renewed aggression, the Trump administration has stepped back from its NATO partners, arguing that Europe can defend itself from a Russia that is much weaker than its Soviet predecessor. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the Kennedy and Reagan declarations that the United States and its allies were firmly on the same team, the Trump administration has highlighted the areas in which U.S. and allied interests diverge. It has criticized NATO partners for free-riding on U.S. military spending, rebuked European governments for what the White House deems to be repressive restrictions on free speech, and threatened to seize Greenland, which is administered by Denmark, a NATO ally. And in early May, Trump responded to the lack of European participation in the war against Iran, as well as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's criticism of the conflict, by withdrawing 5,000 troops from Germany.

U.S. nuclear weapons remain the cornerstone of NATO's nuclear deterrent. But given the major change in stakes from the Cold War to the present and the shifting political landscape in the United States, European governments can no longer assume that American nuclear promises are ironclad. Anxiety about the United States' commitment is palpable. European countries, particularly those in eastern Europe, have started to discuss how to strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrent.

For vulnerable countries in eastern Europe, pursuing independent nuclear capabilities is unlikely to be the best solution. Even Poland, the most militarily capable country in the region, would encounter significant hurdles to developing a secure nuclear arsenal. Warsaw lacks the delivery systems that are the foundation of a strong and reliable nuclear deterrent. Poland has no modern submarines; it is negotiating to buy some from Sweden, but these would be primarily for coastal patrol, cannot carry large numbers of missiles, and are many years from operational deployment. Poland does own a few dozen land-based mobile missile launchers, but they can scarcely reach halfway to St. Petersburg, never mind Moscow. The most up-to-date branch of Poland's military is its air force, which is integrating F-35 fighter jets into its force structure. But relying on air-delivered nuclear weapons to deter an attack is dangerous for a country so close to Russia. The Polish arsenal would

be vulnerable to a Russian missile barrage on its airfields, which could leave Warsaw without the ability to retaliate.

Poland also lacks the building blocks to quickly create the fissile material needed for nuclear weapons. Compared with Seoul's civilian nuclear program, Warsaw's is small, and Poland has neither large stockpiles of nuclear spent fuel nor the facilities needed to reprocess it and build weapons. Over time, Poland could build a capable nuclear arsenal if it decided to do so. But the pieces are not yet in place. And these significant hurdles are even higher for the other vulnerable eastern European members of NATO, which have less money, worse delivery systems, and smaller territory on which to deploy and protect their weapons.

Rather than encourage member states to pursue independent nuclear arsenals, NATO could modify its existing nuclear sharing plans to enhance deterrence. Under the current arrangement, the United States positions a small number of nuclear bombs in Europe in peacetime. Those weapons remain under exclusive American control: they are locked, and only the U.S. president can unlock them. In the event of a serious nuclear crisis, NATO could vote to disperse these weapons, and the United States would—at least in theory—release them to European air forces operating under NATO command.

One shortcoming of the current strategy is that NATO may be unwilling to wage nuclear war to protect the alliance's eastern members. The United States and its NATO partners could address this problem by placing some of the alliance's nuclear forces where they would be entangled in any fighting if Russia were to attack an eastern European ally such as Poland. Warsaw, for instance, could build modern nuclear storage sites at several of its airfields, either as locations to hold NATO nuclear weapons in peacetime or as places to which they could be dispersed during a crisis. Deploying nuclear weapons on Polish territory would strengthen deterrence by making Russia confront the danger that an invasion of Poland would be met with a nuclear defense.

But the existing nuclear sharing arrangements face an even more fundamental challenge: a single person—the U.S. president—can veto the transfer of the weapons. NATO nuclear sharing in its current form is therefore only as credible as the United States' commitment to its European allies.

The best solution lies in expanding the list of countries that hold the keys to NATO's nuclear arsenal. In a modified arrangement, France and the United Kingdom could each contribute about two dozen nuclear weapons to the alliance's stockpile. Those weapons, which would need to be suitable for delivery by NATO aircraft, could be deposited into existing NATO bunkers that are spread across Europe. In peacetime, these additional French and British weapons would remain under the full control of Paris and London, respectively, just as U.S. weapons are under Washington's control, but they could be released to other members in times of crisis.

Anxiety about America's commitment is palpable.

This updated sharing arrangement would retain the logic of the existing plan but convert NATO's deterrence from a "one key" to a "three key" system. Currently, NATO's nuclear force would evaporate if a single person, the U.S. president, were to withhold the key that unlocks the bombs. Under a three-key system, the deterrent would be operational if any of the three leaders—of France, the United Kingdom, or the United States—were to give the go-ahead.

A three-key arrangement would comply with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty because France, the United Kingdom, and the United States would maintain peacetime control over their weapons. France already owns air-launched cruise missiles suitable for inclusion in the sharing arrangement; to fulfill these new obligations, it would need to build only two dozen more nuclear-tipped missiles and share the software and physical connectors that NATO aircraft would need to employ them. Because the United Kingdom has only submarine-launched nuclear weapons, it would need to build bombs suitable for air delivery, which is a prerequisite for use in the NATO arsenal. But these could be lightly modernized versions of the nuclear gravity bombs that it deployed until the late 1990s.

A revised system along these lines is within reach. France and the United Kingdom have the manufacturing facilities and the know-how to build these weapons; constructing additional warheads would mainly require hiring extra workers, running more shifts, and perhaps delaying some routine warhead maintenance

because the countries' plutonium-handling facilities would be manufacturing new weapons. France is already expanding its arsenal of nuclear cruise missiles, although it has thus far declined to allocate any weapons to an enhanced NATO sharing program. An improved sharing arrangement would work best if both France and the United Kingdom contributed weapons to the NATO stockpile, but a contribution from either country would bolster deterrence relative to the current arrangement.

LIKE IT OR NOT

For Washington, the easiest move is to stick with the existing system of global extended deterrence. This leaves allies dependent on the United States for their security, maximizes American influence in the world's geopolitical hotspots, and—at least in the short term—limits the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It also avoids generating new tensions: after all, U.S. adversaries would cast any changes to the status quo as provocative threats and fiercely oppose them.

But continuing with the extended deterrence system courts catastrophe for both Washington and its partners. A security strategy based on a bluff will feel like a bargain until the moment it is challenged. It is better to bolster deterrence today before a military crisis erupts.

Even if Washington doesn't want to change course, it might not have a choice. U.S. allies may simply reject the U.S. extended deterrent and pursue their own alternatives. South Korea may decide that it must take responsibility for its own national security, and Europeans may conclude that something must be done to enhance nuclear deterrence in eastern Europe. Washington's best option is to help them develop their own approaches to deterrence. Supporting allies as they do so would reduce the risk of war during the transition to a new deterrence status quo, and it would increase the odds of closer and more productive relationships with them afterward.

The global system of extended nuclear deterrence was an audacious strategy that was built for the unique circumstances and stakes of the Cold War. That era is over. The United States needs to refashion deterrence strategies for the world not as it once was, but as it is.

The Afghanistan Reckoning

Forever Wars and the Costs of Collective Forgetting

CARTER MALKASIAN

Five years ago, the 20-year American war in Afghanistan came to an inglorious end. In April 2021, the United States had begun its final withdrawal, with the goal of pulling out the 2,500 U.S. troops that remained in the country by September. Within weeks of the first U.S. departures, the Taliban had swept up scores of positions as Afghan government forces melted away. By early August, the group had taken control of most provincial capitals. Finally, on August 15, 2021, the U.S.-backed government in Kabul collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of terrified Afghans besieged the city's airport. Roughly 120,000 were evacuated in planeloads by the United States, its allies, and even groups of private citizens. In a heartbreaking final blow, 13 American service members died in a suicide bombing at the airport four days before the last U.S. soldier departed on August 30. Two decades of heroic effort had ended in shame.

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Recriminations followed—some justified, some not. The same group that had harbored al-Qaeda while it planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks had triumphantly returned to power, and fears of a resurgent terrorist threat mounted. After all, the main reason that successive American presidents had decided to keep U.S. forces in the country for so long was the belief that without them, Afghanistan would once again become a safe haven for terrorists even if the Taliban did not manage to take full control.

Nothing of the sort occurred. Over the past five years, not a single act of terrorism against the United States was carried out by a group based in Afghanistan. Washington spent roughly $1 trillion on the war. More than 120,000 Afghan civilians were killed or injured. More than 775,000 American service members were deployed to Afghanistan, more than 20,700 were injured, and more than 2,400 died—all to defend against a threat that turned out to have been exaggerated.

If American officials had known then what they know now, many of them—including me—would have argued more strongly for an earlier withdrawal. This is an uncomfortable point of view to adopt. It calls into question the judgment of leaders, the effectiveness of the policy process, and the value of the entire effort. Washington might have seen a better outcome, or at least a shorter war, if officials had more seriously debated withdrawal earlier, considered a wider range of threat assessments, pursued negotiations sooner, and, in some cases, recognized the bias instilled by a distaste for defeat.

Five years on, the greatest danger is not that a terrorist safe haven might once again emerge in Afghanistan. A graver threat comes from the risk of collective forgetting. Today, the longest American war rarely figures in public discourse. Americans occasionally acknowledge the noble sacrifices that thousands of U.S. service members made in the conflict. But the country moved on, eager to forget those final days. The riskiest form of forgetting would be for American leaders to fail to recall how perilous it proved to accept high costs and terrible losses, all in response to the fears of the moment. Remembering that will help them avoid future anguish.

"YOU ARE WORTH PROTECTING"

On October 7, 2001, President George W. Bush invaded Afghanistan in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks that had stunned the world. Within months, a combination of U.S. airpower, special operations forces, intelligence operatives, and the Afghan militia known as the Northern Alliance had chased out al-Qaeda and upended the Taliban regime led by

Mullah Omar. A new government was formed under the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai. For the next four years, the country was deceptively peaceful. This initial success helped tempt the Bush administration into invading Iraq in 2003, leading to a brutal war that captured most of Washington's attention for the next five years. During that time, the Taliban regrouped. By 2006, they were regaining territory and seriously challenging the Afghan government.

Throughout this period, the United States was gripped by a fear of terrorism, its anxiety fed not only by the horrors of 9/11 but also by the anthrax attacks that followed in their wake and a series of lethal jihadist bombings and foiled plots in Europe in the mid-2000s. "The global war on terror" was raging, and Afghanistan was the main theater. Countering terrorism was unquestionably the center of U.S. military activity in the country, a mission articulated by presidents, secretaries of defense and state, military commanders, and intelligence chiefs.

The United States had other ambitions in Afghanistan, as well, including a nation-building mission that aimed to establish a sustainable democracy. Bush declared this goal explicitly, and in spite of his successors' efforts to back away, it remained an implicit part of the American project. But without the terrorist threat, there would have been no war against the Taliban, no arming and training of the Afghan military, no nation building, and no democracy promotion. Terrorism was always the driving concern.

For many of the men and women on the ground, that mission justified their efforts and losses. As Ross Berkoff, a U.S. Army lieutenant stationed in Kandahar in 2003, wrote in his diary: "September 11, 2001, is a day that will live in infamy and the fact that Afghanistan became a new place for U.S. soldiers to deploy is directly tied to that infamous day. . . . I am here to respond. We're here in response." In a 2019 memoir, Kyle Carpenter, who fought in Afghanistan as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps and received the Medal of Honor, summed up his feelings about his service on behalf of Americans: "You are worth protecting, you are worth fighting for, you are worth time in a hospital bed and deep scars on my body."

That is not to say that the strategy was always clearly communicated or convincing. Many U.S. troops on the ground were not directly involved in counterterrorism or special operations missions. For some, engaging in firefights in remote mountains and deserts with local Taliban, being targeted by improvised explosive devices, and trying to

End of the road: Taliban fighters storming Kabul International Airport after the U.S. withdrawal, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2021

build up the troubled Afghan government and army seemed a far cry from fighting dreaded international terrorists. Some developed deep skepticism about the purpose of the war, which could turn to resentment when fellow service members died or were wounded.

From 2009 to 2011, I served as the U.S. State Department's political officer in Garmser, a rural district in the southern province of Helmand. I was part of a small team of around half a dozen civilians attached to a U.S. Marine battalion, advising the district governor, the police, and local tribal and religious leaders. Just about every Afghan in the region believed that without U.S. forces backing a strong army and police force, the Taliban would return. A few claimed that al-Qaeda would come with them.

As far as I could tell, there was little to suggest that al-Qaeda was active in Garmser or elsewhere in the south. The truth was that the chances of the group's reviving its Afghan stronghold were impossible to measure with any confidence—and such a nebulous threat scarcely seemed commensurate with the 100,000 U.S. troops then in the country. But by the time I left, I was heartened by the Marines' accomplishments. The Taliban had been pushed out of the vast majority of the district. An Afghan government official could travel unarmed from the top to the bottom of the territory. Over 1,000 new Afghan soldiers and

MARCUS YAM / LOS ANGELES TIMES / GETTY IMAGES

police officers were in place and active. I thought that it was unnecessary for tens of thousands of U.S. forces to stay in Afghanistan, as long as a smaller number remained for the long term. In 2012, Kael Weston and I wrote in these pages that 25,000 U.S. advisers, special operations forces, and air and support personnel should stay. Otherwise, "the Afghan central government would likely lose control of the Pashtun east and south" and, "thrown on the defensive, would be unable to prevent the return of al Qaeda to the vast Pashtun heartland." The country, we warned, would "backslide, quickly and perhaps irrevocably, taking with it the United States' ability to combat al Qaeda."

From 2013 to 2014, I was back in Afghanistan as the civilian adviser to General Joseph Dunford, commander of all U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan. During those years, U.S. President Barack Obama had begun to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan, and by the time I left, fewer than 10,000 remained, and they were focused on turning the war over to the Afghan soldiers and police. In too many places, however, they were suffering setbacks: in the summer of 2014, at the strategic crossroads of Sangin, in Helmand, hundreds of well-armed Afghan police and soldiers had been overrun by a Taliban offensive. That defeat heralded worse reversals that came in 2015 and 2016, all of which U.S. officials took as indicators that the Afghan government could not hold back the Taliban on its own, nor prevent the subsequent establishment of an al-Qaeda safe haven. For me, it was a sign that the costs of staying in Afghanistan had possibly become greater than the danger of terrorism that would come in the wake of the government's fall.

For the rest of Obama's time in office, and during the first term of President Donald Trump, the Afghan war was the focus of constant debate in the White House. The particulars changed over time, but the basic choice was always the same: stay in the country with a small number of troops, a posture that was sustainable but potentially endless, or get out, meaning that sooner or later the government would fall and the terrorist threat would likely return. From 2012 onward, the intelligence community assessed that a terrorist capability to attack the United States could reconstitute in Afghanistan within one to three years after a U.S. withdrawal.

Trump retained the fundamentals of Obama's strategy until mid-2018, when he decided it was time to leave Afghanistan and pursue direct negotiations with the Taliban. Obama had allowed for talks between 2010 and 2014, but the effort was a low priority for his

administration. By 2018, the strategic context had changed. A U.S.-led coalition had defeated the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the global terrorist threat was ebbing, and a bipartisan consensus was at last forming that the United States should wind down the war in Afghanistan. Trump's agreement with the Taliban, signed in February 2020, stipulated that Washington would withdraw all its military forces by May 2021. In return, the Taliban promised not to allow al-Qaeda to recruit, train, or conduct operations from Afghanistan—although the Taliban refused to break relations with the group.

THE BAD GUYS WON

On taking office in January 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden faced a hard choice: keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan to suppress the terrorist threat, or leave in accordance with Trump's agreement. Either strategy was viable. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, and senior U.S. generals favored staying. They argued that counterterrorism operations could be better maintained from inside Afghanistan and that the continued presence of American troops would prevent the defeat of the Afghan government. Biden himself was genuinely concerned about terrorism and acknowledged the possibility of a Saigon-like collapse, but he leaned toward escaping from a never-ending mission. For Biden, the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. contest with China, and the struggling American economy were far greater worries.

In April 2021, Biden announced that all U.S. military forces would withdraw by September 11 of that year. The administration believed the Afghan government would hold out for at least six months after that point. But Kabul fell in August, and the Taliban have governed Afghanistan ever since, led by their dour emir, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Before taking the top position in 2016, he had been the chief judge of the Taliban's Islamic court, a position that endowed his leadership with religious legitimacy in the eyes of many Afghans. He is said to have endorsed a suicide bombing by his own son in Helmand in 2018. Following in Mullah Omar's footsteps, Haibatullah rules not from Kabul but from the traditional Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, and assiduously stays out of the public eye. In Kabul, meanwhile, the minister of the interior is Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the terrorist group known as the Haqqani network and the mastermind of countless wartime suicide attacks, such as a truck bombing in front of the German Embassy in 2017 that killed 150 Afghans and injured 400 more.

The ascent of men like these is precisely the kind of outcome that U.S. officials feared when they contemplated a post-American Afghanistan. Yet far from ushering in a new age of chaos and carnage, Taliban rule has instead fostered a period of relative stability. The country has been at peace for five years, the longest stretch since 1979, when a Soviet invasion was followed by decades of war. Other than periodic attacks by the Islamic State, resistance to the regime has been minimal. Afghans consistently tell me that the country is now *aram*, or calm. Since retaking control, the Taliban have not ruthlessly oppressed the Afghan people. The group has not systematically imprisoned its former adversaries or those who worked with the United States, its allies, or the Afghan government. Taliban governors and judges have generally permitted those people to go on with their lives. The biggest danger for them is violence carried out by low-level Taliban members with a grudge, or local rivals looking for an excuse to settle old scores.

Washington understood little about the Taliban.

Perhaps the most unexpected element of Taliban governance has been its ban on the poppy cultivation that long made Afghanistan a major node in the international heroin trade. Poppy was a major source of revenue for the group during the war. But in 2022, Haibatullah banned the cultivation, sale, and consumption of all narcotics. Enforced by public floggings and long prison sentences and backed by eradication efforts, the edict reduced the cultivation of poppy by approximately 95 percent in 2023, according to UN estimates. The Taliban have accomplished this feat even though doing so sharply reduced the tax revenues they could collect and negatively affected the livelihoods of perhaps a fifth of the population.

Of course, there have also been significant setbacks. Economic growth has stagnated, and poverty has worsened. Health care has degraded with the cessation of international assistance. The most glaring fault is the plight of Afghan women. In 2022, Haibatullah issued edicts that banned girls from attending secondary schools and universities. Women also face restrictions on working and on venturing outside their homes without being escorted by a male relative. The deterioration of health care has hit women particularly hard because hospitals and clinics had been among the few places with personnel dedicated to their care. The cruelty of the policies is thrown into relief by the major strides in rights and opportunities that Afghan women in some parts of the country made in the decades that the Taliban were out

of power. Female income per capita doubled between 2000 and 2013. In Kabul, at least, a generation of Afghan women grew up with access to education, job opportunities, and a sense that they could build lives of their own. The Taliban have extinguished those dreams.

By far the most important turn of events for American and Western interests, however, has been the absence of terrorism. There is little evidence to suggest that al-Qaeda is organizing, fundraising, or training on Afghan territory. Seemingly with the Afghan emirate's permission, fighters and leaders from the Pakistani Taliban have taken refuge in Afghanistan, where they have launched 700 attacks on Pakistani soil. The resulting war has seen Pakistan bomb the Afghan cities of Bagram, Kabul, Paktia, and Kandahar, while Afghan forces have attacked Pakistani border posts. Meanwhile, the Islamic State maintains a few thousand fighters in Afghanistan who have conducted high-profile attacks on the Taliban government in Kabul. But for five years, no known terrorist attack has been mounted from Afghanistan against the United States. Despite the Taliban's track record as enablers of al-Qaeda and their failure to manage their country's economy, the group has not fostered global terrorism since 2021 but instead contained it.

A reversal cannot be entirely ruled out because Washington's ability to monitor Afghanistan is not what it was in 2020, let alone 2011. The United States may be unable to detect terrorist plotting and training in mountain villages or in the backstreets of Kabul, Kandahar, or Jalalabad. And the past five years have not been without red flags. In 2022, a U.S. strike killed Ayman al-Zawahiri, who inherited the leadership of al-Qaeda from Osama bin Laden, at a guest house linked to Haqqani. In 2023, a team of UN investigators concluded that there were still around 400 al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan actively trying to rebuild a base of operations. Similarly, the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate could be stronger than it currently seems and could shift its focus from undermining the Taliban to attacking Western interests.

But the unmistakable fact is that so far, Taliban rule has been manageable for American interests. Five years after the U.S. withdrawal, it is fair to say that the threat of terrorism, which drove American decision-making, was exaggerated.

LOSING IS NOT AN OPTION

The question that lingers, then, is why American officials so badly misjudged the risk of withdrawing and opted to stay for so long.

One factor was domestic politics. Had ordinary Americans not been gripped by fears of jihadism after 9/11, and had they more acutely felt the effects of the war in their own lives, then popular protests, electoral politics, and congressional opposition might have compelled a president to withdraw much earlier. The war in Afghanistan never inspired much passion among ordinary Americans. Presidents confronted little popular opposition to staying and feared that a rapid collapse in the aftermath of a U.S. pullout would be a political disaster—as indeed it was for Biden, whose approval ratings fell sharply after dismayed Americans watched the 2021 evacuation devolve into chaos and bloodshed.

In retrospect, the years immediately following bin Laden's death, in May 2011, offered the best opportunities to end the war. Washington's most notorious enemy was dead, and his organization was decimated. Moreover, by that point, it was clear that the surge of troops that Obama had ordered to Afghanistan in 2009 would be too costly to sustain. About a month after bin Laden's death, Obama announced that 33,000 American troops would withdraw from Afghanistan by September 2012, which would leave around 67,000 in the country. Those forces would continue to draw down until the end of 2014, the president said, when the United States would end its combat mission and shift to a training, advising, and counterterrorism mission. In May 2014, Obama announced that the withdrawal would be complete by the end of 2016. But he reversed that decision the following year amid the rise of the Islamic State, known as ISIS, and Taliban advances in Afghanistan.

If its timeline had been shorter, the withdrawal might have been completed by that point, and Obama might not have been able to reverse course. He did not demand precipitous withdrawal, but he seriously considered a "zero option." The Pentagon, which was not bent on staying, could have presented the president with options for withdrawing more quickly, and Obama himself could have decided to execute faster.

Throughout the Afghan war, beneath the policy debates lay another, unstated reason to stay: the humiliation of losing. The military had understandable biases when confronting the painful topic of withdrawal. Many generals felt a professional duty to accept any outcome; for others, a Taliban victory carried a deep stigma. They did not want to lose. They did not want their soldiers to have fallen in vain.

U.S. soldiers and generals could not succeed in their daily operations if they were not ruthlessly determined to outfight the enemy. Nor could they succeed if they did not care about the Afghans—genuinely, not as pawns in some great game. Afghans had to put their lives on the line, too. This is a difference between the soldier or officer on the ground and a policymaker back home. Thinking objectively about strategy demands a degree of detachment that a person on the frontline must reject. Emotional commitment, with all its biases, is irreplaceable. It is hard for anyone who goes from the field back to Washington to detach from this kind of commitment. Simply put, one reason the Americans did not leave Afghanistan earlier is that the U.S. military fights to win.

THE PERILS OF CONSENSUS

The Taliban did not make the prospect of withdrawal any easier to contemplate. Between 2010 and 2021, Taliban representatives told U.S. interlocutors that they had no intention of permitting anyone on Afghan soil to plan or carry out a terrorist attack overseas. But they muddied the waters by maintaining a relationship with al-Qaeda. In 2019, I was on the U.S. negotiating team that met with Taliban representatives in Qatar, and they admitted to working with al-Qaeda and wanting its members to be able to live in Afghanistan, all while resisting U.S. requests to offer written guarantees to ban al-Qaeda fundraising, recruiting, and training. If Washington's great failure was overestimating or exaggerating the terrorism threat, the Taliban's was keeping that threat alive by refusing, late in the game, to make a clean break with al-Qaeda.

The more important factor that kept Washington from better estimating the threat earlier was the seemingly sturdy conviction among various U.S. intelligence agencies that the threat of terrorism would rise if American forces withdrew. This view was the result of a process of producing national intelligence estimates that, by design, reflected a consensus. Various experts inside and outside government expressed skepticism about the general conclusion, but in an ad hoc fashion; in a consensus-driven process, contrary views were bound to be washed out.

The fault for that, however, does not lie with the intelligence analysts. Decision-makers, congressional representatives, and policy advisers (including me) should have asked the intelligence community for a wider set of forecasts. For the sake of simplicity, I accepted one rough forecast instead of asking for multiple predictions from different viewpoints that I could then present to the principals. It is likely that one

such forecast would have described a fair chance of an indefinitely low terrorist threat to the American homeland. That might have weakened the case for staying—and might have caught the attention of Obama, Trump, Congress, and the media.

The United States did not predict the stability that Taliban rule would yield or the relative leniency the group would show toward Afghans who had opposed it. Washington understood little about the movement; its leaders stayed hidden, and few outsiders had access. (Mullah Omar died in 2013, but the rest of the world, as well as most of his own movement, did not even learn of his passing until two years later.) In retrospect, views of the movement were skewed by reports about its first time in power, when it ruled the country in the late 1990s. Executions, stonings, and other abuses were not as widespread as media accounts from that period suggested. Similarly, the maze of Afghan tribal politics—and distorted information from unreliable Afghan government sources—led U.S. officials to underestimate the level of unity and hierarchy within the movement, which partly explain its success in the past five years.

One way to mitigate these misperceptions would have been to prioritize a sustained dialogue with Taliban representatives much earlier. Attempts to reach out between 2010 and 2014 were sincere but underresourced. Contact with and knowledge of the Taliban—and confidence in that knowledge—would have increased dramatically, and might have created an earlier opportunity for the negotiations to end the war.

THE MINEFIELD AT HOME

The American war in Afghanistan had a tragic quality. The United States could not avoid entering the conflict but then had few chances to exit. Many who served in the war now see it as a waste. Some feel betrayed or let down by generals and civilians who, in spite of the futility of the war, continued to put them in harm's way. An August 2021 Pew Research poll found that two-thirds of veterans from all American wars felt the United States had failed to reach its objectives in Afghanistan. "In the aftermath of 2021, many of us were gripped with existential questions about the meaning and legacy of our service," Berkoff, the U.S. Army lieutenant, now retired, reflects at the end of his memoir. "We struggle with—and continue to unpack—feelings of guilt or regret, wondering if our sacrifices were really in vain." Timothy Kudo, a retired Marine captain, is harsher: "I think of the star-spangled banner that flew over my old patrol base. . . . Five men

died under that flag, for what?" It is deeply unsettling that thousands of service members who fought, were wounded, or lost friends in the war now see it as an unworthy endeavor.

Americans will not all share any single memory of the war in Afghanistan or accept any single explanation for the outcome. And in addition to those who feel it was a waste are the officers, enlisted personnel, and diplomats who feel the war was a duty and served their country, regardless of the reasons the government chose to wage it. There is also a smaller cohort of veterans of the Afghan campaign who believe that the war could have been won. In their view, the Afghan government could have stood on its own, and the Taliban could have been defeated—if only more U.S. troops had stayed in the country, special operations had been conducted more vigorously, the Afghan military had been better constructed, or Washington had not repeatedly told the Taliban it would withdraw.

Many who served in the war now see it as a waste.

These sentiments have created a minefield for military leaders. Today, officers must demonstrate to troops that they will not put lives at risk in endeavors that fall short of victory. To civilian leaders, they must demonstrate that they will not stand in the way of policy. A similar dynamic has not been seen since the aftermath of the Vietnam War, which caused Americans to lose confidence in their military leaders and led the military to refocus on fighting conventional wars and transform itself into a professional all-volunteer force. Perhaps that experience offers some solace: the many lessons from defeat may result in stronger armed forces, improved political judgment, and greater scrutiny of the rationales for putting lives in danger.

The value of a soldier's life lies at the heart of debates about the meaning of the Afghan war. For much of the war, most American leaders and most ordinary Americans thought the benefit of security outweighed the cost of casualties. Today, hardly anyone believes that. Similar shifts took place after other American wars, most recently those in Vietnam and Iraq. In every case, it all seemed so important at the time. Years later, many people decided that if they had known how things would turn out, they would not have supported sacrificing so much.

Americans must not forget those changes of heart. They must remember what it feels like to look back at a war they once embraced and think, "If only I had known then what I know now."

Iran's New Grand Strategy

How a Remade Islamic Republic Will Reshape the Middle East

NARGES BAJOGHLI AND VALI NASR

At the outset of the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran in February 2026, the Islamic Republic appeared battered and weakened. Large-scale bombing had destroyed industry and infrastructure, and a U.S. naval blockade had devastated an already ailing economy. In early March, U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters on Air Force One, "We've decimated their whole evil empire." Several weeks later, he declared "total and complete victory."

Three months in, however, the picture looks quite different. Iran retains its military and industrial capacity, and despite Trump's call for Iranians to topple the regime, no popular uprising is in the

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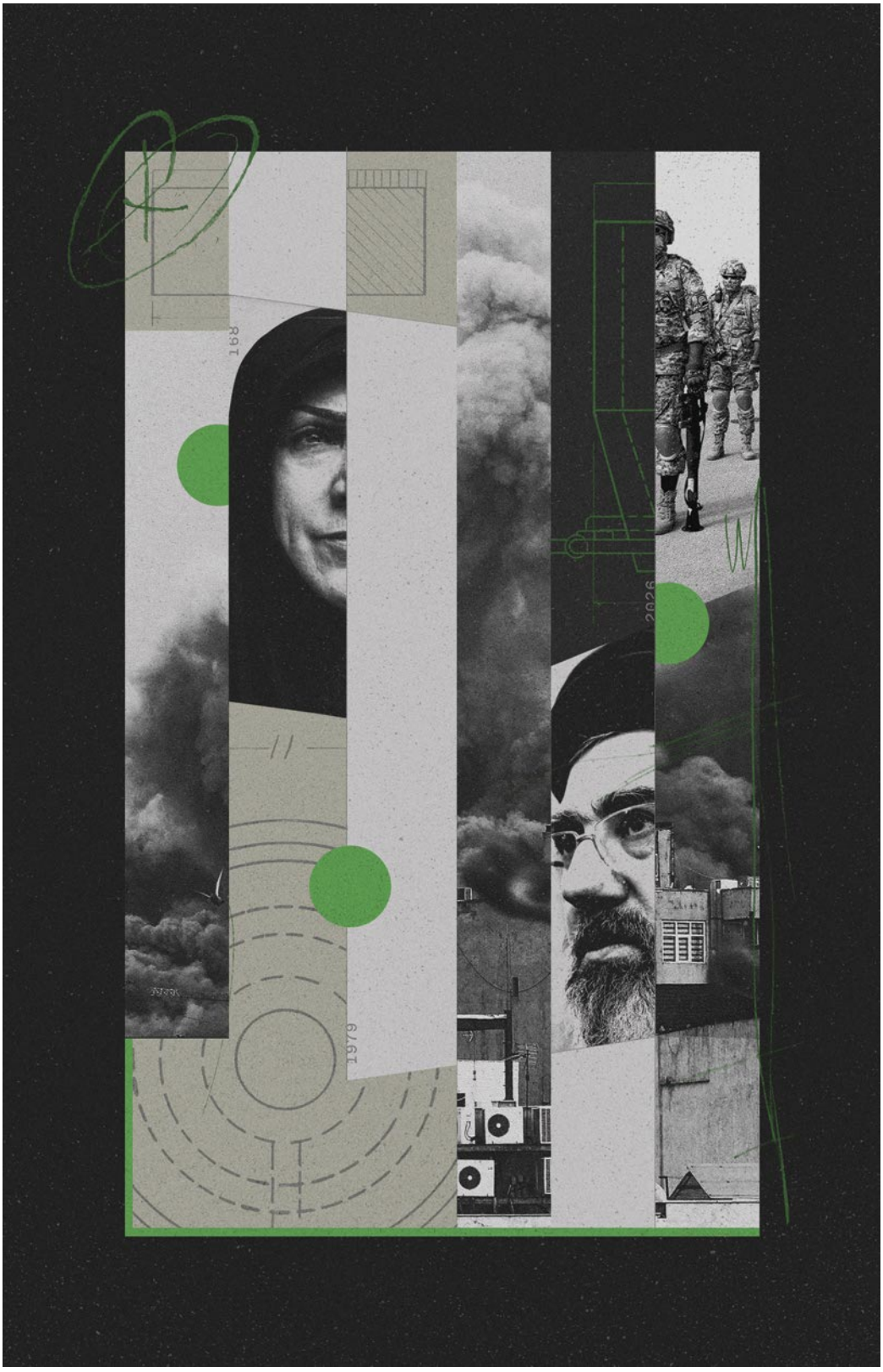

Illustration by Michaela Staton

offing. The war's initial aim—to deliver a death blow to the Islamic Republic—has proved unattainable.

Rather than breaking Iran, the crucible of war has transformed it in unanticipated ways. To survive and establish new strategic advantages, the Islamic Republic had to adapt and innovate, changing how it waged war, ran the state, and managed society. And it had to do so with unprecedented speed. Tehran is now confident in what it has achieved and determined to consolidate those gains at home and abroad. The war has given rise to a new Iran, one that will reshape the Middle East and influence the course of geopolitics for years to come.

A QUIET SUCCESSION

Sensing that the Iranian regime was weakened by Israel's 12-day war in June 2025 and a popular uprising in January 2026, Israel and the United States launched airstrikes on Iran on February 28. They expected a quick victory through targeted assassinations of Iran's leadership. But decapitation did not produce regime collapse. Instead, it opened the door for a new generation to take over.

Many Western observers view the new leadership that emerged during the war, which is dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as more ideologically hard-line and hawkish toward the United States and Israel. But that's not quite right. What truly distinguishes it is subtler and more consequential. Observers outside Iran focus on the handful of top leaders such as Mojtaba Khamenei, the new supreme leader; Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the speaker of parliament; and Ahmad Vahidi, the commander of the IRGC. More important, however, is the transformation in the ranks below them: a new generation of IRGC commanders and civilian security officials who came of age after the 1979 revolution. They now hold key decision-making positions, and their nationalistic outlook on statecraft and security is redefining the Islamic Republic.

The worldviews of the founding generation of the revolution, including former leaders Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei, were forged by their long opposition to the U.S.-backed rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and years spent in the shah's prisons or in exile. Those at the helm today, Iran's second generation of revolutionaries, including Mojtaba Khamenei, Ghalibaf, and Vahidi, were teenagers and young adults during the Iran-Iraq War. Their worldview was hardened in the trenches of the longest conventional

war of the twentieth century. Those in the new managerial class of Iran's political and armed forces, the third generation of the revolution, know nothing but postrevolutionary Iran. The members of this officer class of the armed forces and the IRGC, along with their affiliated security institutions, adopted a structured, technocratic culture and a strategic outlook built around national defense, not revolutionary ideology. And they govern with the confidence of leaders who believe they have successfully defended Iran in two wars against militarily superior powers (last year's 12-day war and this year's far larger conflict), achieving something the revolution had only promised: a genuine weakening of American power in the Middle East.

The new generation has separated revolution from statecraft.

The previous supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed on the first day of the February war, was the product of the intellectual and political currents of prerevolutionary Iran in the Pahlavi era. His political education had been honed by debate with secular nationalists, leftists, and liberals who shared his goals of toppling the monarchy and standing up to Western imperialism. Once in power, the revolution's leaders imposed their ideology on Iran, but they never overcame the insecurity inherent in asserting the right to rule over a society that would not wholly submit.

The new generation knows none of this firsthand. Most of them were children at the founding of the Islamic Republic and were raised believing in its right to rule. These men did not fight their way to power; they came of age inside the institutions of power, taking their legitimacy as given. The insecurity that marked the founding generation—the constant need to prove that the revolution was real, its claims serious, the old elite truly defeated—is largely absent. They are not defending a revolution. They are administering a state.

This psychological distinction has enormous practical implications. When Ali Khamenei's generation confronted the world—in hostage negotiations, nuclear talks, regional confrontations—there was always an undercurrent of grievance, a voice rising in the rhetoric of historical injustice and Islamic vindication. It was powerful and real, but a strategic liability. It made them predictable, defensive, and prone to conflating the defense of their ideology with the defense of Iran's national interests, which did not always neatly align.

The new generation has separated revolution from statecraft. At home and abroad, it neither espouses revolutionary grandiosity nor advocates revolutionary activism. The new leaders are establishment actors: pragmatic, hardened nationalists operating with a clear-eyed assessment of Iran's capabilities and vulnerabilities. Unlike their predecessors, they can exercise strategic patience and act decisively. They look at Iran's weaknesses frequently and publicly—something the founding generation was too insecure to do honestly—and they treat them as problems to be solved. That instinct drove the changes Tehran made between the two wars.

BATTLE HARDENED

Before the U.S.-Israeli attack in June 2025, Iran's rulers had assumed they could indefinitely sustain a no-war, no-peace standoff with the United States and Israel. They were proved wrong, and the reckoning with that complacency began the moment the 12-day war ended. The new IRGC leadership expected the June cease-fire to collapse and another war to follow, possibly with the United States involved from the start. Iran's universities, research institutions, think tanks, and government bodies began hosting debates about lessons learned and changes required. More institutional change took place in those eight months than in the previous ten years combined. Many executive decisions on trade, agriculture, and management of economic and social services were decentralized from Tehran to provincial capitals. And the organizations overseeing propaganda, communication with domestic audiences, and information dissemination abroad underwent a generational overhaul. Institutional lethargy had long defined the Islamic Republic's bureaucracy; now it gave way to the imperative of rapid adaptation. In the process, the technocratic decision-makers took charge.

After Khamenei was killed in a U.S.-Israeli airstrike, the succession of his son Mojtaba was swift and remarkably orderly. The new generation that had emerged from the June 2025 war chose him in part because he had long championed them. Mojtaba was a member of the IRGC and fought in the Iran-Iraq War before entering the seminary to become a cleric. He later served at his father's side, overseeing the IRGC's transformation and the rise of its future leadership. Mojtaba's ascent confirmed and accelerated the generational transformation, producing not the institutional collapse Washington expected but its opposite.

The manner in which the elder Khamenei was killed, at his home rather than in a bunker, mattered enormously. The new leaders immediately framed his death as martyrdom, and that framing worked. Rather than demoralizing the system, Khamenei's assassination gave the new generation of leaders direction and purpose; their first act was to mobilize the Islamic Republic's rank and file around his death. That messaging also drew a larger segment of Iranian society to rally around the flag.

Iran's conduct of the subsequent war reflected the new generation's technocratic approach. The Islamic Republic had long operated through a chaotic maze of competing power centers, which produced unending internal debate and sclerotic inertia. But between the two wars, that chaos gave way to organizational discipline and resilience. A new Supreme Defense Council—led by the IRGC generals Abdolrahim Mousavi, Mohammad Pakpour, and Ali Shamkhani—was created to expedite military changes. Ghalibaf, a former IRGC general who became speaker of parliament in 2020, and Ali Larijani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, performed parallel roles in the civilian and economic bureaucracy, working through government ministries and municipal authorities. Veterans of the Iran-Iraq War, these men had learned to manage against insurmountable odds on the frontlines. Facing Iran's biggest challenge since the 1980s, the revolution's founding generation moved swiftly to reorganize statecraft around war. These older leaders oversaw the transition to the new generation, which quickly reorganized the scattered nodes of power into a coherent decision-making structure that could survive the loss of any single leader.

Iran's armed forces were reorganized into a web of operational commands resembling a guerrilla force more than a conventional military, with authority concentrated among like-minded cohorts rather than distributed among various factions. Larijani, Mousavi, Pakpour, and Shamkhani were all killed in subsequent Israeli strikes, but the resilience they had helped build was not diminished.

On the battlefield, Iran's armed forces applied the lessons of the June 2025 war with precision. They responded to the U.S.-Israeli assault that began in February 2026 with systematic salvos of missiles and drones designed to deplete U.S. and Israeli interceptor stockpiles across the region. They had concluded that their adversaries expected to destroy Iran's missile capability quickly and were not prepared for

a prolonged campaign. During the 2025 war, Israel had targeted the entrances to Iran's "missile cities," effectively sealing them and forcing Iran to launch mainly from eastern regions beyond Israel's reach. Iran responded by dispersing its missile launchers across its vast geography and embedding engineers inside the missile cities, alongside military personnel, to repair damaged launchers and entrances in real time. This enabled Iran to continue firing longer than Israel and the United States had expected.

The IRGC also deployed cheap drones to overwhelm U.S. radar systems and military positions across the Persian Gulf and Israel, impeding the bombing campaign and opening missile routes to targets all over the region. Drawing on the logic of asymmetric warfare—and on the experience of using human-wave attacks to overwhelm Iraqi positions in the 1980s—Iran dispatched swarms of Shahed drones. These cheap, expendable weapons degraded the air defenses protecting U.S. bases, as well as those of Washington's Arab allies, and opened corridors for precision missiles to strike high-value targets. The Iranian military had learned not just to absorb punishment but also to win strategic advantage by frustrating its adversaries' war aims.

A NEW BALANCE OF POWER

The most significant victory for the new generation of leaders is simply that their strategy worked. The state survived decapitation. It withstood the punishing U.S. and Israeli bombardment, asserted control over the Strait of Hormuz, and faced down a U.S. naval blockade. In the process, it expanded the battlefield into the Persian Gulf, inflicting heavy damage on 16 U.S. bases and rendering several inoperable. In March, Iraqi militias compelled the United States to abandon Camp Victory, a major U.S. military installation in Baghdad that U.S. forces had occupied since 2003.

Iranian attacks also created a crisis of confidence among the Gulf states. The United States had brought war to their cities and vital infrastructure and failed to protect them. Their economies became collateral damage. The breach of trust between Gulf capitals and Washington will outlast the immediate conflict. It remains an open question how many U.S. bases will be rebuilt and whether the United States or its Arab allies will see much use in them against an Iran that has shown it can control the Strait of Hormuz.

By closing the strait and targeting energy infrastructure, Iran imposed significant costs on global energy markets and trade. That offensive—combining drone swarms, a "mosquito fleet" of fast boats, and the threat of mines—demonstrated a capability that Washington had long dismissed. Tehran regards the resulting stalemate as a new balance of power. The U.S. naval blockade has squeezed Iran's economy, but at the cost of laying bare the strategic importance of Iran's grip on the strait. By shifting from air war to naval blockade, the United States in effect admitted that Iran had changed the battlefield on which the conflict would unfold.

Trump embraced the naval blockade as the silver bullet that would win the war, but it only put more pressure on the global economy. The stalemate implied greater strategic parity, which the Iranian leadership underscored by saying that the war would end only when the United States and Iran lifted their chokeholds on the Persian Gulf. Going forward, control of the strait, an undeniably vital global economic chokepoint, will serve Tehran as an economic lever and a deterrent against future attacks. For Iran's leaders, that newly realized power partly offsets costs it has incurred during the war, including the degradation of its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, and other setbacks it has endured in recent years, such as the loss of Syria as a strategic corridor after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which had been Iran's staunchest ally in the Arab world.

In Tehran's view, the United States' decades-long containment of Iran has come to an end. The new regional order will be defined less by American primacy than by multipolarity, with China an increasingly central player and Iran an integral rather than a marginal actor. Tehran intends to lock in these gains in any agreement that concludes the war. Its insistence on controlling the Strait of Hormuz and collecting tolls from passing ships, and its preconditions for talks—a cease-fire in Lebanon and an end to the U.S. naval blockade—reflect the leadership's belief that the war has shifted the balance of power in its favor. Iran's new rulers are negotiating accordingly.

STATECRAFT OVER IDEOLOGY

Iran secured these strategic gains by applying the lessons of the 12-day war with surprising swiftness. In June 2025, Iran found itself fighting war on Israel's terms. This time, it was determined to fight

on its own. Beyond the reorganization of the Iranian military, several specific developments stand out. One was Tehran's assault on information infrastructure. Iranian commanders understood early that they could not match U.S. and Israeli advantages in satellite intelligence, precision strikes, and integrated air defense. What they could do was frustrate U.S. and Israeli battlefield decision-making by creating gaps between what sensors observed and what commanders interpreted. Strikes on U.S. radar installations across the Persian Gulf degraded the early warning and targeting infrastructure underpinning U.S. and Israeli air operations in the region. Iran worked systematically to erode the adversary's technological edge rather than confront it directly.

Tehran regards the stalemate as a new balance of power.

Iran's seizure of the Strait of Hormuz was another major development. Closing the strait had long been discussed in Tehran as a practical option—and long dismissed in Washington on the grounds that it would hurt Iran's own exports. Besides, U.S. officials reasoned, the United States' naval power could destroy Iran's surface fleet at the outset of the war, effectively removing Tehran's capability to close the strait. Iran proved all these assumptions wrong. For over four decades, Iran's military doctrine had centered on asymmetric warfare designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of U.S. and Israeli conventional forces. It did not need a traditional navy to close the strait. Using drones, fast boats, and the threat of mines, it exercised control over the strait—calibrating pressure methodically, sustaining it for weeks, and avoiding the full confrontation it was not prepared to win.

The Strait of Hormuz is now understood by all parties as an Iranian asset rather than an open sea-lane backed by an American guarantee. "Sanctions relief is not important for us anymore because we know it won't come, and even if it comes it won't be long-lasting," one Iranian analyst told us. "We're not making the same mistakes as before. Now managing Hormuz is the key." This represents a fundamental reorientation of Iran's economic strategy—away from pursuing reintegration into the Western-led financial system, which the new generation considers unattainable, and toward leveraging Iran's command of critical geography.

The war has also compelled Tehran to deepen its tactical alignment with China, building something closer to a strategic partnership. The Iranian leadership has concluded that there is no path to normalization with the United States but that it cannot face U.S. and Israeli pressure alone. Beijing, Tehran believes, sees a resilient Iran as a worthy and proven ally. "Our Chinese friends believe that Iran's international position has improved since the war began," Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, said in May after meeting his Chinese counterpart in Beijing. "A new era of cooperation between Iran and China lies ahead." Faced with the eventual task of rebuilding after the war, Iranian leaders are more open than ever to considering China as their primary external partner for reconstruction and economic recovery.

Tehran's communications campaign during the war marked another break with the past. The Iranian government's messaging through media and diplomatic channels demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of global audiences. Iranian embassies posted and shared viral content on social media, including animated music videos featuring Lego figures, that drove public conversation far beyond the Middle East. Iran's framing of the war reached, and persuaded, audiences in the Arab world, Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and even in the United States and Europe. Iran's strategic communication reflects the same technocratic dexterity that has characterized the military campaign.

Finally, Iranian leaders have come to understand that economic malaise is the greatest threat to their political stability. The lesson they drew from recent nationwide protests is that economic grievance acts as a force multiplier for the opposition. No sooner had the cease-fire been announced in April than the government moved ahead with an economic reform package, ending a number of subsidies and politically protected programs, a move that the leadership justified as necessary for managing the economic fallout of the war. The rush to publicize infrastructure reconstruction projects—bridges, railways, hospitals—signals that the government is moving toward a new social contract, one that will rest on demonstrated competence rather than ideology. The IRGC has made a public show of its technocratic capabilities on the battlefield. Whether it can bring the same efficiency to managing the economy is the question Iran's new leaders are now asking themselves.

THE NATIONALIST TURN

In the aftermath of the mass uprisings and the subsequent massacre of protesters in January 2026, Iranians appeared united against the regime. The country's politics were defined then by the rupture between a restless population tired of isolation and the deepening pain of U.S. economic sanctions and an increasingly unpopular and embattled government. The war has complicated that picture.

The war's destruction has been vast: public infrastructure, factories, schools, hospitals, historic monuments, and even entire neighborhoods lie in ruins. As Israeli and American bombs and missiles pummeled the landscape, Trump threatened to arm separatists, redraw Iran's borders, crush its economy, and annihilate its civilization. Together, these military and rhetorical assaults provoked a nationalist reaction that cut across political divisions. Public anger toward the regime has not disappeared. The grief, frustration, and accumulated resentment of decades of misrule and repression remain. What has changed is the political landscape in which those feelings find expression. Dissent is now refracted through a national struggle against a foreign enemy that Iranians compare to Alexander the Great, who conquered the Persian Empire in the fourth century BC; the Arab armies that invaded in the seventh century AD; and the Mongols, who came six centuries after that.

Contrary to American and Israeli expectations, the war has not sparked street demonstrations. The longer it went on, the less the regime appeared threatened by public uprisings. Iranian society mobilized not against the state but alongside it, holding daily rallies across the country, forming human chains to protect power plants, and gathering on bridges threatened by Trump. The sharp divide between state and society that had characterized Iran in January blurred—not through persuasion or repression, but through the shared experience of living through the bombing and witnessing its destruction.

According to a Bloomberg analysis, two-thirds of the targets struck in Tehran before the cease-fire were residential, commercial, and other civilian buildings. In interview after interview, Iranians described explosions that reverberated through their bodies night and day, leaving deep psychological wounds. To them, the Iranian armed forces were no longer the oppressors but the defenders. A chant heard

at rallies across Iran to cheer on Iran's missile and drone strikes captured the shift in mood: "Strike, for you strike so well." As the Iranian philosopher and dissident Mohammad Mehdi Ardebili said in Tehran during the fifth week of the war: "In this moment in time, the Islamic Republic and Iran are one and the same. If the Islamic Republic falls, Iran falls."

The sentiment extended to how the war was managed at home. Iranians noted, sometimes with surprise, that after weeks of bombardment and a naval blockade, there were no food or fuel shortages, and daily life continued largely uninterrupted. "Besides the bombs, it didn't feel like we were at war," one Tehran resident told us. "If the Islamic Republic can always manage society this efficiently, we wouldn't have the number of complaints we usually have about them." Such observations are not endorsements, but they do reflect a change in how Iranians view their leaders.

The government's Internet shutdowns intensified this dynamic. When the government cut off outside information as a defense against U.S. and Israeli intelligence operations, Iranians were unhappy but had little choice but to turn to the domestic intranet and media. The blackout eliminated diaspora media and social media directed at mobilizing dissent, producing a different kind of national conversation. New and more complex perspectives took root, including about the IRGC, the security threats facing Iran, and what the country has built and must defend. "I always ignored or dismissed what the Revolutionary Guards or the governing system had to say about Israel or the United States," said a longtime civil society organizer who had been repeatedly interrogated for their activism. "But these past few weeks, I only have access to internal Iranian messaging apps and news apps, and we've had to consider their positions and see the reality of being attacked on a daily basis." A university professor told us: "The country has entered a national war, and a new identity is being forged."

"ARE YOU IRANIAN ENOUGH?"

The Islamic Republic has always sought a social contract with its population, but the terms have shifted dramatically across its history. In the early years, that compact was based on revolutionary transformation and the redistribution of wealth. In the 1990s, it shifted to economic growth and limited social openings

in exchange for political quiescence. Two decades ago, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad channeled oil revenues to the poor in exchange for loyalty to official ideology. His successor, Hassan Rouhani, promised economic growth through a nuclear deal and sanctions relief. All these efforts failed to create a stable relationship between state and society, to varying degrees and for different reasons.

What is now on offer is a nationalist-technocratic bargain, in which state legitimacy rests on a demonstrated ability to defend the country and rebuild it. The terms are national, not Islamic. State media is producing content that normalizes images of women with and without the hijab standing side by side, frames Iranian identity as cultural rather than purely religious, and reaches toward the parts of society that had most thoroughly rejected the Islamic Republic, such as the youth and the urban middle class.

This is not liberalization; in fact, the regime continues to crack down hard on political dissent. But the state now acknowledges that it needs a social base far larger than Islamic ideology alone can provide. Increasingly, the Islamic Republic looks less like a theocracy and more like a right-wing nationalist authoritarian state. Islamic ideology persists, but it is subordinated to the imperative of national cohesion. The test of political fealty is no longer "Are you Islamic enough?" but "Are you Iranian enough?" The mosque is still present, but the dominant political symbol on necklaces and lapel pins, worn by the young and old, is now the country's map. Government rallies for the defense of the homeland are drawing even critics of the regime, some of whom paid a heavy price for their dissent in the past. These gatherings have become focal points for a nationalism centered on preserving Iranian civilization and celebrating survival with dignity in the face of overwhelming force.

The leadership understands that this is a unique and potentially fleeting moment. The same society that protected the power plants will return to its grievances once the immediate threat recedes. The Iranian people's anger over repression, economic mismanagement, and mistreatment of women and minorities has been subordinated by war, not dissolved. The state's concessions on social issues—the de facto relaxation of hijab enforcement, tolerance of concerts and women driving motorcycles—represent an attempt to make wartime unity durable before the political tide turns. Whether they

are sufficient to fundamentally alter the relationship between state and society remains to be seen.

For Iran's rulers, addressing economic grievances will be essential once the war ends. Washington assumes that Tehran remains interested in negotiating for sanctions relief. But the IRGC is not counting on diplomacy; it no longer believes the United States will ever lift sanctions. Rather, it seeks a deal that ends the war, consolidates Iran's gains, and paves the way for economic dividends from taxing maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.

Iranian society mobilized not against the state but alongside it.

Washington interprets this new posture as obduracy born of ideological rigidity and factional rivalry in Tehran. "Unfortunately, the hard-liners with an apocalyptic vision of the future have the ultimate power in that country," U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in April. "Our negotiators aren't just negotiating with Iranians," he added. "Those Iranians then have to negotiate with other Iranians in order to figure out what they can agree to, what they can offer, what they're willing to do, even who they're willing to meet with." Vice President JD Vance echoed the sentiment in May. "Maybe the Iranians themselves aren't quite clear in what direction they want to go," he said. "They also are just a fractured country."

Rubio and Vance are wrong. Tehran's defiant approach reflects neither ideological rigidity nor factional infighting. Instead, it demonstrates Iran's newfound confidence and the lessons learned from the war and previous rounds of talks. The country's leaders understand that the United States is seeking to get from talks what it could not achieve in war and that Washington is not interested in a deal but in Iran's surrender. Twice before, last June and in February, talks with the United States were interrupted by U.S. and Israeli strikes. And after a collapse in talks in Islamabad on April 12, Washington immediately imposed a naval blockade, followed by another demand for Iran's unconditional surrender. Iranian leaders already claim they have won the war. They are not prepared to forfeit the gains they have made or to return to the containment cage they occupied before the war. This self-confidence—rooted in the belief that the war has empowered Iran rather than weakened it—is informing their international outlook. It is also central to

the legitimacy they seek at home. Their diplomatic endgame must reflect what Iran's defiance won in the war.

THE MULTIFRONT DOCTRINE

Iran's pronounced turn to nationalism at home does not mean that Tehran will abandon its regional allies. It will not fundamentally renegotiate relationships with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. But it will manage them with more strategic discipline and less ideological romanticism. The new Iranian leadership will not sacrifice Iran's interests at the altar of revolutionary solidarity. These alliances will be deployed as part of a coherent regional strategy designed to sustain Iran's strategic depth against sustained U.S. and Israeli pressure.

Iranian strategists have concluded that it was a mistake, during the war in Gaza, to allow Israel time to fight the different nodes of Tehran's "axis of resistance" one by one. The U.S.-Israeli strikes over the past year followed directly from that failure of coordination. But in February, having learned its lesson, Iran quickly activated Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraqi militias simultaneously, creating a second front for Israel in Lebanon, expanding the war across the region, and compelling the United States to close Camp Victory in Iraq—which Tehran views as validation of its multifront doctrine.

Iranian commanders maintain their regional network not out of ideological desire to project power, but from the calculation that Iran cannot be fully sovereign as long as it faces military threats and economic strangulation by the United States and Israel. Iran's insistence that negotiations with the United States are contingent on a cease-fire in Lebanon, and that a final agreement must end war on all fronts and reflect Iran's strategic gains, illustrates this expansive view of regional defense. U.S. and Israeli policy, in Tehran's analysis, aims at Israeli hegemony across the Middle East—a goal that requires a weak and broken Iran.

The axis of resistance, once dismissed by many Iranians as charity for an ideological cause, is now understood by a larger segment of the population as an instrument of national defense. Iran's aim to prevent the United States from rebuilding its damaged radar installations in the Persian Gulf is another expression of the same logic—a deliberate effort to degrade the early warning infrastructure that has underpinned U.S. military dominance in waters Iran regards as its strategic backyard.

A NEW ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The war has been a crucible, forging a new iteration of the Islamic Republic and the first major generational shift since its founding. Power no longer resides with the founders. The second generation now runs military and political affairs while the third and fourth direct communications and international outreach.

In its first years under Khomeini, the Islamic Republic was a revolutionary state: organized around ideological transformation, legitimized by the charismatic authority of the supreme leader and his claim to implement God's will, and oriented in foreign policy toward exporting the revolution. After Khomeini's death, in 1989, on through the reform era and the hard-line consolidation under Khamenei, the republic was a postrevolutionary state perpetually negotiating between its founding ideology and the demands of governance. The leadership managed an increasingly skeptical population through repression, patronage, and limited openings. It saw resistance to American influence as an anti-imperialist imperative, but it was still, above all, an Islamic republic, ruled by the founding generation and animated by its internal battles.

The republic born of the U.S.-Israeli wars is defined less by ideology than by nationalism, less by revolution than by statecraft, less by clerical charisma than by the confidence and technocratic ethos of a new officer class. In comparative terms, it resembles the military-led nationalist states of the twentieth century—Turkey under the later Kemalists, Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser—in which ideology persisted but was subordinated to national interest and the imperatives of state power.

This turn away from dogma and toward pragmatic statecraft does not make the Islamic Republic more benign. Nationalist security states are often brutal to their own people and destabilizing to the international order. The emergent Islamic Republic will remain highly authoritarian. But the categories that Western analysts have often used to describe its various factions—hard-liners versus moderates, ideologues versus reformists—will be less accurate than ever. The priorities of the new Islamic Republic, and how it pursues them, will be shaped by the specific experiences of its two wars with Israel and the United States: the losses Iran sustained, the confidence its leadership gained, and the new social contract the fighting has made necessary and possible.

Heartland vs. Rimland

The Battle Lines in the War for the Next Global Order

MICHAEL BECKLEY AND HAL BRANDS

At first glance, today's strategic map seems familiar. A bloc of land-based powers, clustered around the center of Eurasia, is challenging a liberal, maritime order headed by an offshore superpower. China and Russia, reinforced by Iran and North Korea and ringed by autocracies from Belarus to Myanmar, now occupy the role that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and the Soviet Union each once held—continental empires seeking to dominate Eurasia and project power globally. The United States, like the United Kingdom before it, remains the only actor capable of anchoring a great arc of coastal and maritime countries across North

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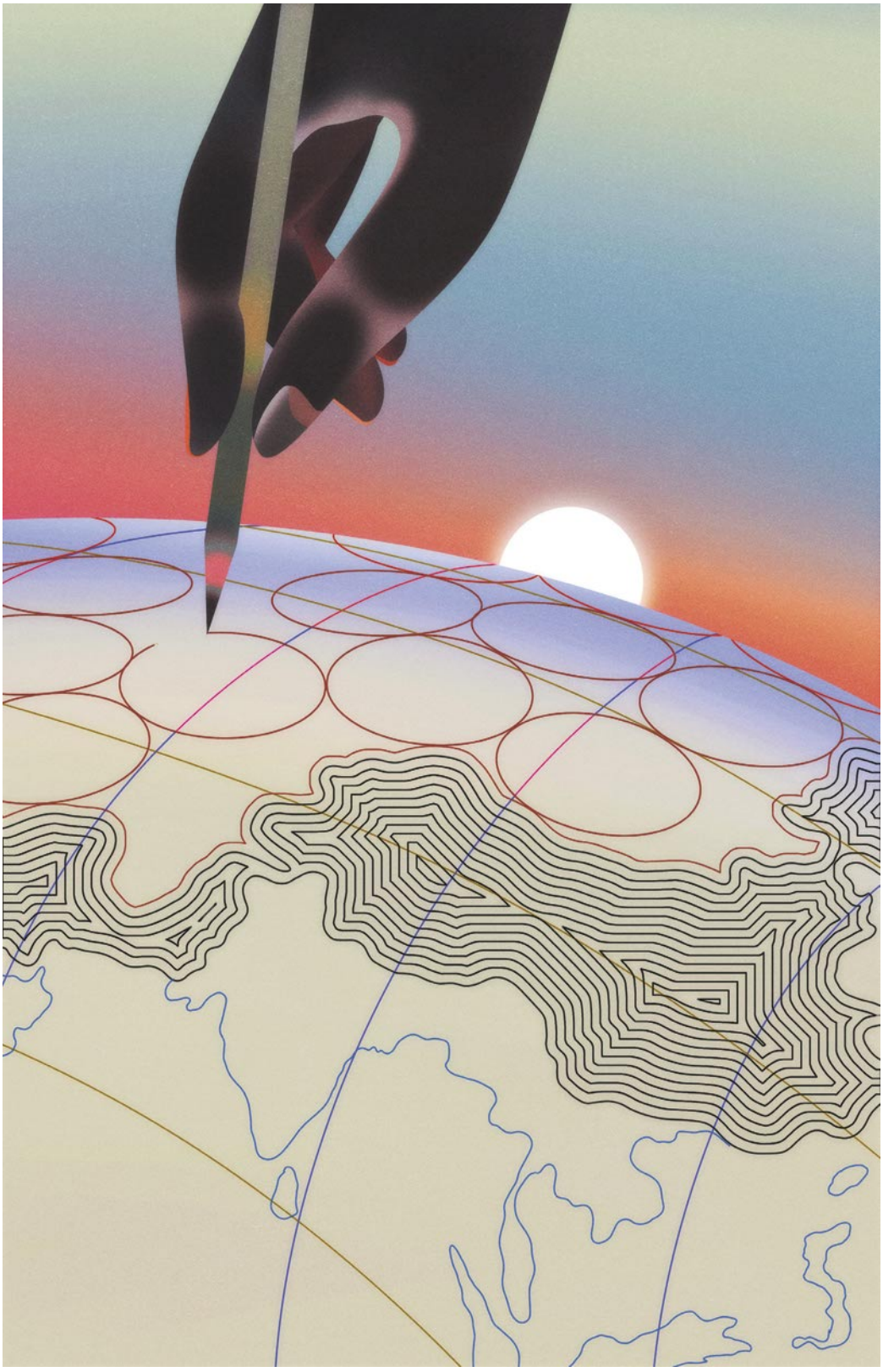

Illustration by Ibrahim Rayintakath

America, Europe, and East Asia that hem in the Eurasian supercontinent. The rhythm of geopolitics repeats itself: an autocratic axis, emerging from the continental heartland, seeks to rupture rimland barriers that buffer the wider world.

The heartland of today, however, is not a mere replica of its predecessors. It isn't a single empire marching across Eurasia but a loose league of revisionists motivated by a shared loathing of liberal ideals and American power. These countries cannot steamroll vast regions as Napoleon and Hitler once did. Instead, they wield modern tools—cyberattacks and digital disinformation campaigns, precision-guided arms and nuclear-tipped missiles—that afford them the power to weaken opposing rimland alliances and even to strike the United States itself. Most critically, these Eurasian autocracies are connected. They expand by laying cables and signing contracts as much as by deploying columns of tanks; they weaponize global interdependence to weaken the rimland order from within. China anchors this new heartland, seeking global power on land, through its Belt and Road Initiative; at sea, in a record-busting military buildup; and in the digital cloud, through telecommunications networks, payment platforms, and surveillance systems. Together, these offensives imperil rimland dominance by linking China's growing virtual empire to old-fashioned terrestrial designs.

Yet this heartland has a built-in contradiction: it is at once fierce and feeble. Its core—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—can wield powerful coercive leverage, generating acute crises through cyberattacks, nuclear brinkmanship, and opportunistic military probes. But it still lacks the economic and technological strengths to prevail in a generational rivalry over a countervailing, U.S.-led coalition.

The rimland coalition is unmatched in power but dangerously fractured in purpose. The United States sits atop a patchwork of regional security webs, economic and technology clubs, and values clusters. This distributed empire is open and adaptive but also vulnerable to drift and division. Adversaries have been able to exploit the openness of Western markets, institutions, and technologies, and globalization has weakened the domestic consensus that underpinned rimland cohesion. Allies sheltered by American power have become dependents rather than force multipliers, with some now viewing U.S. unilateralism as a greater threat than the heartland aggressors themselves. The United States has become an ambivalent protector,

prone to protectionist and sometimes predatory impulses. Tensions over the war in Iran have reflected this breakdown, as several allies withheld support or openly distanced themselves from U.S. action rather than rallying behind it. The result is a rimland beset by internal discord, while heartland autocracies remain united by their desire to revise the status quo.

The challenge for Washington is to rebuild a rimland order that is suited to an age when power runs through both networks and territory. This means not only keeping hostile armies behind their borders but also keeping heartland autocracies from hijacking globalization. A modern rimland strategy must fuse the loose web of coalitions into a system that governs interdependence, strengthens free societies, and protects against coercion. Only the United States can lead this new order, but to do so, it must resist its own inward, illiberal reflexes. Otherwise, the heartland will rewire the world for its own ends.

HEARTLAND OF DARKNESS

For centuries, autocratic states have sought to consolidate the world's largest landmass against maritime coalitions that try to keep Eurasian power fractured and contained. The most recent of these clashes, the Cold War, was the purest version of this pattern. The Soviet Union was a hulking land power with an empire that stretched from Germany to the Pacific. Soviet armies and subversion were constant threats to the Eurasian margins. The United States answered by forging ocean-bridging alliances to secure Eurasia's dynamic peripheries, especially Western Europe, East Asia, and, later, the Middle East. It isolated Moscow's heartland empire militarily, politically, and technologically and integrated friendly countries into a free-world economy with trade routes and supply lines secured by American power. This rimland coalition contained the hostile heartland until it crumbled. It created a new global architecture of power dominated by democracies, and it is again under threat.

A new team of Eurasian autocracies is now vying for primacy. A neoimperial China aims for supremacy across Asia and beyond. A vengeful Russia seeks to overturn the European security order and reclaim its role as a heartland superpower. A weakened but still ambitious Iran clashes violently with Washington and its allies in the Middle East. A provocative North Korea bolsters its ambitions in Northeast Asia with far-reaching military capabilities. Collectively,

these revisionists occupy huge swaths of the Eurasian supercontinent. They are all driven by intense hostility to the power and democratic purpose of the rimland world. As they cooperate more closely, they revive the nightmare of a Eurasian axis that colludes against its foes.

These autocracies are deepening their economic, financial, and technological ties. Chinese microchips and machine tools now underpin the Russian economy, and Chinese money and technology are helping Russia develop the Arctic. Russian companies raise money in Hong Kong, and Russian oil flows to Beijing. The regimes in Moscow and Tehran have cooperated to expand the International North–South Transport Corridor, which connects Russia to Asia via the Caspian Sea and Iran.

This autocratic power combination extends to the military realm. Iranian drones, North Korean missiles and troops, and Chinese dual-use goods (which can be used for both military and civilian purposes) have sustained Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. Russia sells advanced military tools, including high-end air and missile defenses and lethal submarine-quieting technology, which turbocharge the dangers posed by Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Their coordinated production of drones, missiles, helicopters, and other capabilities is creating an increasingly integrated military-industrial bloc committed to shattering the rimland order. Tehran used a Chinese-built spy satellite and Beijing-based satellite stations to surveil and strike U.S. bases in the Middle East during its war with Washington. Chinese networks supplied Iran with missile-fuel precursors, and Russian targeting data aided Iranian attacks.

The political geographer Halford Mackinder warned at the turn of the twentieth century that heartland aggressors would use mastery over Eurasia to embark on global offensives. Amid the vicious combat of World War II, the political scientist Nicholas Spykman argued that the United States must hold the globe in balance by keeping Eurasia's vital, amphibious rimlands secure. Both thinkers would recognize today's contours of conflict. Yet the present challenge is more nuanced and pernicious than those that came before.

TRANSACTION FEES

The Eurasian axis is not a unitary empire of the sort the Soviets aspired to run, nor is it a full-fledged alliance. It is a syndicate of sanctioned regimes bound mostly by shared grievance. The Leninist

party-state in Beijing, the neofascist regime in Moscow, the family racket in Pyongyang, and the militant theocracy in Tehran share little ideology beyond a common hatred for their rimland rivals. They are not pursuing one collective global revolution but distinct and ultimately divergent imperial projects rooted in each country's history and traditions. Today, China and Russia are strategic partners that, in Chinese leader Xi Jinping's words, fight "back to back" against the liberal, U.S.-led world. But they may soon discover that they both cannot dominate the Arctic, Central Asia, and other places where their visions of greatness collide.

This limits heartland solidarity. China's and Russia's responses to the Iran war showed the pattern clearly: they were willing to help Tehran with intelligence and military-technological aid but not willing to risk a wider clash by coming directly to Iran's defense. Likewise, when U.S. commandos seized Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January, Beijing and Moscow sent little more than hopes and prayers. These are transactional partners, not allies committed to a common defense.

Yet this dynamic also minimizes the risk of an ideological meltdown. Rather than bicker over questions of orthodoxy and heresy, revisionist powers can focus on the strategic transactionalism—trade, sanctions proofing, military-technological cooperation—that fortifies them against common foes. The heartland powers' effective absence of ideology helps them avoid isolation by enabling flexible partnerships with anti-American autocracies in Belarus, Cambodia, Cuba, and Myanmar; ambivalent swing states such as India and Saudi Arabia; and developing countries that are dissatisfied with a world dominated by the West.

None of today's revisionists can simply smash Eurasia, as their predecessors did. Russia has moved at less than a snail's pace in subjugating eastern Ukraine. China would struggle against the barriers to conquering Taiwan, as long as that island enjoys Washington's protection. Yet this weakness also makes Beijing appear less existentially menacing to countries beyond its immediate reach, complicating U.S. efforts at containment. And today's Eurasian autocrats boast assets their forebears lacked—namely, the ability to disrupt the alliances that bind rimland states to Washington and even to strike at the offshore superpower itself.

Chinese and Russian cyberattacks threaten critical U.S. infrastructure and could immobilize the United States in a crisis. In 2021,

a Chinese cyber-espionage group dubbed "Volt Typhoon" was compromising critical American infrastructure, including water utilities and energy grids. That same year, Russian hackers shut down the flow of fuel in the Colonial Pipeline in the eastern United States, creating gasoline shortages. Beijing's and Moscow's antisatellite capabilities jeopardize the military communications infrastructure that lets the Pentagon project power globally. Vast arsenals of missiles and other precision-guided munitions give China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea the power to unleash devastation on U.S. partners—and to bloody U.S. forces that might rush to their rescue. In March, an Iranian drone and missile barrage damaged U.S. aircraft at an air base in Saudi Arabia. Tehran hit U.S. diplomatic and military facilities from Jordan to Bahrain, underscoring how even a weak revisionist state can menace the United States' far-flung bases. That's just a preview of what might await Washington in the western Pacific: Beijing now boasts the largest ground-based missile force in the world.

The Eurasian heartland is at once fierce and feeble.

Growing nuclear arsenals—paired, in China's case, with delivery systems such as hypersonic glide vehicles that can evade defenses—can further raise the price of U.S. intervention by threatening coercive strikes against U.S. bases or the homeland. By the mid-2030s, Washington will face nuclear peers with revisionist aims at both ends of the supercontinent. Although the United States' foes can't conduct a new Eurasian blitzkrieg, they have the tools to fracture rival coalitions and to facilitate local aggression—around Taiwan or the Baltic Sea, for instance—that tilts the military balance in rimland regions.

Then there are the economic tools of heartland coercion. China can choke its rivals by cutting off rare earths—it mines roughly 60 percent of the world's supply and processes more than 80 percent—as well as electric vehicle batteries or pharmaceutical precursor chemicals. It has also made a generational effort to insert itself in the arteries of globalization—telecommunications networks, undersea cables, trade and shipping companies—as a source of strategic strength.

Russia has similarly used energy flows and transnational corruption to divide and weaken Europe. It employs advanced technology, opaque cross-border financial flows, and the free media and accessible political systems of open societies to subvert democracies.

Beijing and Moscow have sometimes worked together or in parallel in support of this divisive agenda: the combination of Chinese money and Russian meddling has effectively driven wedges within the European rimland by empowering illiberal actors and fomenting ethnic nationalism in the Balkans.

These powers make twenty-first-century connectivity a weapon in the enduring struggle for influence. And no revisionist state mixes historical ambition with modern methods as much as China.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY TRIAD

In 1904, Mackinder warned that a stable, ruthlessly run China could one day imperil "the world's freedom," because it combined rimland frontage with a vast Eurasian hinterland. In 1942, Spykman predicted that a "modern, vitalized, and militarized China" might command the western Pacific and become a "continental power of huge dimensions." The great minds of geopolitics have long feared Eurasian giants that can expand in two directions. They did not imagine that Beijing would reach for greatness in three.

Xi's Belt and Road Initiative revives the old logic of Eurasian consolidation, binding the supercontinent through infrastructure, dependence, and debt. All told, BRI outlays probably exceed $1 trillion, mostly in loans that give Beijing leverage as the world's biggest debt collector. Political influence and security ties follow: the string of ports Beijing has invested in, stretching from Thailand to Greece, could one day become the backbone of a global basing network. Ensuring access to Eurasian real estate and resources, whether Middle Eastern oil or Southeast Asian nickel, would make the supercontinent a Chinese stronghold—and a platform for expansion or coercion on a global scale.

China also means to blast through the rimland's maritime barrier. For decades, Beijing has been building an antinavy navy—an arsenal of antiship missiles, air defenses, and quiet submarines meant to lock U.S. vessels out of the western Pacific. In recent years, Xi has increasingly emphasized power-projection forces—such as a far-reaching navy with multiple aircraft carriers—that can bring Chinese influence into the open Pacific. The scale of this oceanic offensive is astounding: China's navy is now the world's largest by number of ships, and its coast guard dwarfs rival Asian fleets. Its doctrine of military-civil fusion allows it to tap into a shipbuilding industry that produces more than the rest of the world combined.

China's third offensive is in the cloud. Influence in the twenty-first century comes from ruling digital networks as much as ruling key geography, and progress on Beijing's Digital Silk Road is well advanced. Chinese surveillance gear is used on every continent. The Chinese companies Alipay and WeChat Pay lead the digital payments industry, servicing merchants in dozens of countries and currencies. U.S. sanctions have not stopped Chinese giants such as Huawei from surging in the 5G and 6G telecommunications race. Chinese AI models, including DeepSeek and Qwen, have broad appeal, especially in developing countries. Underpinning this campaign are China's efforts to control the materials, from semiconductors to rare earths, that make those technologies and networks run.

RIM OF FIRE

Washington's rimland coalition has led the world for decades. Today, it is being tested in every domain. The most urgent task for the United States is brutally simple: shore up military barriers to prevent heartland breakthroughs that could destabilize the status quo and enable greater gains down the line. Deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan requires more forward-deployed U.S. and allied combat power: long-range fires, submarines and surface ships, fifth-generation aircraft, integrated air and missile defenses, legions of aerial and maritime drones, and bases and weapons stockpiles dispersed across the so-called first island chain, the arc of islands that runs through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. In Europe, deterring Russia means turning NATO's eastern flank into a hard target, with permanent or persistent heavy forces, deep-strike and air defense networks, counterdrone capabilities, and resilient critical infrastructure from the Baltics to Poland and Romania. Effective deterrence also calls for a steady stream of arms for Ukraine.

For now, this task falls overwhelmingly on the United States and select frontline countries. Only Washington has the full suite of tools that make a high-end coalition defense viable. Although the most vigorous and vulnerable U.S. allies are rapidly rearming—especially the Baltic states, Finland, Germany, Japan, Poland, and Taiwan—the rimland rear has spent three decades demilitarizing and underinvesting in even basic capabilities. The heavy lifting will have to be done by U.S. forces and a thin forward line of local militaries, with the rest of the rimland offering sanctions, funding, and rear-area support.

U.S. President Donald Trump is right that allies should spend more on defense and contribute more to the common industrial base. But he is wrong to pair that pressure with his persistent yearning for American disengagement. If the United States flees Eurasia, the remaining rimland states will not be able to contain Beijing or even Moscow. Washington must show, through increased defense spending and forward deployments, that it will stand with those that stand up for themselves.

But shoring up local military capabilities is only the first move in a long contest. Recent wars have demonstrated how quickly supplies of shells, missiles, air defenses, and basic materiel dwindle—not in months but in weeks or days—and how decisive industrial output becomes once the shooting starts. A frontline deterrent could blunt the opening blows of a conflict in Europe or the western Pacific, but it could not, on its own, sustain a multiyear struggle in which production capacity, technological depth, and financial resilience determine which side bends first. That is where the broader rimland coalition comes in, because even Washington cannot indefinitely underwrite multiple major theaters while replenishing its own forces. The task, then, is to transform a dispersed collection of wealthy, anxious states into a functioning war-and-peace economy—a bloc that deters aggression in the near term and outproduces, outinnovates, and outlasts the heartland over time.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Despite Western defeatism, the rimland dwarfs the heartland in all meaningful measures of economic capacity. North America, the eurozone, and the major Indo-Pacific democracies of Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan produce roughly half of global GDP at market exchange rates. The maximalist heartland, by contrast—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, plus a clutch of aligned states such as Belarus, Cambodia, Cuba, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics—reaches only about 20 percent of global GDP. Even that figure is likely inflated: satellite-based research that measures nighttime light, a proxy for economic activity, suggests that China, Russia, and other authoritarian states overstated their growth rates by roughly 35 percent in the first two decades of this century.

The rimland also controls the core engines of global wealth creation. North America, the eurozone, and the major Indo-Pacific democracies

form a consumer market roughly three and a half times the size of the heartland's; the U.S. market alone is nearly twice the size of China's and Russia's combined. That imbalance shapes global trade flows, with more than half of all world trade occurring within the rimland and roughly two-thirds of heartland exports depending on rimland demand, as the economist Neil Shearing has shown. By contrast, only about one-sixth of rimland exports rely on heartland markets.

Members of the U.S.-aligned bloc issue the world's reserve currencies, run the main payment and transaction networks, and supply nearly all liquid, investment-grade assets. Roughly 85 percent of global foreign direct investment, 85 percent of portfolio investment, and 87 percent of foreign exchange reserves sit inside the bloc. These foundations give the rimland both lower borrowing costs in normal times and formidable coercive leverage in crises. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the G-7 froze $300 billion in Russian reserves and ejected Russian banks from the financial communications network known as SWIFT, forcing Moscow into financial dependence on China. During the Iran war, Washington sanctioned Tehran's weapons networks and shadow fleet of oil tankers and warned that banks handling illicit Iranian funds could be cut off from the U.S. financial system. China operates within this same system; about 75 percent of its overseas lending is dollar denominated, and most of its nondollar reserves are held in Europe.

Resources are another rimland strength. The United States has become the world's dominant producer of oil and gas, pumping roughly twice as much petroleum as Saudi Arabia or Russia and about 75 percent more natural gas than Russia, the second-place producer. That abundance has sharply reduced U.S. exposure to far-flung chokepoints: only about seven percent of the crude oil that the United States imports comes through the Strait of Hormuz, whereas roughly half of China's crude oil imports do. Meanwhile, North America went from being a marginal supplier of liquefied natural gas in 2016 to becoming the world's top exporting region in 2025. That shift has made the rimland more self-reliant. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow supplied 45 percent of EU gas imports; by 2025, that share had fallen to 12 percent. Russia's attempt to weaponize oil and gas did not leave Europe helpless but instead pushed the continent deeper into a U.S.-centered energy system. The Iran war has accelerated the trend. Roughly two months after the conflict began,

U.S. crude oil exports hit a record 6.4 million barrels per day, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Earlier in April, more than 65 empty supertankers—nearly triple the number in the week before the war began—were heading for U.S. ports to load crude. U.S. refineries were also expected to supply more than one-third of Europe's jet fuel in April, roughly double the January level.

The heartland has natural resources, too, but the rimland has a greater ability to translate resources into power. Russia sits on vast oil, gas, and mineral deposits, but many of them depend on outdated Soviet-era pipelines, overstretched rail networks, and ports and shipping lanes that are vulnerable to attack. In April, Ukrainian strikes on major export hubs forced Russia to cut its oil flows, exposing the fragile infrastructure beneath its resource power. China's edge in critical minerals is more formidable but less secure than it looks. Its chokehold is now being attacked across the supply chain, as U.S. and allied countries' diversification efforts have shifted from aspiration to state-backed mobilization. Tokyo pioneered this model in 2010, after tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands) led China to embargo all exports of rare-earth elements to Japan. Since then, Tokyo has leveraged public finance to connect Australian mining and Malaysian refining to Japan's downstream magnet industry, cutting its dependence on Chinese rare-earth imports from roughly 90 percent in 2010 to around 60 percent today. Washington is now scaling that approach, by using equity stakes, price floors, and new financing mechanisms to spur rare-earth production, and creating a state-owned U.S. Strategic Critical Minerals Reserve. Companies across the rimland, including MP Materials in the United States, Lynas in Australia, and Serra Verde in Brazil, are building a mine-to-magnet chain. China can still cause pain, but its threats to cut off access only accelerate the consolidation of rimland supply chains.

The most decisive asymmetry lies in advanced industry. The United States and its allies capture nearly 85 percent of global corporate profits in high-tech industries—the clearest indicator of where genuine value is created—according to calculations by Stephen Brooks and Ben Vagle. China's share is around six percent; Russia, Iran, and North Korea contribute virtually nothing. In 2022, American companies led 20 of the 27 industries listed in Forbes' Global 2000, which ranks the world's largest public companies, and the United States never

ranked below third in any industry. China led in only three: banking, construction, and raw materials extraction. In the sectors that matter most for modern power, U.S. and allied dominance is overwhelming; as Brooks and Vagle show, in 2022 the United States and its partners captured 99 percent of profits in aerospace, 96 percent in semiconductors, 90 percent in tech hardware, 85 percent in software, and more than 75 percent in biotech, telecom, chemicals, and capital goods. China's share of profits in each of these categories ranged from one percent to seven percent.

China's industrial scale is real: it produces about a third of global goods, and it leads output in electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, drones, ships, pharmaceuticals, and rare earths. But scale has not produced self-sufficiency. China's domestic production of chips covers less than one-fifth of demand, and U.S. export controls have sharply reduced China's access to high-end computing power. Even China's best AI models rely on open-source architectures designed in the West or patched-together clusters of low-end chips. The underlying picture is unchanged: China is a mid-tech manufacturing giant operating within a rimland frontier-tech ecosystem.

AT THE WATER'S EDGE

The rimland is not only larger and more advanced than the heartland; it is also diverse enough to operate as a self-contained global economy. The heartland, by contrast, remains a narrower coalition built around concentrated industries and fragile states. China and Russia have tried to compensate by cultivating partners outside both blocs, especially through loans and investment. But many of Beijing's big borrowers are heavily indebted commodity exporters with B-minus credit ratings, and its overseas lending has generated negative net transfers since 2019 as borrowers' defaults have mounted. These asymmetries matter in times of peace and war. In normal times, rimland firms set standards, control critical intellectual property, and capture the high-margin segments of global value chains. In conflict, those same networks become chokepoints the rimland can squeeze; high-end chips, precision tools, and other irreplaceable inputs cannot be stockpiled indefinitely or domesticated quickly. Today's heartland is more dynamic and connected than past adversaries, but it still lacks the economic depth and technological reach of the coalition arrayed against it.

And yet the rimland's great strength—its diversity—is also a weakness. A coalition that resembles a miniature global economy brings together states whose policies are motivated by very different vulnerabilities and risk tolerances. China inspires fear in India through aggression in the Himalayas, in Japan and Southeast Asia through maritime expansion, and in Australia through economic coercion. Russian missiles and energy shocks worry European countries. The heartland, on the other hand, has a simple, unifying aim: weaken the rimland order that constrains it.

Rimland powers also rely on a group of hinge states that are strategically indispensable yet structurally uncommitted. India cultivates close partnerships with both Washington and Moscow. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its defense ties to the United States while keeping Huawei embedded in its digital infrastructure. These countries have the resources, technological strengths, or other assets that can bolster rimland dominance, but they remain only quasi allies whose commitment is contingent at best.

China's edge in critical minerals is less secure than it looks.

Inside the rimland's Western core, democratic politics magnify coordination problems. Exporters, import-dependent industries, and ordinary citizens accustomed to cheap energy and goods make it difficult for politicians to take harder lines on China and Russia. Europe has a weak tech sector and lagging productivity, and its industries are exposed to both Chinese overcapacity and U.S. protectionism. Such structural limits push democratic allies toward hedging and delay. The United States, meanwhile, is indispensable but unreliable. Domestic polarization and cycles of populism feed unilateralist foreign policy impulses; economic heft encourages the belief that the country can prosper without careful alliance management or perhaps even extort those allies for narrow gains. During the Cold War, a nuclear-armed, ideologically expansionist Soviet Union imposed discipline on the rimland system. Today's heartland does not: Russia is brutal but limited, and China advances through economic coercion and gradual "gray zone" pressure—maritime harassment, military intimidation, cyber-operations, and other coercive actions designed to shift facts on the ground without triggering war. Without a singular existential danger, the rimland lacks the fear that once forced

democracies to subordinate parochial interests to shared strategy. It is materially dominant but politically weak.

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

The task is not to widen the rimland but to make it coherent. This means shifting from ad hoc coordination to more structured collaboration—shared production in key industries, interoperable technology networks, and defense industries that reinforce one another rather than operate in isolation.

The organizing principle is simple: redundancy without autarky. The rimland does not need to produce everything everywhere; it needs to ensure that every essential industrial and technological capability exists somewhere in the coalition. Instead of building one giant supply chain, the bloc should distribute critical functions across North American, European, and Indo-Pacific economies. Partners would follow common rules for investment screening, export controls, and countering Chinese overcapacity, so that private capital could flow naturally toward allied hubs rather than Chinese or Russian chokepoints.

This same logic applies to technology. The rimland's historical advantage is decentralized innovation: many independent centers of expertise compete, experiment, and scale breakthroughs faster than any state-driven rival. A coherent strategy would amplify that advantage, linking R & D ecosystems, coordinating restrictions on dual-use technologies, and ensuring that sensitive advances in AI, quantum, and biotech circulate within the coalition without leaking into heartland militaries.

This system also needs a cohesive defense industrial base. Today, allied militaries train together, but their factories often operate as if in different worlds. A stronger rimland would knit those bases into a networked defense economy that promotes the joint production of munitions and platforms and fortifies the undersea cables that anchor global finance and military command. The goal is a massive and distributed defense base: different states specializing in areas in which they are strongest but with interoperable outputs that reinforce collective strength.

This would achieve greater military staying power. A distributed defense industrial system—spread across North America, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific—would create surge capacity that no single antagonist could disable. It would also allow allies to distribute pressure:

when one region's stockpiles ran low or its factories were hit by cyberattacks, others could compensate. In this way, the rimland's economic and technological advantages could turn a coalition that is tactically exposed into one with strategic stamina.

This economic and military integration must be paired with tools for coercion. If China or Russia targeted one member with trade restrictions, willing partners could unleash synchronized tariffs, export controls, and emergency financial support. A permanent coordination board could calibrate penalties, enforce tech-security rules, and compensate states hit by retaliation. Instead of improvising responses, the bloc would rely on rehearsed tools and predictable escalation ladders that raise the costs of heartland aggression.

Closing China's backdoors is equally crucial. The U.S.-led coalition controls the machinery of modern industry, but only by coordinating rules of origin and content tracking can it prevent Beijing from routing critical inputs through India, Mexico, or Vietnam. Harmonized export controls and embedded geolocation standards would keep dual-use machinery from slipping into heartland militaries. A tiered system, with full access for compliant states, partial access for fence sitters, and suspension for violators, would anchor a flexible but disciplined order.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

None of this requires a formal alliance. Treaties are cumbersome, and unanimity creates veto players. What the rimland needs are aligned rules and coordinated enforcement, not shared sovereignty. Groups of willing states can move ahead on chips, undersea cables, long-range fires, or sanctions even when others hesitate. The system expands by accretion, not by grand bargains.

Nor should the rimland romanticize winning over the so-called global South. During the Cold War, most postcolonial states chose nonalignment, and the Western coalition prevailed anyway. That basic reality still holds. The U.S. economy alone is roughly 30 percent larger than the economies in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia combined. Countries in those regions are politically and economically divided. Many are tempted by China's lending and infrastructure but threatened by its industrial overcapacity and dumping. Developing regions will likely remain an arena of shifting case-by-case alignments, not a reliable coalition for Washington or Beijing.

For the rimland, the implication is simple. It must engage with countries in these regions opportunistically, not ideologically. What the coalition needs from these countries is specific and limited: secure access to critical minerals, diversified energy supplies, and complementary labor pools. Partnerships with them will remain transactional and fluid. The goal is not to convert them into allies but to offer credible economic alternatives when interests align and to ensure that China cannot dominate their markets or lock up resources at low cost.

The rimland should not romanticize winning over the global South.

All of this will require steady U.S. leadership of the sort that is in question today. The United States has its own continentalist impulses. As the world's strongest, most self-sufficient country, it may be tempted to pull back to its home region, using hemispheric dominance as a refuge in a disordered world. Or it could seek unilateral advantage by coercing its allies, rather than working to generate greater multilateral strength. Either impulse would prove fatal to rimland cohesion.

Only the United States can anchor the defense of endangered rimland regions with the economic weight and technological primacy to underpin a system of collective resilience and pressure. Only the United States can backstop the confidence partners need to take a stand against heartland coercion. Only the United States can be the central node in the network of flexible partnerships that will enable the rimland to outinnovate and outlast its foes. If Washington uses pressure and persuasion to catalyze collective action, as it did during the Cold War, it can fortify vital relationships. If it discards those relationships or uses them to extort tribute, it will bulldoze the barriers that have long impeded heartland aggression.

The heartland knows what it wants: a world carved into territorial spheres and controlled through industrial chokepoints that keep others dependent. With superior technology and richer markets, the rimland has the scale to stop that future. But those advantages mean little if they aren't organized. The question now is whether the rimland will act as a coherent center of power or remain a loose, vulnerable assemblage. The underlying balance of power still leans decisively in the rimland's favor. Whether the international order does as well will depend on whether the rimland can turn strength into strategy.

The Fault Lines in China's Power

America Must Build—and Use—Leverage Against Beijing

ELY RATNER AND NICK DANBY

The U.S.-Chinese trade war of 2025 lasted barely a month, but the strategic deficit it exposed had been festering for decades. On April 2, his so-called Liberation Day, U.S. President Donald Trump imposed sweeping tariffs on dozens of countries, including China, which suddenly faced average levies of nearly 75 percent. But while most governments struggled to respond, Chinese leader Xi Jinping was poised to retaliate. Two days later, Beijing not only announced comparable duties but also raised the stakes by introducing export controls on seven rare-earth elements that power everything from smartphones to fighter jets. Because China commands 90 percent of rare-earth processing worldwide, the move threatened severe disruptions to American manufacturing and the U.S. defense industrial base.

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Shaken by China's leverage, the Trump administration quickly folded, realizing that soaring U.S. tariffs were no match for Beijing's stranglehold on critical minerals. A temporary truce in May gave way to summer negotiations, which Beijing punctuated by further tightening its licensing rules in October, a clear signal that future controls could bite even harder. Weeks later, when the two leaders met in South Korea, Trump walked back his tariffs and shelved U.S. port fees targeting China's dominance in global shipbuilding, among other concessions. In return, Beijing offered a one-year reprieve from its rare-earth restrictions, which Washington knew could be reversed at any time.

Most of China's oil passes through vulnerable chokepoints.

This looming threat recast U.S. policy toward China. In the ensuing months, the United States softened its approach on issues important to Beijing, dialing back support for Taiwan and loosening controls on advanced technology. Reflecting an effort to avoid re-escalation, the Trump administration outlined its pursuit of "strategic stability" in the 2026 National Defense Strategy. China, meanwhile, had more than survived the confrontation. Beijing had reset the terms of the relationship in its favor, narrowing Washington's strategic options right through Trump's May 2026 visit to China.

It did not have to be this way. China's success in cornering the Trump administration was not simply a result of the United States' failure to secure its supply chains. It reflected a profound failure of U.S. strategy. As the scholar Thomas Schelling famously observed, "The power to hurt is bargaining power." Whereas Beijing had spent years identifying where it could squeeze Washington hardest and then built the capabilities to do so, the United States was not ready to exploit the anxieties that keep China's leaders up at night—even though there is no shortage of them.

At home, China's economy faces stiff headwinds: weak domestic demand, mounting local debt, a depressed property market, high youth unemployment, and an aging and shrinking workforce. Its military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is corrupt and untested, and the regime has grown increasingly reliant on repression, digital surveillance, and propaganda to maintain social control. Abroad, the country is locked in sovereignty disputes with most of its neighbors, touts North Korea as its only formal treaty ally, and remains heavily dependent on

the United States and its partners for energy, capital, industrial inputs, advanced technology, export markets, and the dollar itself.

This litany of liabilities foretells neither China's imminent collapse nor its inevitable decline. It does, however, suggest that Beijing is susceptible to strategic pressure. Yet the United States has too often failed to press on China's pain points or even develop options for doing so. When Xi called Trump's bluff, he laid bare this foundational gap in Washington's China strategy: the absence of competitive leverage over its foremost rival.

BLIND SPOT

This strategic deficit did not emerge overnight. U.S. policymakers in both parties have long avoided exploiting or deepening China's weaknesses, viewing such efforts as unnecessary or counterproductive, if not beyond the bounds of fair play. When Washington did consider serious economic or diplomatic pressure on China, it was often in service of other foreign policy priorities, such as enforcing sanctions on Iran or North Korea, rather than as part of a deliberate strategy to compete with Beijing. Recent moves against China's telecommunications and semiconductor sectors marked a welcome shift but remained too episodic and detached from a broader approach. Instead, successive U.S. administrations have largely focused on a combination of amassing military power, investing at home, building coalitions of like-minded allies, and respecting guardrails to prevent inadvertent escalation with China.

This approach may have served Washington well in an era of unrivaled American power, but it is insufficient to contend with a competitor that has demonstrated the will—and increasingly the capability—to challenge vital U.S. interests. Consider how few consequences Beijing has faced for its massive theft of U.S. intellectual property, its incessant provocations in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, its relentless cyber-intrusions into U.S. critical infrastructure, its economic coercion of American allies, and, more recently, its weaponization of critical minerals. In each instance, Washington's response has been modest, predictable, and ineffective at steering Beijing away from an aggressive and threatening posture.

China, by contrast, has been a clever practitioner of finding the gaps and seams in American power. Through industrial policy, anticompetitive trade practices, and forced technology transfers,

Beijing has exploited the U.S. market economy to accelerate its own development at the United States' expense. The PLA has pursued cyber-capabilities and space technologies, backed by an arsenal of missiles, with the express intent of challenging and eroding the U.S. military's ability to deploy and sustain forces in the Western Pacific. And it has leveraged the open Internet in the United States to target civilian infrastructure and siphon vast quantities of trade secrets and private data, including the 2015 hacking of the Office of Personnel Management that compromised the personal information of 22 million federal employees.

Xi's decision to weaponize critical minerals should clarify the way forward for Washington. The United States must surely do more to secure supply chains and reduce its reliance on China, as most policymakers and experts now agree. But many of those efforts will take years at best. Meanwhile, Beijing continues to sharpen its tools of coercion and is likely to find new targets to exploit faster than Washington can shield them. This means that a purely defensive approach—one that focuses only on "de-risking," self-sufficiency, and resilience—will not be enough. The United States must also be ready to go on offense.

THE ART OF THE SQUEEZE

Leveraging an adversary's vulnerabilities may sound aggressive or destabilizing, but the goal is not regime change or all-out confrontation. It is to protect and advance U.S. national interests through calibrated and proportional means. To avoid a scattershot approach, which would risk escalation and dilute the compounding power of coordinated pressure, the United States must follow a coherent and disciplined framework.

To start, policymakers should ask whether exploiting a particular weakness will afford the United States a substantial and sustained competitive edge. The vulnerabilities worth pursuing should be important to China's leaders and difficult for them to resolve. Beijing's own policy priorities offer such a road map. Xi has spent his tenure trying to shore up China's fragilities: corruption, domestic instability, excessive reliance on exports, and dependence on other countries for food, energy, and technology. Although he has made some headway, his continued spending of financial and political capital on these problems underscores how exposed China remains. It

also illuminates where American pressure is most likely to pay off. By accentuating existing insecurities, the United States can compel Beijing to do more of what it is already doing, but at greater expense and with lesser effect, ideally forcing it to divert resources away from other, more threatening initiatives.

The United States should also zero in on vulnerabilities that are susceptible to outside pressure. Not every Chinese weakness can be exploited. Demographic decline, for instance, may sap China's strength, but there is little the United States can do to accelerate or shape its trajectory. Instead, Washington should target vulnerabilities that its policy instruments can demonstrably affect. This requires assessing whether unilateral action will suffice and, if not, whether the United States can build a coalition to prevent, for example, "sanctions spoilers" from undermining U.S. pressure campaigns.

Finally, before putting a vulnerability in their sights, American policymakers should be confident that the expected returns outweigh the costs and risks. If they get this calculus wrong, it could harden Beijing's resistance, invite retaliation, or nudge the competition toward the conflict it is designed to prevent. Ethical concerns matter, too. Actions that inflict needless civilian suffering, such as aggravating China's food insecurity, could cross legal and moral lines and corrode Washington's standing with essential allies and partners.

SMALL YARD, UNFINISHED FENCE

Rather than inflicting indiscriminate pain, the aim of a competitive strategy is to apply sequenced and proportional pressure that builds and sustains Washington's advantages. To that end, the United States must operate across multiple time frames and prepare for multiple scenarios. It must start by constraining China's ability to threaten the United States. It must then prepare credible options for deterring Chinese escalation and aggression. And while doing both, it must devise ways to convert China's coercive strengths into weaknesses by exposing its malign and covert practices.

Most immediately, the United States must constrain China's ability to amass power and capabilities that could directly threaten vital U.S. interests. Washington has already devoted considerable attention to this objective, most notably by limiting China's access to advanced semiconductors. Without these chips, China cannot build or deploy AI systems, precision weapons, or the offensive cybertools

that would be integral to its military modernization. The prospect of recursive self-improvement—AI systems capable of autonomously enhancing their own capabilities—further raises the strategic stakes; whichever power reaches that threshold first could enjoy an enduring and compounding advantage, making the size of that lead as important as having one.

The critical nodes of the semiconductor industry remain outside Beijing's control, with U.S., Japanese, Dutch, and Taiwanese firms dominating each layer of production. And although China has been trying to onshore its semiconductor supply chain for more than a decade—to the tune of more than $150 billion—it has seen limited success: China's advanced chips still lag several years behind the frontier in scale, yield, and performance.

China's industrial base could be easily disrupted.

The Biden administration's "small yard, high fence" approach restricted China's access to advanced chips, chip-making tools, and related high-end technologies, while tightening outbound investment restrictions and export license requirements for certain foreign-made equipment produced with U.S. technology. Critics have charged that these controls accelerated China's technological self-reliance at the cost of U.S. corporate revenues. But that conclusion misses the bigger picture: Beijing had already resolved to establish its own technology base. The controls may have validated or even expedited that drive, but they also forced China to pursue its ambitions on worse terms. It had to spend more money, time, and effort to reproduce what its companies had once purchased abroad. Meanwhile, constraints on China's computing power hamstrung the development of its domestic AI models. This is textbook competitive strategy: get the rival to do more for less in the areas that matter most.

Yet the job is not done. China continues to leverage chip-smuggling networks, overseas data centers, and model distillation, a technique that exploits access to frontier AI models to replicate their capabilities. New policy measures should target the channels China uses to acquire restricted chips and supporting architecture, including shell companies and unlisted subsidiaries, as well as cloud-based access to U.S. computing power and servicing arrangements that keep older semiconductor manufacturing equipment operational. Equally urgent is synchronizing U.S. export restrictions with those of the

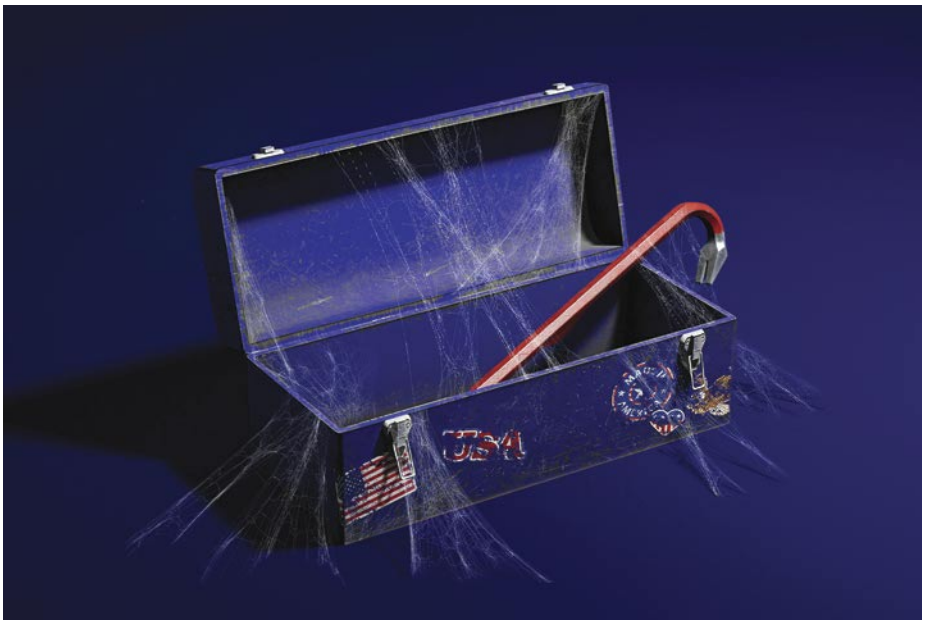
Netherlands and Japan, whose companies—ASML and Tokyo Electron—control critical chokepoints in the advanced semiconductor supply chain. Although both governments began strengthening their own policies in 2023, their controls on equipment sales, servicing, and subcomponent exports to Chinese fabrication plants and toolmakers fall short of U.S. restrictions. Washington should press The Hague and Tokyo to close these gaps. If diplomacy fails, it should consider invoking the Foreign Direct Product Rule, which extends the extraterritorial reach of U.S. export controls to restrict products made with U.S. software or technology.

At the same time, the United States should not unwind its hard-fought gains by licensing the export of advanced AI chips to Chinese companies, as the Trump administration did when it approved the sale of Nvidia's powerful H200. There is little strategic sense in restricting China's access to chip-making equipment while allowing the chips themselves to flow freely. Moreover, American AI labs and cloud providers are already computationally constrained, meaning advanced chips exported to China directly displace domestic capacity. Congress should codify stronger export restrictions to prevent any administration from trading away this decisive advantage for ephemeral gains.

OVEREXTENDED

China's dependence on foreign export markets gives the United States similar leverage. Its outsize manufacturing sector—which accounts for nearly 25 percent of GDP (compared with a world average of 15 percent)—is enabling China's military growth as well as its economic aggression. Nearly a third of all goods worldwide are made in China. This is not by accident: Beijing has turbocharged manufacturing with state subsidies and an undervalued currency to bolster employment and economic growth, build national champions, reduce foreign dependence, and dominate strategic industries. Today, China installs more than half of the world's industrial robots and produces more electric vehicles than the rest of the world combined.

If these trends continue, Beijing's control over critical sectors would displace manufacturers in the United States and U.S.-allied countries, erode their defense industrial bases, and leave them dependent on a strategic rival for the technologies that underpin both economic prosperity and military power. At a meeting of the G-7 in 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen



warned that China's industrial policies were creating a "pattern of dominance, dependency and blackmail."

But China's huge export market is also a liability. Because domestic household consumption has not kept pace with industrial output—it lingers around 40 percent of GDP, compared with a global average of roughly 60 percent—China's economy relies on overseas markets to sustain employment and growth. Beijing is well aware of the problem: every five-year plan the Chinese Communist Party has produced since 2006 has called for boosting domestic consumption. Nonetheless, the requirements for a genuine rebalancing, including reforming social safety net programs, pursuing income redistribution, and reducing state dominance of the economy, have proved exceedingly difficult to achieve given vested interests in state-owned enterprises, fears of unemployment, and the CCP's insistence on maintaining political control over the economy. So instead, China has redoubled its reliance on exports: in 2025, it posted a record $1.2 trillion trade surplus worldwide, nearly 20 percent more than the previous year and the largest ever recorded by a single economy.

Washington thus has a unique opportunity to press on this pain point. It should push back against China's export surge by bringing advanced economies facing deindustrialization together with developing countries whose own manufacturing aspirations are

CARL GODFREY

being displaced. This coalition could then coordinate trade measures to protect their industries, including steel, shipbuilding, batteries, and drones. Alongside tariffs, the United States could pursue high-standard trade agreements that institutionalize requirements for subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and forced technology transfers that China cannot meet. Like-minded partners could also create an anticircumvention regime by strengthening rules of origin, sharing customs data, and imposing penalties on goods routed through third countries to avoid trade restrictions. They could further impose outbound investment screening to prevent companies or individuals in the United States and allied countries from financing Chinese capabilities that the controls seek to limit.

China would no doubt try to peel off more vulnerable members of the coalition, but Washington and its partners can anticipate and combat this with affirmative incentives for developing countries, including expanded market access, supply chain investment, and industrial development financing. Such coordinated pressure on China's export-driven growth model would reassert fair trade rules, revive market competition that has been crushed by China's industrial policy, and deny Beijing a virtual monopoly over sectors that are critical to American security and prosperity.

DOLLAR DETERRENCE

Curbing the most threatening elements of China's power is an immediate goal, but the United States must also build competitive leverage to support a second objective: deterrence. This leverage need not be deployed right away, or even during a trade war, but developing the tools now would ensure that the United States is ready to impose unacceptable costs on Beijing during a more intense crisis or conflict to deter Chinese aggression or escalation.

Because the U.S. dollar touches nearly every dimension of China's international economic activity, it is one of Beijing's most significant and exploitable vulnerabilities. Nearly 70 percent of China's international trade is dollar-denominated or passes through dollar-based financial institutions. China carries around $900 billion in dollar-denominated debt (roughly 40 percent of its total external debt), and an estimated 50 percent of its foreign exchange reserves are held in dollars. Dollar dominance is self-perpetuating because of powerful network effects: importers hold dollars, exporters invoice in

them, financial institutions clear transactions using them, and central banks reserve them. If China wants to trade with most of the world, it must operate within this system.

Were Washington to restrict China's dollar access—moving from sanctions on banks supporting PLA activities to broad limits on dollar transactions in advanced technology and military manufacturing—it could impose severe costs on Beijing, disrupting Chinese financial markets and potentially triggering wider economic instability. Xi has sought to reduce this dependence by internationalizing the yuan, but progress has been incremental. China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, for example, offers a partial workaround to the dollar-clearing system and may ease the bite of U.S. sanctions, as it did for Chinese-Russian trade following the imposition of U.S. and allied sanctions on Russia for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Yet this has done little to resolve China's broader reliance on the dollar-based global financial system. The only way Beijing can establish a credible path to reserve status for the yuan is to loosen capital controls and enact legal and institutional reforms that would satisfy foreign investors, steps the CCP has consistently resisted because they would weaken the state's command over the financial system. China cannot simultaneously maintain a tightly controlled financial system and a globally trusted reserve currency, making any genuine attempt at de-dollarization more aspirational than achievable for the foreseeable future.

Of course, major financial action against China's largest banks would send shock waves well beyond Beijing. The United States would have to accept real economic risks, and the assets and personnel of U.S. and allied firms operating in China would become likely targets of retaliation. Washington must prepare for this scenario by first communicating unambiguously that only severely destabilizing acts would trigger consequences of this magnitude: for example, large-scale cyberattacks on critical U.S. infrastructure, Chinese export restrictions that seriously imperil the U.S. economy, or an armed attack against U.S. allies and partners.

Critically, Washington must also rally its allies to support these thresholds, so that Beijing faces a unified front rather than opportunities to arbitrage between jurisdictions. And to help ensure that the United States can act decisively without paralyzing its own economy or forcing allies into impossible choices, policymakers should

stress-test U.S. financial institutions for exposure to Chinese firms, coordinate liquidity arrangements with allies' central banks to prevent cascading market disruptions, and fortify supply chains against potential Chinese retaliation. No set of measures could fully insulate the American economy, but together these steps would strengthen the credibility of U.S. financial retaliation as an option of last resort.

CRUDE LEVERAGE

China's reliance on energy imports offers another vulnerability that, if targeted during a crisis, could present Beijing with unacceptable risk. China imports roughly three-quarters of its crude oil, with approximately 90 percent arriving by ship and transiting the vulnerable chokepoints of the Strait of Malacca and the Lombok and Sunda Straits in Indonesia. Although cars and trucks in China are increasingly powered by electricity and liquefied natural gas, the country remains by far the world's largest importer of crude oil, which serves its vast industrial base, including the production of plastics, synthetic fibers, and high-tech components that drive its growth.

Beijing has long recognized that a major disruption to maritime energy flows would strain the country's infrastructure, manufacturing, transportation, and military readiness. Decades of mitigation efforts have reduced but not resolved this dependence. Strategic and commercial petroleum reserves, for instance, would last for more than 100 days, and China has seemingly absorbed the energy disruptions from this year's Iran war. But a short-term shock emanating from the Middle East is different from a sustained blockade with China as the primary target. In a protracted conflict with the United States, alternative energy sources, strategic reserves, and Russian overland imports would be unlikely to offset China's loss of seaborne supply. As Xi weighs the costs of aggression, such latent pressure could prove a potent deterrent.

But to make the threat credible and enhance its deterrent value, the United States should prepare an array of plausible options for imposing costs. For starters, the U.S. intelligence community should examine China's response to recent disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz to assess specific areas of continued vulnerability. Below the threshold of a full blockade, the U.S. Treasury Department, through

the Office of Foreign Assets Control, can use maritime sanctions to dissuade shipping companies, insurers, brokers, and banks from supporting prohibited shipments. Pressure on insurance, port access, and flag registration would raise costs and create uncertainty for China-bound tankers without requiring direct military action.

The Pentagon should nevertheless demonstrate its ability to disrupt or interdict China's seaborne energy imports by exercising U.S. naval control over key chokepoints along energy trade routes. Given that Washington's Asian partners depend on many of the same shipping lanes, the United States should expand intelligence sharing so that it can better identify ships supplying its friends and prioritize developing alternative energy sources and routes to protect energy flows to its allies during periods of crisis.

Energy, however, is not China's only commodity dependence. China imports roughly 80 percent of its iron ore, a foundation of its steel industry, predominantly from Australia. And most of its copper and lithium inputs, which are critical to battery and defense manufacturing, come from Australia, Chile, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Peru. As with oil, these dependencies offer additional pressure points that can be leveraged to strengthen deterrence and compound China's challenges across multiple sectors simultaneously. If Australia were prepared to restrict exports of iron and lithium ore, and the United States and its partners had a plan to tighten access to copper and cobalt, they would send a message to China that its industrial base could be easily disrupted and its defense production capacity degraded if circumstances warranted.

Beyond commodities, the United States should also coordinate with partners on potential restrictions in key defense-related sectors in which China has deep asymmetric dependencies, such as aerospace. China's state-owned manufacturer, Comac, seeks to rival Boeing and Airbus with its newest passenger jet, the C919, but more than 60 percent of the aircraft's components, including engines and flight controls, still come from foreign suppliers. Countries that hold genuine leverage over China's industrial base may be reluctant to exercise it without significant diplomatic investment by the United States. Negotiating contingency plans, drafting legal authorities, and aligning allied arrangements before a crisis is precisely the kind of groundwork that competitive leverage demands. Done right, especially when combined with combat-credible military deterrence,

this kind of preparation would make any major escalation even costlier for Beijing.

THOSE IN GLASS HOUSES

Beyond limiting immediate threats and deterring escalation, the third goal of competitive leverage is to turn Beijing's strengths into weaknesses by exposing its most destabilizing covert and coercive practices. China's authoritarian system has projected power abroad through overseas influence operations, information control, and subversive economic and military tactics. Yet each instrument works best when it is kept out of sight. China's hidden yet powerful hand is therefore a vulnerability, and one Washington has yet to fully illuminate.

China's efforts to shape global opinion have served two broad objectives. The first is to shield the regime from international criticism and interference in what it considers its internal affairs, especially its designs on Taiwan and its repressive policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. The second is to shape the foreign and domestic policies of target countries in ways that advance Beijing's strategic interests, including building coalitions in UN bodies to abstain from voting against China and cultivating sympathetic politicians who soften their governments' positions on Taiwan, trade, and human rights. The aim is not merely favorable perceptions of China, but a world in which Beijing's preferred outcomes on major international issues are treated as inevitable and legitimate by the governments and institutions that matter most, often at the direct expense of U.S. influence.

China's vast overseas influence operations are a central component of these efforts, particularly in countries that lack detection mechanisms and independent media. Beijing has built a sprawling overseas infrastructure of front organizations, diaspora networks, media partnerships, and elite cultivation programs, including in advanced democracies. Consider Linda Sun, the former deputy chief of staff to the governor of New York, whom the U.S. government accused, in 2024, of serving as an undisclosed Chinese government agent, allegedly blocking Taiwanese officials' access to the governor's office and aligning official messaging with Beijing's wishes. In Canada, meanwhile, authorities investigated Chinese consulate officials for allegedly mobilizing international high school students to vote for Beijing's preferred candidate in a 2019 local party election.

China's influence campaigns are not confined to the covert. Beijing pours billions of dollars annually into its state media, overseas broadcasting, and social media operations worldwide to influence other countries' public narratives in ways favorable to China. Across Africa, Chinese state media outlets such as Xinhua and CGTN have signed extensive content-sharing agreements with local broadcasters and newspapers, enabling Beijing to distribute prepackaged, pro-Chinese narratives through trusted domestic outlets at scale. Since these efforts are often uncontested, cash-strapped news organizations increasingly rely on free or heavily subsidized Chinese content to fill coverage gaps, allowing China to broadcast its messaging on issues such as unification with Taiwan or Uyghur human rights in Xinjiang or China's relations with African countries.

The CCP cannot bear to be seen for what it is.

Yet the benign image Beijing projects belies its grim oppression of minorities at home, harassment of dissidents abroad, cyberattacks against foreign critical infrastructure, collusion with organized crime, and illegal fishing that depletes fish stocks in the world's oceans. These activities threaten the welfare and national security of numerous countries and can spark political and diplomatic backlash when exposed.

The Philippines, for instance, has pioneered an effective transparency campaign against Chinese maritime coercion. In 2023, Manila began releasing footage of Chinese coast guard vessels harassing its ships in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. The imagery had major domestic and international impact: it transformed what had often been abstract territorial disputes into vivid, emotionally resonant evidence of Chinese intimidation. Public opinion in the Philippines hardened sharply against China, strengthening support for a more assertive maritime posture and deeper alliance coordination with the United States. Allied governments and international media disseminated the footage widely, putting Beijing on the diplomatic defensive.

The United States possesses vast untapped potential to turn China's malign activities into sustained reputational liabilities. To better detect and expose this behavior, the U.S. government should designate a lead agency to strengthen and synchronize information competition

efforts, which to date have been insufficient and bureaucratically scattered. In addition to coordinating international messaging campaigns against especially egregious Chinese activities, the United States should work with allies and partners to identify, attribute, and expose CCP-backed influence operations. It should also support journalists, scholars, and researchers who can independently uncover and amplify China's malign activities. After public disclosure, relevant government agencies can ensure accountability through criminal prosecutions, sanctions, diplomatic measures, and official attribution.

The CCP's greatest vulnerability is perhaps its simplest: it cannot bear to be seen for what it is. Exposing China's destabilizing international behavior would force Beijing to divert time and resources toward damage control, tarnish its carefully cultivated image, and erode the tenuous international standing on which its great-power ambitions depend. A world that sees China's behavior more clearly is a world more resistant to its pressure campaigns, more skeptical of its false narratives, and more favorable to American interests and leadership.

THE RECKONING

Over the last decade, China has grown stronger, more assertive, and more confident, militarizing the South China Sea, harassing and intimidating U.S. treaty allies such as Japan and the Philippines, and waging economic and political war on countries that betray its preferences. During this period, U.S. officials and strategy documents have rightly identified China as the United States' foremost challenge, but too often, subsequent actions have proved less competitive than the rhetoric might suggest. Beijing's weaponization of critical minerals put this shortfall in stark relief. Although the United States must continue working to reduce its dependence on China and rebuild U.S. and allied strength, that alone is not enough. Washington must also build and wield its own competitive leverage.

Acquiring that leverage serves three clear purposes: to limit the ways China can coerce and threaten the United States and its partners, to make aggression and escalation more costly, and ultimately to improve the prospects for restraint and stability. The recommended measures for achieving this must be carefully timed and sequenced.

Some, such as imposing controls on advanced semiconductors and devising more collaborative trade initiatives, should be deployed immediately; others, such as weaponizing China's dependence on the dollar, oil, and other commodities, should be held in reserve for crisis or conflict. All the while, the United States should find ways to weaken and expose Beijing's subversive activities, whether in foreign capitals, media outlets, or contested waters. In most cases, no single measure will suffice. Real leverage comes from compounding pressures across multiple domains. This is why American policymakers must not only build leverage to target China's current dependencies but also look to tomorrow's chokepoints in quantum computing, biotechnology, and energy technologies.

Capitalizing on China's vulnerabilities carries real risks of escalation and retaliation, which is why options must be developed and stress-tested now, not improvised under pressure. Much of this effort will demand close coordination with allies still committed to countering China's most predatory practices. Building these coalitions requires eschewing the language of all-out confrontation and instead adopting a defensive frame tailored to foreign partners' core national interests: defending sovereignty, protecting domestic industries, and strengthening national resilience. The Trump administration's disruption of long-standing partnerships and its war in Iran have complicated prospects for collective action, but allied frustration need not outweigh what are still shared interests in addressing the economic and security threats China poses. For its part, Congress can help lock in this more competitive architecture by codifying the core frameworks and initiatives necessary to build leverage over China. This includes multiyear funding of pertinent offices and initiatives and stronger oversight of technology controls and investment restrictions.

The United States has navigated great-power rivalries before, but never by competing with one hand tied behind its back, leaving its adversary's vulnerabilities largely untouched. China is squarely focused on this century-defining competition. It has grown more confident in testing the United States, punishing U.S. friends, and turning American dependencies into bargaining chips. Meeting that challenge requires a U.S. strategy that pairs domestic renewal with competitive leverage. Together, these reinforcing efforts will help Washington tilt the competition in the United States' favor.

Why "China First" Will Fail

The Limits and Lessons of a Transactional Foreign Policy

PATRICIA M. KIM

For nearly eight decades, the United States has served as the chief architect and guarantor of the international order. But today, under the banner of "America first," Washington is abandoning responsibility for sustaining the system it built after World War II. As the United States retreats from global leadership and challenges the norms it once fostered and the order it once upheld, the world is waiting to see whether Beijing steps up.

In countries long allied with the United States, views of China are becoming more favorable. A survey conducted by *Politico* in February 2026, for instance, showed that people in Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom support deeper engagement with China amid declining confidence in the United States as a global leader. Beijing has been quick to encourage this view, presenting itself as a

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defender of multilateralism, a champion of the developing world, and a guardian of what it calls a more "just and equitable" international order. In this telling, China offers stability and cooperation at a time when the United States is acting erratically and unilaterally.

Yet a closer look at China's record suggests that Beijing is not trying to replace Washington as a global leader or take on the burdens traditionally associated with superpower status. Unlike the United States, which built a network of alliances and underwrote the postwar order, and the Soviet Union, which controlled a formal bloc of communist states through the Warsaw Pact, China has shown little interest in assuming responsibility for a rival order or even a tightly organized coalition. Beijing instead seeks global reach without entanglement, partnerships without binding obligations, and great-power status without the burdens of leadership.

Beijing perpetuates instability that threatens its own interests.

As China has rapidly expanded its network of strategic partnerships and positioned itself at the center of non-Western coalitions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it has prioritized flexibility over cohesion or control. China avoids formal alliances and resists long-term commitments in favor of arrangements that can be tightened or loosened at will. Beijing values the ability to act decisively when its core interests are at stake, but it is content to let others bear the costs of managing regional and global crises that fall outside those interests. In this sense, China has been practicing what might be called a "China first" strategy—prioritizing its narrow interests while disclaiming global responsibilities—long predating the current "America first" policy championed by the Trump administration.

Nowhere is China's approach clearer than in its dealings with its closest partners. In Russia's war in Ukraine and Iran's confrontation with Israel and the United States, Beijing has provided economic and diplomatic backing while largely avoiding direct military involvement. Even as its strategic partners have faced existential threats, China has kept its distance. Beijing has also shown little willingness to restrain its partners' destabilizing behavior or to take on the onus of bringing global conflicts to an end.

This "China first" strategy has in many respects worked to Beijing's advantage. China has extended its reach without taking on much risk. It has projected the appearance of international leadership and persuaded

many governments to support its preferences. Yet this same strategy comes with downsides. By eschewing deeper commitments, especially security guarantees, Beijing has struggled to convert its expanding network into ties that foster loyalty or collective power. Its partners are unwilling to incur major costs on Beijing's behalf, and they hedge by forging relationships with China's adversaries. China's approach also risks destabilizing the broader global system. By minimizing its exposure to crises rather than actively managing them, Beijing perpetuates instability that threatens its own interests.

Although the United States and China have distinct geographies and historical legacies, Beijing's experience nevertheless offers a cautionary lesson for Washington. A more transactional, narrowly self-interested global posture may reduce short-term burdens, but it comes at the cost of weaker alignment, less reliable support from partners, and a more unstable global order that ultimately leaves the United States—and the world—worse off.

BEEN BURNED BEFORE

China's preference for flexible partnerships over formal alliances has deep roots in the country's history. Since its founding, in 1949, the People's Republic of China has faced what its leaders describe as the persistent threat of strategic encirclement—the belief that hostile powers, near or far, will rally together to constrain China's sovereignty, security, and development.

At the outset of the Cold War, Chinese leader Mao Zedong sought to prevent that encirclement by forging ties with the Soviet Union. In 1950, Beijing entered into a formal alliance with Moscow that promised Soviet economic and technological support and a security umbrella. In many respects, the arrangement provided exactly what the new regime needed: resources, training, and protection. But it also came with steep costs. The alliance drew China into the Korean War on terms largely set by Pyongyang and Moscow, resulting in staggering human and economic losses. The war also derailed Beijing's plans to seize Taiwan. In response to fighting on the Korean Peninsula, the Truman administration deployed the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, and the Eisenhower administration later signed a mutual defense pact with Taiwan. With Washington's help, the island eluded Beijing's control, leaving what Chinese leaders still regard as an unfinished task of national unification.

Within a decade, however, the alliance between China and the Soviet Union had collapsed. Ideological disagreements, rivalry over regional spheres of influence, and long-standing suspicions culminated in their split. For Chinese leaders, the lesson was enduring: alliances constrain autonomy and expose China to risks arising from the ambitions and conflicts of others. Since then, Beijing has avoided forging new alliances. Its only remaining mutual defense pact is with North Korea, an agreement it signed in 1961. Today, this lone alliance looks less like a strategic asset than a burden.

Even while formally allied with Moscow, Beijing began gravitating toward a more flexible approach to international alignment. From the early 1950s, Zhou Enlai, China's first premier and the architect of its early diplomacy, warned against viewing the world as "simply divided into two conflicting camps," one led by Washington and the other by Moscow. China, he urged, must maneuver among multiple powers, not bind itself to a single bloc. This logic later crystallized in Mao's concept of "the three worlds." According to this framework, at the apex stood the great powers of "the first world": the United States, long viewed in Beijing as the country most responsible for China's strategic encirclement, and the Soviet Union, a power that oscillated between partner and threat. Beneath this tier sat "the second world" comprising U.S.-aligned industrialized powers, including Japan and countries in Europe, many of which lacked nuclear weapons and fell short of superpower status. In the eyes of Chinese leaders, these middle powers were key enablers of U.S. containment efforts—and thus prime targets for loosening their country's strategic encirclement. Finally, "the third world" encompassed the states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. China regarded these countries as a natural constituency, bound by shared histories of anti-imperialism and aspirations for development.

Mao envisioned uniting the second and third worlds in opposition to the first world. But in practice, China's global contest with Washington and Moscow proved a lonely one. Beijing lacked the resources of its great-power rivals, resulting in a struggle to cultivate partners. Outside a handful of communist friends, such as Albania and Cambodia, which offered rhetorical solidarity in exchange for Chinese aid, Beijing's appeals for collective resistance against "imperialist powers" garnered little support. Yet the underlying rationale behind the "three worlds" framework foreshadowed

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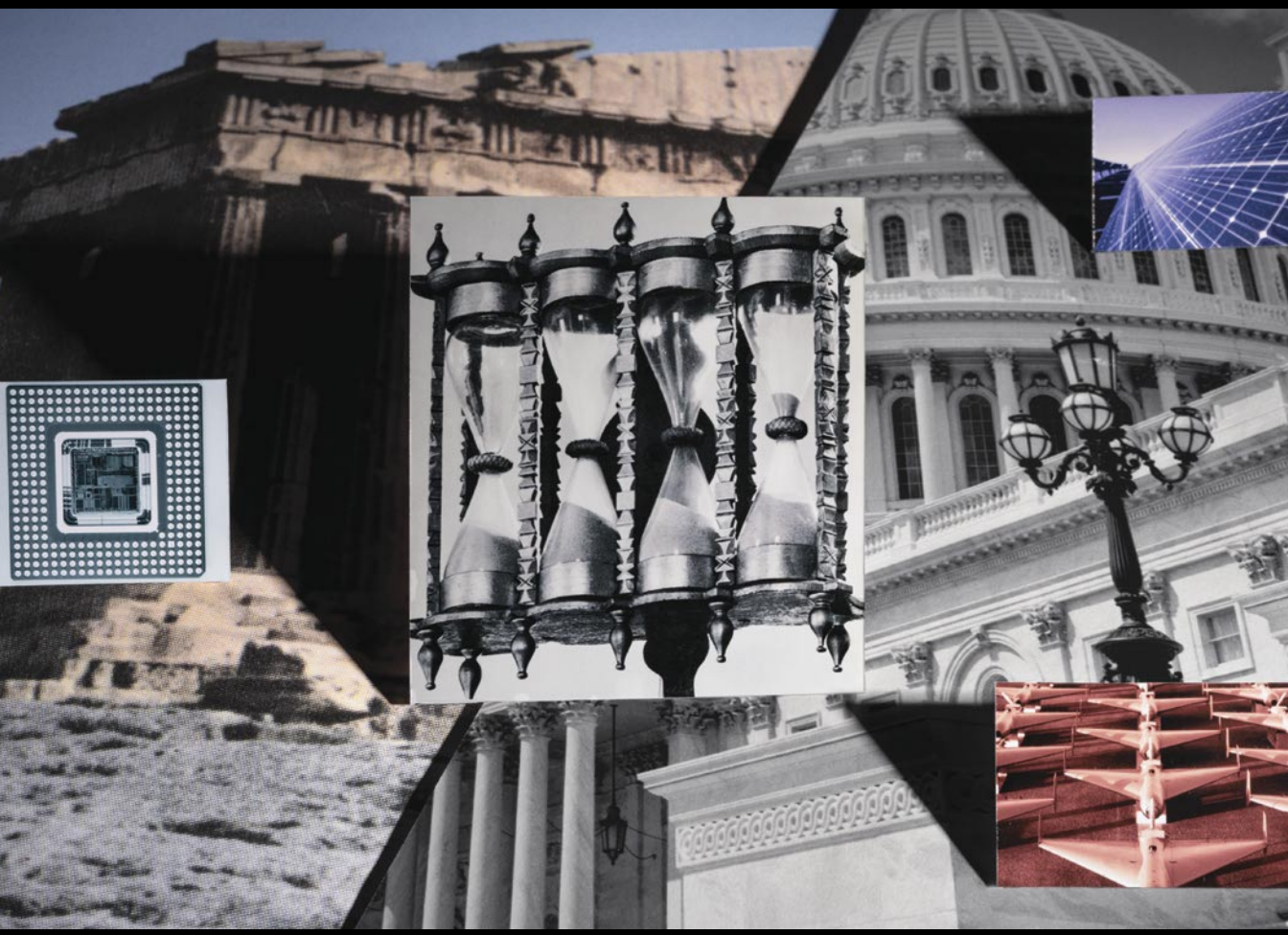
The Future of American Strategy



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the flexible, nonaligned approach that would come to define China's global strategy.

PUT A LABEL ON IT

The strategy of cultivating diverse partnerships across multiple tiers of the international system remained the organizing principle of China's diplomacy after the Cold War ended—and has become more important under China's current leader, Xi Jinping. When Xi took power, in 2012, China faced a security environment it perceived as increasingly hostile, shaped by tightening U.S.-led alliances and growing scrutiny of China's global ambitions. At the same time, Beijing possessed far greater economic scale, diplomatic reach, and coercive capacity than at any previous point in its history. By the early 2010s, China had become the top trading partner of more than 120 countries. It sat at the center of global supply chains, and its military was rapidly modernizing. In Xi's telling, the world was undergoing "changes unseen in a century": Western dominance was eroding, multipolarity was advancing, and China was moving "closer than ever to the center of the world stage."

This assessment underpinned a more proactive phase of foreign policy. Early in his tenure, Xi called for China to pursue "a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a great power." This marked a clear departure from his three predecessors, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, who had urged Beijing to "keep a low profile." China began to push back more forcefully against perceived strategic encirclement and the U.S.-led international order. But Xi made clear that Beijing would not replicate the American alliance model, which he claimed was outdated and rooted in confrontation. Instead, China would practice a "new type of international relations" and forge a "new path for state-to-state relations." Under Xi, Beijing accelerated the expansion of China's global network of partnerships by upgrading diplomatic ties and investing more heavily in Chinese-led forums.

Today, China maintains formal partnerships with more than 100 countries and regional organizations. Beijing avoids publicly ranking these relationships, but a loose hierarchy is evident. At the top stands Russia, whose ties with China are officially described as a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era." A smaller group of countries—including Belarus, Pakistan, and Venezuela—are designated "all weather" partners, signaling strong political alignment. Below this tier lies a broad and diverse array of

"comprehensive strategic partners" and "strategic partners" spanning Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. These labels obscure as much as they reveal. Nearly all Pacific Island states, for instance, are considered "comprehensive strategic partners" despite wide variation in their engagement with China. Djibouti, which holds the same designation, cooperates with Beijing much more substantially. It even hosts China's first overseas military base.

For Beijing, this ambiguity is a strength. The elasticity of its partnership system allows China to deepen relationships when interests align and scale back when risks or costs increase. Even as Beijing has prioritized closer alignment with Russia and its partners in the global South, it continues to cultivate ties with U.S.-aligned middle powers in Europe and Northeast Asia. South Korea and several European states are officially "strategic partners," reflecting their importance to China. Engaging these countries allows Beijing to blunt the sharper edges of American competition while maintaining access to advanced markets and technologies.

Beyond bilateral ties, Beijing has relied on multilateral coalitions to broaden its influence. Groupings such as the SCO, the BRICS—a ten-country bloc named for its first five members, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—and an array of Chinese-led regional forums provide platforms on which Beijing can shape global agendas, coordinate diplomatic positions on international issues, and amplify its voice at relatively low cost.

For years, China's leaders avoided direct security engagements abroad, relying instead on economic and diplomatic tools to build influence. But as China expanded its global presence, and its citizens and investments spread across every region, this minimalist posture began to shift. Over the past decade, China has expanded its participation in UN peacekeeping operations, participated in antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, and evacuated its citizens and foreign nationals from conflict zones. Joint military exercises and law enforcement with members of the SCO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, often framed around counterterrorism, maritime security, or humanitarian assistance, have allowed Beijing to deepen security ties with its partners without formal commitments.

STAYING ON THE SIDELINES

For many of China's partners, particularly developing countries and authoritarian governments overlooked or kept at arm's length by the

United States and its allies, Beijing offers valuable diplomatic attention, economic opportunity, and international legitimacy.

But China's partnership model is defined as much by what it withholds as by what it provides—and nowhere is this more apparent than in moments of acute crisis. Chinese leaders have long viewed the burdens of American global leadership—especially the United States' role as a security guarantor—as causes of overextension and decline. China generally avoids mutual defense pacts, security guarantees, or binding obligations. It instead offers a narrower package: economic engagement, diplomatic backing, and selective security cooperation while keeping its distance when the stakes escalate.

As conflicts have erupted across Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, the boundaries of Beijing's partnerships have become more obvious. Take Iran, for example. China is the Islamic Republic's largest trading partner and the top buyer of Iranian oil, and in 2021 the two countries signed a much-publicized 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership. Two years later, Beijing helped mediate an agreement restoring diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a breakthrough seen at the time as evidence of China's emergence as a power broker in the Middle East.

Yet as the region has descended into conflict, China has remained notably aloof. When Israel and the United States launched strikes on Iran in 2025 and a full-scale air war earlier this year, China condemned the attacks, continued to purchase Iranian oil in defiance of U.S. sanctions, and supplied Iran with dual-use goods, including electronics and industrial chemicals with potential military applications. U.S. intelligence reports suggest that Beijing may have provided Iran with shoulder-fired missiles, although China has largely refrained from overt or large-scale military assistance. Nor has Beijing taken steps to secure the Strait of Hormuz, even though the closure of the waterway has threatened China's energy imports and export-dependent economy.

Beijing has instead confined itself largely to rhetoric. It issued a five-point statement with Pakistan calling for a cease-fire and pressed Tehran to negotiate with Washington. But China has been careful to avoid assuming responsibility for the conflict's outcome, declining Tehran's requests that it serve as a guarantor of a cease-fire and provide Iran with broader security assurances.

In Europe, as the Ukraine war continues into its fifth year, China has pursued a strategy of calibrated support for Russia, its most important

strategic partner. Less than a month before Russia invaded Ukraine, Beijing and Moscow described their relationship as having "no limits." Beijing has maintained trade with Moscow, increased purchases of Russian oil, and supplied dual-use goods, while offering steady diplomatic backing. Such Chinese support has sustained Moscow economically and enabled it to reconstitute its defense industrial base. But as with Iran, China has shied away from providing major lethal military assistance. Instead, Russia has had to turn to North Korea for troops and arms, a telling sign of the limits of China's support.

China's unwillingness to go all in for its partners became even clearer during Russian President Vladimir Putin's most vulnerable moment, when the Wagner Group, a powerful Kremlin-linked paramilitary force, launched an armed rebellion in June 2023. Despite the much-publicized personal ties between Xi and Putin, neither the Chinese government nor Xi personally issued any statement explicitly supporting the Russian leader. Instead, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a terse, two-sentence statement that called the crisis an "internal affair" for Russia to deal with. When its closest partner faced a serious internal crisis, Beijing chose caution over solidarity.

Venezuela provides another revealing example. In January 2026, the United States captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro—just hours after he met with Beijing's special representative for Latin

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American affairs—and installed new leadership under U.S. auspices. For years, China had served as one of Venezuela's most important economic lifelines, extending tens of billions of dollars in loans and purchasing vast quantities of Venezuelan oil. Yet when the Maduro government faced its most direct external challenge, Beijing did little beyond condemning the intervention.

A consistent pattern emerges from these cases. China sustains its partners economically and shields them diplomatically but won't defend them when it matters most. And although it regularly invokes principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the international rule of law, it has shown little willingness to defend those principles, especially when its partners violate them.

YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

At first glance, China's model appears to have paid dividends. Beijing has cultivated an expansive network of partners and platforms that provide international legitimacy and diplomatic support for its core interests. Many partners publicly back China at international forums and endorse Beijing's positions on controversial issues such as Taiwan and China's repressive governance in its Xinjiang region. Yet these gains are often more symbolic than substantive. They may bolster the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and help Beijing shape international discourse, but they rarely translate into meaningful alignment or costly action. It remains unclear whether China could lean on its friends in a major crisis.

There are already signs that Chinese leaders doubt the reliability of their partners. For instance, when the Trump administration imposed sweeping global tariffs at the height of last year's U.S.-Chinese trade tensions, Beijing feared that its partners might strike side deals with Washington—restricting Chinese exports in exchange for tariff relief. Chinese officials responded with threats of "reciprocal countermeasures." The fact that China felt the need to warn its partners shows that their alignment is neither assured nor automatic. To be sure, U.S. alliances are not without strain, but deeper institutional ties and security dependence have, at least until recently, underpinned more reliable coordination.

More broadly, although China's partnerships amplify its diplomatic voice, they rarely generate collective power. The emerging economies and developing states that China seeks to rally against a

U.S.-led international order do not constitute a cohesive bloc. Divergent national interests and internal rivalries, most notably between China and India, continue to constrain coordination. Initiatives that the BRICS countries promoted as alternatives to U.S.-led financial bodies illustrate these constraints. For example, more than a decade after its launch, the group's New Development Bank still lends a fraction of what the World Bank does and remains deeply embedded in the dollar-based global financial system. The BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement has likewise failed to play a meaningful role in financial crises.

The United States should resist the temptation to follow China's example.

At the same time, China's expanding economic footprint has led to friction. Concerns about debt, trade imbalances, and the influx of low-cost Chinese goods have sharpened skepticism of China in countries that once embraced it as a development partner. Over the years, China has attracted charges of extractive behavior that once plagued the United States and European countries, fueling local protests and prompting governments across Asia and Africa to review or cancel major Chinese-backed projects.

Moreover, in China's own neighborhood, endemic disputes and historical mistrust continue to hurt its reputation. The country's assertive behavior along disputed maritime and land borders, as well as its use of coercive economic measures, has undermined its claims to be a benign, nonhegemonic power. Even countries that believe, as Beijing does, that the global order is unfairly dominated by the United States and its allies continue to seek close ties with them. China's neighbors remain fundamentally pragmatic: they want to diversify relationships, hedge risks, and avoid dependence on any single power, including Beijing.

The same pattern is evident among U.S.-aligned middle powers in Asia and Europe. Even as confidence in the United States has wavered and American allies have strengthened economic ties with China, Beijing has struggled to convert that engagement into strategic alignment. For states such as France, Germany, Japan, and South Korea, China is an important economic partner and a consequential great power that must be dealt with, but it is seen as neither a potential security partner nor a credible leader of a durable global order.

China's reluctance to fully support its partners in moments of crisis has led to questions about what Beijing can expect in return. Nowhere would the limits of Beijing's "China first" strategy be more exposed than in a conflict over Taiwan. Beijing could probably count on Moscow and Pyongyang for narrow, transactional assistance, such as the provision of dual-use goods, intelligence, military equipment, or, in Russia's case, energy supplies. But such aid would fall short of the well-planned, high-cost, and operationally integrated assistance the United States has traditionally been able to mobilize from its treaty allies. China's partnerships generally lack the formal institutional bonds—joint planning, integrated logistics, and interoperability—required for collective military action at scale. As a result, any support from Moscow or Pyongyang would likely be parallel and opportunistic, not coordinated or sustained.

Most of China's other partners would likely declare themselves neutral in a conflict over Taiwan. Few would willingly incur significant costs on China's behalf, including by openly defying U.S. sanctions or fighting alongside Chinese forces. In the event of U.S. intervention to defend Taiwan, Beijing would pressure U.S. allies in Asia, such as Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, to deny Washington access to bases or other forms of operational support. Assuming that U.S. alliances remained broadly intact, these countries would nonetheless have reason to support Washington: their treaty commitments, their dependence on U.S. security guarantees, and the presence of American troops in their territory.

China would be left to bear the burdens of a conflict over Taiwan largely on its own. Even if Beijing were not counting on help from partners, it would be harder to sustain a prolonged conflict, withstand economic pressure, or manage the risks of U.S. intervention without a reliable coalition. A partnership model designed to preserve flexibility might curb China's ability to drum up support when it matters most.

LONELY AT THE TOP

Recent crises in the Middle East and Latin America have exposed the limits of Beijing's ability to protect overseas interests. These developments have prompted experts at Chinese think tanks and academics to debate whether China should adopt a more assertive, interventionist posture abroad. But for the most part, Chinese leaders still believe a more expansive global role, particularly one

involving broader security responsibilities, would ultimately sap Chinese power.

What would cause China to change course? The United States assumed global leadership after World War II by necessity: Asia and Europe lay in ruins, and only Washington possessed the capacity to rebuild and stabilize the system. For China to underwrite a new international order and overhaul its global strategy, a disruption of similar magnitude would likely be needed: a world so destabilized that Beijing would see no alternative but to take on the costs of stabilizing it. Short of such a shock, China's approach is unlikely to fundamentally change in the near term.

Rather than a straightforward transition from one global leader to another, from U.S. dominance to Chinese primacy, the international system is entering a leaderless era, one in which great powers are less interested in sustaining order than in preserving their freedom of action. In such a world, great powers are not building alliances, cultivating deep interdependence, or investing in public goods. They consider economic and security ties to be vulnerabilities, not assets, and see transactional relationships as the best way to advance their national interests.

China's experience illustrates both the appeal and the drawbacks of this logic. By avoiding binding commitments and responsibilities, Beijing has preserved its autonomy and reduced its exposure to risk. But it has also struggled to translate its global reach into real collective power. Its relationships remain shallow, its partners hedge, and its ability to mobilize a coalition in moments of crisis appears tenuous.

Washington should take note. Some in the United States have argued that retrenching from global engagement, scaling back commitments to allies and partners, and putting "America first" will ultimately serve the country's interests. China's record suggests otherwise. A foreign policy built around transactional ties and narrowly defined national priorities may appear attractive in the short term, but it comes at the cost of reliable support from partners and contributes to a more fragmented and disorderly world. Without a great power at least trying to helm the international system, crises become harder to manage and collective responses more difficult to organize, leaving even the strongest states less secure. The lesson for the United States, then, is clear: resist the temptation to follow China's example.

How to Survive the AI Shock

A Policy Playbook to Avert Political Crisis

JAMES A. DAVIDSON AND MATTHEW J. SLAUGHTER

The dawning age of artificial intelligence holds great promise for the world economy and for the United States. Like so many other countries, the United States has endured decades of slow growth in labor productivity. Productivity, the amount of goods and services produced per worker, is the single most important measure of a country's overall economic success. Slow productivity growth has meant poor growth in average incomes, which in turn has fueled much of the political turmoil manifested across the globe in the last generation. In the United States, slow growth in productivity has contributed to escalating political polarization and what many see as the gradual death of the American dream.

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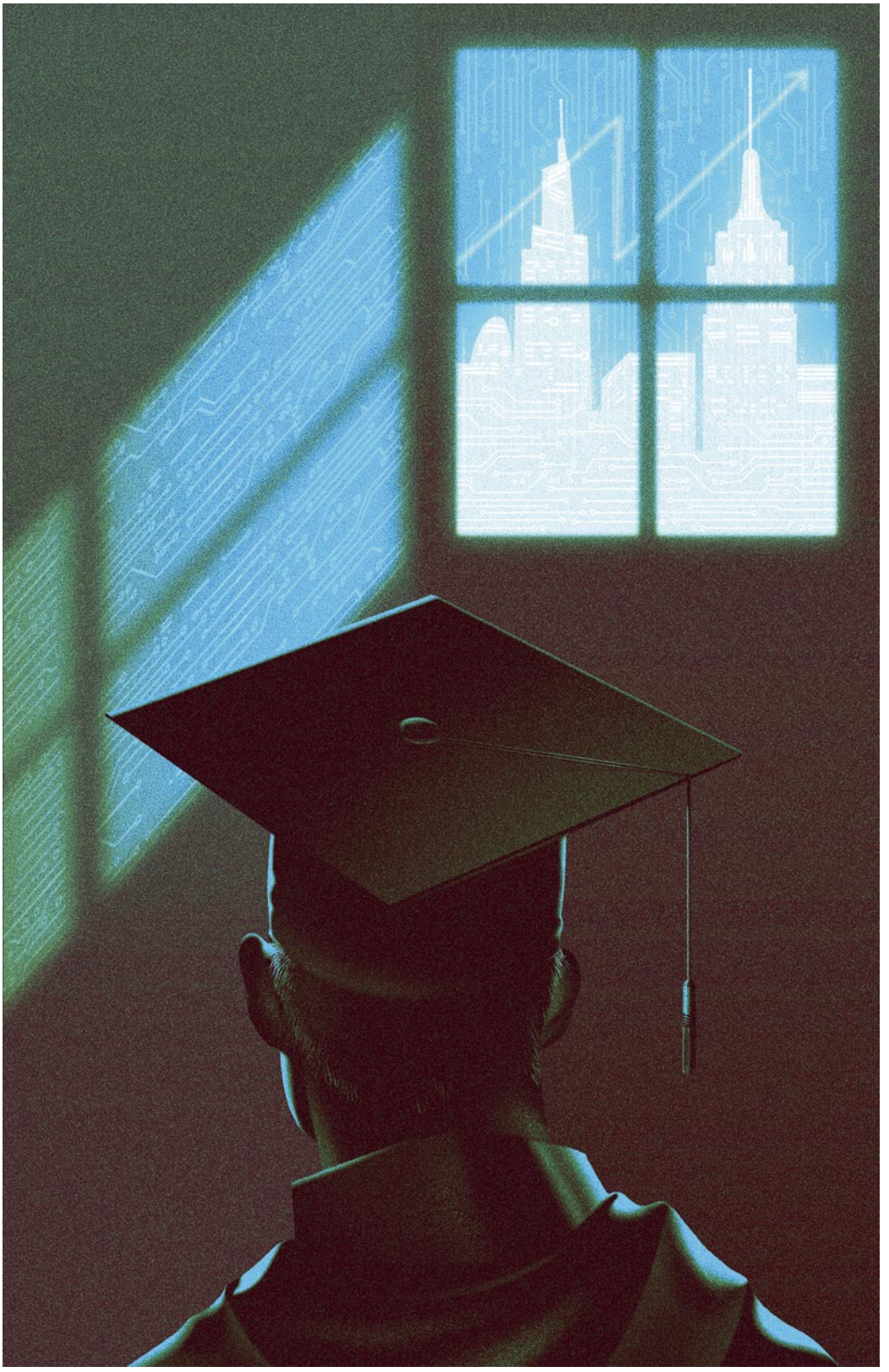


Illustration by Raven Jiang

The United States needs to conjure up a productivity renaissance. And AI seems to be a perfect catalyst. In 2024, U.S. productivity in the nonfarm business sector grew by three percent, the fastest increase in a nonrecession, nonpandemic year in decades. A McKinsey study published in 2025 estimated that by 2030, AI-powered agents and robots could generate somewhere between $2.9 trillion and $6.4 trillion in new annual economic value for the United States—a productivity gain equal to nine to 20 percent of the country's 2025 gross domestic product—and $28.7 trillion for the world overall.

AI is poised to power this kind of renaissance because it drives both capital investment and innovation, the two ways that countries can reliably increase their productivity. The United States and a growing number of other countries are witnessing a surge in capital investment in AI infrastructure, including computer chips, data centers, and electrical systems. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, AI-related investment accounted for about 39 percent of total U.S. GDP growth in 2025. That number is set to go up in 2026. According to the *Financial Times*, the four largest U.S. "hyperscalers" in AI and cloud computing—Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft—plan to increase their collective capital spending on AI in 2026 to $725 billion, a 77 percent increase from the roughly $410 billion they collectively spent last year.

The other means of increasing productivity, innovation, involves discovering new goods and services and more efficient ways to produce existing ones. Every day, companies are using AI to discover and take advantage of efficiencies and automate routine tasks. For example, AlphaFold, the AI program developed by DeepMind, whose scientists won the 2024 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, has dramatically quickened the discovery and analysis of the proteins needed to produce breakthrough drugs and other medical advances.

Yet despite all this economic promise, AI is also creating great political peril: the potential destruction of jobs at a faster rate and a wider scope than existing government assistance can reasonably address. This conundrum is hardly new. Innovation has almost always reduced labor demand for some goods and services. Sometimes that innovation did not result in widespread loss of existing jobs, but rather in the disappearance of old tasks and the invention of new tasks and capabilities within those occupations. In the early 1980s, for instance, around 16.5 million Americans worked in office operations and administrative support. Despite all the

information technology inventions that have automated such secretarial tasks as taking dictation and making copies, almost the same number of Americans work in this sector today. They just do different things.

Sometimes, innovation permanently reduces demand for certain jobs: craftspeople producing horse-drawn wagons when the automobile was invented, typists with typewriters at the dawn of personal computers, workers on assembly lines automated with robots and other capital investments. This destruction is a fundamental feature of productivity growth. Indeed, the destruction of existing jobs, companies, and sometimes entire industries is a necessary condition for creating new jobs, higher incomes, and greater wealth.

But creative destruction also harms some workers and communities and can spark political resistance. This dynamic has been true since at least the Industrial Revolution, when the Luddites, skilled British textile workers protesting the invention and implementation of new machines, raided factories and destroyed power looms and knitting frames. Centuries later, the flood of low-cost Chinese exports into the United States reduced demand for many American-made goods, undercutting thousands of U.S. manufacturers and gutting many communities.

Today, evidence is building that AI is reducing labor demand in many industries, leading to an "AI shock" akin to the "China shock" of the early twenty-first century. But whereas the China shock was mostly confined to older workers in a few industries, the coming AI shock may ultimately prove much larger and more destructive. It is predominantly affecting the young rather than the old, the more educated rather than the less educated, and the full sweep of industries rather than mainly manufacturing. And because of the breakneck pace of innovation, the AI shock is reverberating much more rapidly than the China shock did.

If the scope and speed of the AI shock exceed the capacity of policymakers to find solutions that blunt its negative effects, the repercussions may be severe. Countries that fail to institute adequate labor-market supports for displaced workers may lose out on the productivity gains of artificial intelligence if they bow to public pressure to pass new laws and regulations that stifle or even reverse its spread. They may face political turmoil along new, sharper cleavages. And they may fall permanently behind countries that manage to mitigate the AI shock and thus realize its full gains.

Some companies have taken welcome steps to help affected workers: Jamie Dimon, the chief executive and chair of JPMorgan Chase, and Dan

Schulman, the CEO of Verizon, have each announced programs to assist employees whose jobs have been or will be eliminated because of AI. But private-sector solutions are insufficient to address AI's economy-wide effects. Responding to the AI shock effectively requires meaningful public investment now. The United States is singularly unprepared for such an undertaking. Its antiquated labor-market policies are narrowly focused and inadequately funded. Without new sources of tax revenue to support and retrain displaced workers, the country will simply not be able to cope with the scale of the shock.

A pair of new policies can prevent the United States from repeating the mistakes of the China shock: tax credits to encourage training in new skills, and wage-loss insurance to encourage reemployment. These new fiscal outlays should be funded by a new tax on equity-related compensation, which would more fairly distribute the windfalls of AI's expected productivity gains among the executives of companies that will financially benefit most from the technology's disruptive effects and the workers hit hardest by it. The AI boom will assuredly transform the U.S. economy in ways no economist can fully anticipate. But these policies will ensure that its gains are more broadly shared across innovative companies, their workers, and communities across America.

DEGREES OF DIFFICULTY

Consider the following headlines from late 2025. In October, Amazon announced the elimination of 14,000 jobs along with plans for further cuts. A month later, Verizon eliminated over 13,000 jobs—roughly 13 percent of its workforce and its largest round of layoffs ever. According to the executive coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, job cuts announced across the United States in 2025 totaled 1.2 million, a 58 percent increase from the previous year and the highest tally, excluding the COVID-19 pandemic period, since the nadir of the Great Recession in 2009.

Increasingly, companies cite AI as the reason for such layoffs. In June 2025, Amazon's CEO, Andy Jassy, warned that the company expected to "reduce our total corporate workforce as we get efficiency gains from using AI extensively" over the next few years. In November, Enrique Lores, then the head of HP, explained a cut of approximately 5,000 jobs as part of the company's effort to embed AI "in everything we do."

This year has brought more of the same. In January, Bank of America's CEO, Brian Moynihan, predicted staff reductions as the company

pursues "operational excellence and application of new technologies, including AI." The following month, the financial services company Block announced that it would lay off nearly 40 percent of its workforce—over 4,000 employees—thanks to the adoption of AI "intelligence tools." In April, Meta announced plans to lay off about 8,000 employees—ten percent of its workforce—and scrap 6,000 open positions while expanding its AI investments. The same day, Moynihan revealed that AI had already eliminated 1,000 jobs at Bank of America. In May, the chief executive and president of Cloudflare justified the elimination of 1,100 jobs—not as a "cost-cutting exercise" or "an assessment of individuals' performance," but as an effort to define "how a world-class, high-growth company operates and creates value in the agentic AI era." Not all these recent layoffs can be attributed solely to AI, but employee efficiency is at the heart of many decisions to deploy the technology.

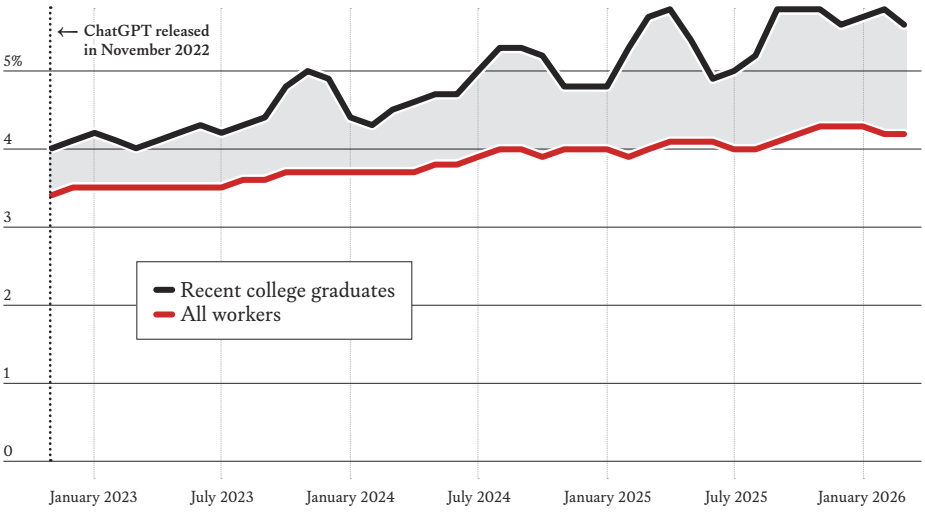
The ground is fertile for an AI backlash.

Although the growing volume of AI-related layoffs means that this emerging shock is affecting many kinds of workers, it seems to be disproportionately hitting the young and the more educated, across all industries. One of the most definitive academic studies to date, by the Stanford Digital Economy Lab, examined monthly payroll records for millions of people across tens of thousands of companies from the months before the initial public release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, in November 2022, through July 2025. Drawing on data from ADP, the largest payroll software provider in the United States, the researchers found that workers between the ages of 22 and 25 in the occupations most exposed to AI, such as software developers and customer service representatives, experienced a six percent decline in employment. "In contrast, employment trends for more-experienced workers in the same occupations, and workers of all ages in less-exposed occupations such as nursing aides, have remained stable or continued to grow," the paper said.

The China shock brought blue-collar, less educated American workers into direct competition with hundreds of millions of low-wage Chinese workers. In contrast, a Federal Reserve Bank of New York study concluded that recent increases in overall U.S. unemployment were concentrated "among recent college graduates and white-collar workers." Across the entire U.S. economy, the unemployment rate for recent college graduates is outpacing that of the overall labor force.

WHITE-COLLAR WIPEOUT

U.S. unemployment rate, 2023–26



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York; U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

In March 2026, the jobless rate for recent college graduates stood at about 5.6 percent, compared with 4.2 percent for the overall population. Perhaps the most prominent early casualty of AI's pressure on the white-collar job market is software engineers, particularly recent STEM college graduates struggling to secure entry-level work as AI's ability to write and edit computer code improves by the day.

But the effects are hardly confined to aspiring coders. The St. Louis Fed study concluded that "even highly educated workers in previously stable fields are not immune to economic disruption." In many previously shock-resistant industries today, people whose main tasks can be largely if not entirely codified by a set of rules and processes—and thus can be automated away by AI—are now under threat: analysts in consulting, accountants and actuaries in finance, associates and paralegals in law. This slackening of labor demand for the young reduces the likelihood that early-career workers will acquire the differentiated skills that tend to catapult their future career prospects.

In some industries, particularly those that rely on so-called tacit rather than codifiable knowledge and for which aptitudes such as judgment and emotional intelligence matter, AI is augmenting work, not

automating it. One example is health care. *The New York Times* reported that the Mayo Clinic has expanded its radiology staff by more than 50 percent even while deploying hundreds of AI models to support image analysis, allowing doctors to focus more on complex decision-making and patient care. AI is also spurring the creation of altogether new occupations and someday may even spawn new industries.

AI should eventually boost productivity, incomes, and the overall standard of living in the United States. But even as AI is beginning to complement existing labor, the relative speed and scale of initial job destruction are likely to exceed the speed and scale of job creation. And the damage it wreaks may be exponential, as well. One reason is the astonishing rate of improvement in the quality of AI tools. Since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022, the number of AI offerings has exploded and their caliber has exponentially improved—all at little cost to any business or individual with an Internet connection. This year, in March and April alone, at least ten new models were released by the leading AI companies.

History offers few, if any, examples of such prodigious innovation, adopted so rapidly. A U.S. Census Bureau survey published in 2024 reported that 60 years after the first industrial robot was installed in the United States in 1961, only 12 percent of manufacturing factories used robots. Another found that by 1997, a generation after the advent of personal computers, only 49.8 percent of employed adults used them. According to the St. Louis Fed's November 2025 study of AI adoption, 54.6 percent of U.S. adults were using AI—just three years after the public launch of ChatGPT.

Business leaders are already bracing for the broadening impact of the AI shock. Forty-one percent of approximately 10,000 global executives polled in a 2024 World Economic Forum survey said they expected AI to reduce their workforces by 2030. They are no doubt aware of the emerging scholarly consensus on AI's labor-market effects. Using a novel methodology that modeled 32,000 distinct skills across the U.S. labor market, a team of scholars at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology calculated that 12 percent of total U.S. wages pay for tasks that are technically automatable by current AI systems—calling the early effects on tech-related jobs like coding "only the tip of the iceberg." The McKinsey study concluded that current technologies, including AI agents, "could, in theory, automate activities accounting for about 57 percent of U.S. work hours today"—in other words, "a majority of the work now done by people in the United States."

THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS

The question is not whether AI will bring forth a productivity bonanza; it will. The question is whether the United States can fully realize those future gains by navigating the initial disruptions to labor markets and mitigating the strains on the country's economic and political structures. The historical record is unambiguous: resistance to innovation arises when the pace and scope of creative destruction exceed the pace and scope of a government's policy response.

So far, the largest creative destruction shock to the post–World War II global economic system was the explosion of labor-intensive Chinese exports resulting from the productivity boom that began in China in the early 1980s. Studies have shown that from the 1990s through the first decade of the twenty-first century, U.S. imports of Chinese goods destroyed more than a million U.S. manufacturing jobs, with many of the losses concentrated among older manufacturing workers in a small number of states with once thriving industrial economies, such as Ohio and Pennsylvania.

That Washington and local governments did too little to address the economic, cultural, and social costs of the China shock has been well documented. They incorrectly assumed that the larger but diffuse benefits—cheaper consumer goods, expanded export opportunities—would outweigh the concentrated and deep harm of job loss in the eyes of displaced workers. The main U.S. policy bulwark against the China shock was the Trade Adjustment Assistance program, which was established under the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 as part of that bill's efforts to liberalize U.S. trade under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The TAA aimed to provide expanded unemployment insurance, job-search assistance, and retraining to workers whose companies had been harmed by increased imports. But the TAA was hobbled by its complex design, cumbersome bureaucracy, and inadequate funding: in 2005, its total outlay was $845 million, just 0.03 percent of total federal spending.

The social consequences of this neglect were devastating. The workers most hurt by the contraction of the manufacturing labor market were far more likely to suffer what the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have described as "deaths of despair": suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol poisoning, an explosion of which has contributed to declines in life expectancy among some groups of Americans over the last two decades. The political consequences

were similarly seismic. Donald Trump was elected and reelected president largely because of his strident rejection of globalization and his willingness to give voice to the grievances of China shock victims. In his first term, he launched a trade war against China and pursued immigration restrictions. In his second, he instituted a sweeping and chaotic global tariff regime and a mass deportation campaign focusing primarily on immigrants working low-wage jobs in the United States illegally.

These shock waves continue to define American politics today despite two important and underacknowledged realities. The economic pressures from China on less-skilled manufacturing jobs have largely eased, and those pressures were outweighed for the country overall by lower prices of consumer goods and industrial inputs, as well as growth in sectors in which the United States retains a comparative advantage over the rest of the world. In 2024, the median U.S. household income was $83,730—18.6 percent higher in inflation-adjusted terms than it was in 2001, the year China acceded to the World Trade Organization—and aggregate unemployment remains near historic lows. But these economic realities have not softened the political backlash against globalization.

The China shock entailed a reorganization of global supply networks, its pace dictated by the years-long crawl of World Trade Organization agreements and multinational corporate decision-making. According to a canonical study by the economists David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson, it caused the loss of around 1.5 million U.S. manufacturing jobs between 1990 and 2007, displacing an average of about 7,500 U.S. manufacturing workers every month. The evidence suggests that the AI shock may already be as large, with the potential to grow much bigger. In a U.S. economy that contains two million software-developer jobs and three million customer-service jobs alone, the number of jobs threatened by AI could dwarf the number of jobs lost to the China shock. Moreover, the digital infrastructure of AI is vastly easier to build than the physical infrastructure of global supply networks—or of earlier epoch-defining innovations such as railroads or the electric grid. The AI shock may end up being the fastest technology-driven disruption in human history.

The ground is already fertile for a political movement animated by backlash to the AI revolution. Younger, more highly educated workers around the world are already voicing profound dissatisfaction with

the economic, political, and social systems into which they are maturing. The outlook of Generation Z—skeptical of elites, capitalism, and Big Tech—has been deeply shaped by pessimism over stagnant wages, concentrated wealth, fading opportunity, and declining trust in institutions and their leaders.

This generation is entering the political fray at a time when the median age of a first-time homebuyer is 40, up from 32 in 2000 and 28 in 1991; the monthly premiums for high-quality health care are surging; and the annual sticker price for undergraduates at top universities is approaching $100,000. It is not surprising, then, that today most young Americans believe that capitalism does not provide fair opportunities to succeed, or that only 16 percent of Americans under 30 believe that democracy is working well for them. Accordingly, they are supporting candidates who speak to these concerns: Abigail Spanberger and Mikie Sherrill, both of whom campaigned on "affordability agendas," rode the youth vote to respective victories in the Virginia and New Jersey gubernatorial races, and Zohran Mamdani, a democratic socialist, galvanized young voters with a similar message en route to becoming mayor of New York City.

In many advanced countries, much of Generation Z sees its progression into adulthood as a gauntlet of seemingly endless competitions: for admission into selective middle schools, high schools, and universities; for hiring by selective global companies for selective internships; and, finally, for permanent employment by those companies to launch their careers. If AI eliminates too many of these coveted jobs, the sense of betrayal among young, highly educated professionals may closely echo the outrage of older, less educated manufacturing workers during the China shock. As age becomes another fault line in American politics, new battles over Social Security and Medicare could further divide an already polarized country.

UNLEARN HOW TO CODE

Policymakers who assume Americans will uncritically embrace AI, labor-market disruptions and all, will be in for a rude awakening. Indeed, before it has begun in earnest, the AI transition is already unpopular. A September 2025 Marist poll revealed that roughly 67 percent of all Americans believe that AI will eliminate more jobs than it creates, and a March 2026 Quinnipiac University poll found that 81 percent of young Americans believe that it will reduce job opportunities. The backlash

against data centers is the first surge in a building groundswell of discontent. Investment in the data centers that provide the computing infrastructure needed for the broad deployment of AI is increasingly driving U.S. economic growth. That has not stopped the proliferation of heated protests against data centers or of proposed moratoriums on their construction being debated in statehouses and town halls across the country.

To reap the full productivity and geopolitical gains from AI and avoid a wider backlash that could seriously limit those gains, the U.S. government will need to devise new ways of supporting workers. Tax credits to encourage training in new skills and wage-loss insurance to stimulate reemployment are sufficiently broad, simple policies that will bolster skills and incomes, help workers navigate AI-related job losses, and thus avoid another moment of political rupture. To pay for these policies, the federal government should establish a payroll tax on companies' equity compensation.

> The AI shock may already be as large as the China shock.

Most employees are paid for the work they do entirely in cash that can immediately be taxed by the federal government. But some, particularly the country's highest-paid executives, receive most of their compensation in the form of equity incentives, such as shares in company stock or options to purchase those shares. Equity compensation is generally not taxed at the time it is granted or as it compounds in value over time. According to the Economic Policy Institute, equity compensation has been the single biggest driver of inequality of pay between American CEOs and their average workers, which has risen from a ratio of 21 to 1 in 1965 to 281 to 1 in 2024.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, markets currently reward companies for paying equity compensation. Under U.S. law, public companies must report their financial results in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles. But most companies also report "pro forma" results that exclude stock-based compensation. Academics and market observers routinely criticize this practice because pro forma results overstate corporate profitability by excluding the cost of equity compensation. Investors tolerate the convention, however, so companies continue to do it. This practice greatly rewards executives who get paid mainly in equity and disadvantages workers who receive cash.

A new payroll tax of 25 percent levied on public and large private companies when issuing equity compensation would generate at least

$100 billion in annual revenue without unduly penalizing AI innovation. It would link the generated tax revenues to the appreciating equity of the companies that benefit most from an AI-related productivity boom, while still allowing executives to earn compensation packages consistent with market forces. Those companies' higher revenues and lower costs, made possible by the successful deployment of AI, would offset some, if not all, of the tax's cost over time. The $100 billion in new annual tax revenue would be equal to just 0.16 percent of the equity-market capitalization of the Fortune 500 companies as of May 2026 and only about ten percent of the $1 trillion in U.S. stock repurchases in 2025.

Unlike a wealth tax, which may be unconstitutional and could squelch extraordinary innovations like AI, a payroll tax on equity compensation would align the economic interests of all those with a stake in artificial intelligence: companies looking to innovate and grow, a federal government looking to boost overall U.S. productivity and average living standards, and workers who need support to navigate the AI transition.

The new revenue would fund both the tax credits to encourage retraining and the wage-loss insurance to encourage reemployment. To cushion the blow of potential mass white-collar job losses, the federal government would create a substantial new tax credit that eligible workers or their employers could use to invest in building new skills. The government would not be creating its own retraining programs and thus would not be forced to predict which skills will be most in demand; the training, including online courses, in-person classes at colleges and universities, and in-house programs crafted by companies, would teach whichever skills end up being a strong complement to AI.

A widely available portable tax credit would also overcome the so-called adverse-selection problem that befalls most training programs, which generally do not boost worker earnings because companies assume that those who participate in them may somehow be less skilled and thus less desirable to hire. By offering this tax credit to many workers rather than few, competition would compel companies to offer meaningful retraining or risk seeming unattractive in the overall labor market.

To encourage the reemployment of workers who lose their jobs to AI, the new wage-loss insurance program, also created by the federal government, would, for a time, replace a fraction of eligible workers' lost wages once they have found another, lower-paying job.

The rationale for wage-loss insurance is straightforward. Laid-off workers often lose firm- or industry-specific capital; for example, software engineers at a large tech company laid off because AI has automated away their roles miss the chance to gain experience using AI in the workplace. Often, these workers can find jobs only at a lower wage, which they are understandably reluctant to take, thus aggravating the loss of human capital by remaining unemployed. The government can mitigate this risk by partially compensating workers for their lost earnings when they move to lower-paying jobs. A software engineer, for example, might find a new job in sales at another large tech company or as the chief engineer of a fledgling AI startup. Wage-loss insurance would help soften the blow of accepting a lower salary in the new position.

Wage-loss insurance incentivizes faster reemployment after a job loss by reducing the worker's incentive to stay unemployed in the hope of landing a better job. And it does so without discouraging businesses from hiring because the insurance does not alter the market wage firms are willing to pay.

The emerging evidence that AI can substitute for high-talent tasks (and thus for high-wage jobs) makes wage-loss insurance especially well suited to addressing the perils of the AI shock—and its promise, as well. Research by the economists Rob Shimer and Daron Acemoglu has shown that wage-loss insurance increases aggregate output by encouraging workers to seek high-wage jobs that carry high unemployment risk along with high productivity potential—in other words, the very jobs that will power an economic boom.

The relative simplicity of tax credits and wage-loss insurance would make adjusting their eligibility criteria and overall scope simple, as well. For example, the government could easily change or expand the list of eligible occupations and skill groups to keep pace with the AI shock as it unfolds.

Creative destruction has been central to growth in the world economy for centuries. Artificial intelligence is no exception to this rule. As a technology, it holds sorely needed economic promise for workers, companies, and the country. But if not managed properly, its adoption could yield a political and social crisis that could make the China shock look mild by comparison. Acting boldly now, before the AI shock has fully materialized, can forestall another era-defining crisis and usher in a productivity renaissance.

REVIEW ESSAY

Who Is China?

Beijing's Self-Inflicted Identity Crisis

IAN JOHNSON

The Idea of China: A Contested History
BY XU GUOQI. Harvard University Press, March 2026, 320 pp.

Too many in the West, China's rise is an indisputable fact. Commentators celebrate its success in language not seen since an earlier generation of political tourists gushed over Mao's China: in February, after returning from a visit to the country, the investor and columnist Steven Rattner averred that China's "model of state-directed capitalism" had helped produce "the colossus that dominates global manufacturing while making extraordinary progress in fast-growing, technology-oriented fields that have long been American led." The economic historian Adam Tooze declared last year that the country "is the master key to understanding modernity." Others seem resigned to asking narrow, technocratic questions: Will its military be ready to invade Taiwan next year, or a few years down the road? Can its authoritarian political model provide a stable succession when Chinese leader Xi Jinping dies? Can it overcome sanctions and produce cutting-edge chips? In doing so, they treat the permanency of the People's Republic of China as a foregone conclusion.

What's often lost in these discussions is that the country's own leaders implicitly doubt the very concept of their nation. Government officials and many ordinary people vehemently proclaim the sanctity of China's borders, even as many of its border regions are run under a state of near-martial law. Official narratives, meanwhile, forbid a coherent explanation of how China obtained these lands. As part

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Illustration by John Lee

of a broader intellectual decay, many of the country's brightest minds have exiled themselves, either through inner emigration and self-censorship or by leaving the country altogether.

China shouldn't have much of an identity crisis. It boasts an ancient civilization and culture instantly recognizable around the world. Its intellectual inheritance—rich traditions in martial arts, medicine, philosophy, and religion—is widely admired and imitated in global popular culture and the high arts. But Chinese leaders behave as if they were running an upstart nation with no history—one that has to demand that visitors refer to it as "the People's Republic" and repeat that there is only "one China," located within sacred and immutable borders. The country today "is a multiheaded creature of no certain or reliable identity," Xu Guoqi writes in his new book, *The Idea of China: A Contested History*. "If there were a clear or reliable identity, today's leaders would not be so obsessed with trying to impose one."

In the nearly 15 years since Xi took power, in 2012, he has tried to define China by fusing the glories of communism—sacrifice, duty, perseverance—and some elements of traditional culture, especially filial piety and obedience. But by emptying both of these ideologies of their subversive kernels—their emphasis on social justice and the right to disobedience, to name two—Xi has failed to construct a convincing vision of what China stands for. It remains unclear whether Xi's version of China has any values beyond holding on to the territories of the old Qing empire and keeping the Chinese Communist Party in power, or whether the CCP's project is capacious enough to accommodate the country's historical hybridity.

To Xu, the party's answer—building a "house of cards" atop the country's multifarious history—could be its downfall. In the Soviet Union, a similar attempt to build a modern nation-state on the foundations of an empire fell apart after its leaders could not resolve the inherent contradictions of such a project. The CCP, *The Idea of China* suggests, might meet a similar fate if it does not change course.

The political and economic success of the last four decades will likely prevent the People's Republic from collapsing like the Soviet Union. Still, Xu's book should make one skeptical about the assumption that the China that exists today is the China that will exist long into the future. Instead, Xu reminds readers of the different possible paths China might have taken, and the consequences of its not doing so. At its most powerful, the idea of China was civilizational, helping hold together multiethnic empires and vast territories without extreme violence. But when it relied on force, China became brittle and unstable.

Over the past century, China has solved its material shortcomings, emerging as a global economic and scientific powerhouse. But its national identity remains as troubled as it was when the first Chinese nation-state was founded. This presents the world with a worrying question: whether a country that is so uncomfortable in its own skin can be a pillar of stability as so many hope, or whether it is more likely to become a source of global instability, projecting its anxieties and

neuroses onto the rest of the world. Beijing claims to aspire to the former, but its actions at home and, increasingly, abroad suggest it may be headed toward the latter.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Part of the confusion over China's identity originates in its history as a cultural rather than a political idea. The Chinese word for China is *zhongguo*, or "middle kingdom." *Zhongguo* is an ancient term, but until the nineteenth century, it had almost never been used to describe the country that outsiders called China, Cina, Cathay, or Kitay. Instead, Chinese officials and writers called their lands by the name of the dynasty that ran it: the Great Qing or the Great Ming, for example. When they referred to their ancient civilization, they used different terms: *huaxia* or *zhonghua*. Those terms rarely changed over the centuries, but the name of the territory varied depending on who was in power because it was the ruling family that controlled the lands and could call it what they wanted.

Europeans of the early modern era were perplexed by this state of affairs. In the sixteenth century, for example, Galeote Pereira, a Portuguese soldier-merchant, wrote: "We are wont to call this country China, and the people Chins," but local people said they had never heard of any such name. Matters came to a head in the nineteenth century, when the rise of the modern nation-state forced the ruling Qing dynasty to deal with other countries as equals rather than as barbarians or vassals. Outsiders might have called the Qing's territories "China" or some similar variant, but the empire's officials rejected the term. In their eyes, there was no country of China; there was only the Great Qing, and some of their diplomats insisted—unsuccessfully—that foreigners call them by that name.

For Liang Qichao, the most famous reformer of the early twentieth century, this confusion was shameful. Even though Chinese people had a long history, he lamented in a 1901 essay, "to this day they do not have a name for their country." He rejected the name "China" because it derived from the country's first dynasty, the Qin. (The word "China" likely ventured into European languages in the sixteenth century through the Portuguese borrowing of a Persian term, which itself came from a Sanskrit word derived from the Qin dynasty.) Using it meant using the same name for the country that one royal family called its territories two thousand years ago. It made about as much sense as using the dynastic names Tang, Song, Ming, or Qing to describe the country—these were just names bequeathed by rulers. In the end, Liang figured that "China" would have to do. But until the fall of the dynasty, a decade later, officials rejected it.

The same question continues to linger a century later. "The People's Republic" is little more than mid-twentieth-century communist nomenclature, emphasizing that China is a communist state. Simply referring to the country as "China" could imply that others might rule it.

BORDER PATROL

The Chinese government does take pains to show itself as a multicultural state in the same way that many countries make a pageantry of different races

and cultures in their public messaging. When China applies to the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization for certain cultural practices to be recognized as "intangible cultural heritage," it always includes minority cultural practices, such as Mongolian throat singing, Tibetan opera, or Uyghur Muqam musical suites. That can't, however, mask the fact that these cultures are almost all in borderlands that were not part of China for most of its history. In fact, Chinese dynasties never controlled the territories that today make up the three northeastern provinces often collectively referred to as Manchuria (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang), rarely controlled any parts of Mongolia, and only occasionally sent expeditions to Tibet or the parts of Central Asia now called Xinjiang. Control, when it happened, was the exception, not the rule.

More typical were the borders of China's penultimate dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644), which encompassed lands from roughly today's Beijing in the north to Hong Kong in the south, and from the eastern coastal areas to the Sichuan basin in the west. On older maps of China, Westerners called this "China Proper" because it was where almost all Chinese people lived and where the country's battles, fables, myths, and stories had arisen. It accounts for more than 60 percent of China's current territory.

China's borders ballooned under the Qing. The dynasty was run by the Manchu, who conquered the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century, and then combined their knowledge of the borderlands, the economic power of the heartland, and the new technologies of modern firearms to create a military juggernaut. The Qing almost doubled the territory the Ming had controlled, absorbing Mongolia, Tibet, and huge swaths of Central Asia, which they called Xinjiang, or "new border." Eventually, after the Qing fell, in 1912, the Manchu areas near the Korean Peninsula, along with the rest of the empire, became part of the Republic of China, putting them under the control of ethnic Han Chinese. In 1949, the republic's armies lost the civil war and fled to Taiwan; the CCP inherited the republic's borders minus the province of Outer Mongolia, which broke free, became a Soviet satellite, and is now the independent country of Mongolia—the only minority region that was able to escape the old empire.

Before they took power, Communist Party leaders had said the lands the Qing had conquered should choose their own way—and independence was fine. Communist leader Mao Zedong, for example, favored independence not only for Mongolians and other minorities but even for his home province, Hunan. In these early years, Mao was inspired by the twin New Culture and May Fourth Movements, embodiments of the seminal intellectual awakening advocating rationalism, liberation, and self-determination, from which the CCP sprang in 1921. Chen Duxiu, one of the party's principal founders and a luminary of both movements, recognized that democracy was as important to the project of Chinese modernization as technological progress.

These ideas were only partly adopted by the Nationalists (who ruled from

1912 to 1949), and then mostly rejected by the CCP. Once in power, it adopted the republic's borders, offering the border regions only a token form of autonomy and recognition of their cultural heritage: a minority might be named the formal head of the region, while the Communist Party secretary—who wielded the real power—was usually Han Chinese.

The twists and turns in central control over China's peripheries have never quite been resolved; they have simply assumed new form under the CCP. Festering wounds in the national psyche, they help contextualize movements for independence in Taiwan and autonomy in Hong Kong and their repression at the hands of a government that has all but abandoned its enlightenment-style roots.

A BRUTAL PAST

Linguistic and geographic instability contributed to political instability. One corrective to this problem of national definition might be some sort of political manifesto for the country—in other words, a constitution. But as Xu points out, China has churned through numerous documents that in form were constitutions but in effect were "regulatory legislation, provisional documents, a set of guidelines, or simply lip service that the rulers tweaked and rewrote to better serve the regime."

Unstable political structures have in turn produced political violence. "Because the political culture had not yet stabilized into a system of enduring institutions," Xu writes, leaders from Chiang Kai-shek, through Mao and Deng Xiaoping, to Xi today have "relied on military intervention to solve political issues and crush dissent." Chiang launched large-scale military operations to crush opponents, especially the Communists, and unite the country. After a four-year civil war brought them to power in 1949, the Communists killed, by some estimates, two to three million people in an attempt to eliminate the country's landed gentry, and several million as a result of other political campaigns in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Mao's successor, Deng, used military force to put down student protests in 1989 and oversaw violent "strike hard" anticrime campaigns that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of social outcasts. Xi has violently suppressed Chinese civil society, especially in minority regions, and continues to conduct military purges.

The government tries to paper over almost every aspect of this history by rewriting the record to make it seem as if the Communist Party has ruled China benevolently since 1949, its Han and ethnic minority subjects living in complete harmony. The basic idea is that all people who have ever lived inside the current boundaries of the People's Republic are now and always have been "Chinese." This applies, most absurdly, to conquering foreign military leaders, including Genghis Khan, whose mausoleum is found in the current region of Inner Mongolia. There, officials lionize him as "a great man of the Chinese people."

SUFFERING FROM SUCCESS

The Idea of China is eminently readable and covers a collection of issues as varied as China's role in World War I

and how the state views sports. Xu's evident ease working across subjects prompts comparisons to Jonathan Spence, the Yale historian who paired macro-level histories of the country with idiosyncratic examinations of narrower but revealing subjects: the story of an ordinary woman's death in imperial China is one of his classics. *The Idea of China* is an effort at the broad-brush portrait, but unlike Spence's doorstop, *The Search for Modern China*, Xu's book is more of an urgent intervention in contemporary debates about China than a comprehensive historical overview.

Xu is clearly disappointed with how China has turned out. He grew up in rural Anhui Province during the Mao era and came of age at the start of the reform era, when China opened to the world. He studied at Harvard, taught in the United States, and for nearly 20 years has lived and taught in Hong Kong. (The territory's demise as a center of free-thinking and judicial independence is a leitmotif in the book.) He bemoans how the very idea of China has become tarnished in many parts of the world, a decline he attributes to elites' centurylong search for national wealth and prosperity rather than an inclusive political system. The CCP, in its dual commitment to economic growth and suppression of dissent, epitomizes these priorities. While Rattner and Tooze travel to China to marvel at Xiaomi auto factory floors and miles of high-speed rail tracks, inspiring Chinese figures such as the documentary filmmaker Ai Xiaoming are banned from leaving the country. But it is hard not to read parts of the book, including a vividly rendered chapter on Zhang Pengchun, the Mencius-quoting diplomat sent by Chiang to the United States and Europe in 1945 to help draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as proof that Chinese culture is not only compatible with a more open political system but contains the seeds of one.

Mostly, *The Idea of China* is about missed opportunities. The failure, after the Qing fell, of Chinese leaders to heed the insights of New Culture and May Fourth was one. The CCP's successful pursuit of national prosperity may temporarily shield it from the worst consequences of this refusal. But it has left China hobbled by the same problem that has plagued it since it moved from traditional empire to nation-state: a political system that ultimately relies on violence to coerce its heterogeneous subjects.

Prosperity insulates all political systems from hard decisions. That has been the case in China since the ultraviolence of the Mao era gave way to the more rational decision-making and accompanying affluence of the past half century. With growth and faith in the future now flagging, the Xi administration's answer—injecting token elements of traditional culture to bolster legitimacy—is little more than a clichéd response drawn from the standard playbook of authoritarian leaders around the world. But under wiser political leadership, the "idea" of a China with a hugely rich, diverse, and multicultural past could be a source of strength rather than insecurity. This idea, of a complex China that far transcends the narrow constraints of the People's Republic of China, will endure.

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REVIEW ESSAY

A Democracy Safe for the World

How to Fix a Broken System

SHERI BERMAN

Politics Without Politicians: The Case for Citizen Rule. BY HÉLÈNE LANDEMORE. Thesis, 2026, 320 pp.

Over the past decade or two, concerns about democracy's future have moved to the center of political debate. In many long-established democracies once thought stable and secure, polarization has risen, trust in political institutions has fallen, and governments appear unable to respond effectively to the challenges their countries face. In the United States, internal divisions, political dissatisfaction, and institutional dysfunction have become so severe over the past year that the country is backsliding "much faster" than "any other democracy in modern times," according to the think tank Varieties of Democracy.

Scholars, activists, philanthropies, and nonprofits across the United States and Europe—and across the ideological spectrum—have responded by turning their attention and resources to fixing what is wrong with democracy. Most assume that the basic structure of representative democracy is sound and that its problems can be addressed by improving the institutions and procedures through which it operates. But not everyone shares that view. To some, the crisis of democracy goes deeper—it derives from a system that is so rotten, corrupt, unrepresentative, and incompetent that it is beyond reform.

Today, this critique is commonly associated with the populist right and the far right. In the United States and elsewhere, some right-wing intellectuals and activists argue that liberal democracies should give way to illiberal regimes that still hold elections but

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restrict rights and that will promote the "common good," traditional values, and nationalist projects that emphasize ethnic and religious homogeneity. Some argue that democracy must be discarded altogether in favor of strongman rule or some form of monarchy.

Outside those right-wing circles, other thinkers begin from the same premise—that contemporary democracy is fundamentally unworkable—but arrive at very different conclusions about what should replace the existing system. One such proposal comes from Hélène Landemore, a professor of political science at Yale. Landemore is hardly opposed to democracy; indeed, she is a defender of democracy, albeit an increasingly critical one. Her first book, *Democratic Reason*, celebrated the system's advantages over other forms of government. Her second, *Open Democracy*, argued that democracy could be improved if it allowed citizens more direct influence and participation. Her latest book, *Politics Without Politicians: The Case for Citizen Rule,* goes a step further. In it, Landemore argues that representative democracy is fundamentally flawed and that what is needed is nothing less than a revolution. "It gives me no pleasure to see myself converging on a conclusion associated with the populists," she writes on the first page. Yet they "have a point." The current system "is no longer—if it ever was—capable of delivering either democratic or good governance."

Landemore's solution is a reimagining of democracy from the ground up, replacing representative institutions with direct citizen rule. But just as transitions to illiberalism or authoritarianism are not the answer to democratic malaise, neither is discarding elections and other features of representative democracy that create vital links between citizens and their government. The current system requires repair, not revolution. Making governments more representative and responsive will require a wide variety of reforms, potentially including the kinds of citizens' assemblies Landemore champions. But such assemblies are one promising improvement among many, not a substitute for representative democracy itself. Contemporary democracy needs all the innovative reforms it can get.

ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE

All modern democracies are representative: rather than governing themselves directly, citizens elect politicians to govern on their behalf. Many definitions of democracy therefore focus on elections. Perhaps the most famous was offered by the early-twentieth-century Austrian political economist Joseph Schumpeter, who defined democracy as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Adam Przeworski, Schumpeter's most influential contemporary successor, describes democracy as a system in which rulers are selected through contested elections and incumbents relinquish power when they lose.

For Landemore, however, this electoral core is precisely the problem. She argues that any attempt to repair democracy while leaving elections at its center is bound to fail because elections create a professional political

class that is unsuited to genuine democratic rule. As she puts it, members of this group, "whatever their personal, individual qualities," cannot create "assemblies capable of either fully democratic representation or smart, optimally beneficial legislation." One reason is that elections select for a particular type: those who seek power and are prone to be corrupted by it. These are, as Landemore writes, "alpha types, the charismatic, the daring, the entitled, the arrogant, even those with no shame whatsoever, and sometimes even the downright psychopathic."

Elections thus deny meaningful influence to ordinary citizens, especially those she calls the "shy"—"the unambitious, the selfless, and the accommodating." The process filters out many of the citizens least attracted to power and, in Landemore's view, best disposed to exercise it responsibly. And in many countries, elections produce representatives who are disproportionately white, wealthy, and highly educated rather than a cohort that resembles the citizenry at large. Landemore argues that the inevitable result is distorted political outcomes, with electoral systems generating laws and policies that are often "misaligned with and sometimes even contrary to the political interests of citizens."

Ultimately, Landemore concludes, democracy should not be understood merely as a method whereby citizens choose representatives and governments at periodic intervals. Instead, democracy should be a "way of life," with continual public participation. She reimagines the structures of democracy accordingly, proposing that elections, professional politicians, and parties all be eliminated and replaced with a national parliament and local assemblies whose members would be selected by lottery. Members might be called on to serve for extended periods and be compensated for their time

and for the expenses associated with attending. Citizens would then vote on the proposals these bodies produce in frequent referendums.

According to Landemore, this system would have practical and civic advantages. Without professional politicians bending to the wishes of campaign donors and lobbyists, avenues for corruption would disappear. Because they are chosen at random, citizens' assemblies would more closely approximate the diversity of society than a class of elected officials, enabling them to draw on the "collective intelligence" of that society and therefore produce better policy outcomes. Most important, she argues, would be the assemblies' realization of the French Revolution's promise of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." (Landemore is French.) Citizens' assemblies would tap into a classical, positive conception of liberty in which citizens would be devoted "full-time" to "the public good and political life." The assemblies would better embody political equality by opening governance to all citizens. And they could generate solidarity or even what Landemore calls "love," as citizens governed through assemblies come to see one another as fellows rather than as competitors or strangers.

To help make her case, Landemore cites recent experiments with citizens' assemblies. In Iceland, citizens' assemblies emerged in response to a political crisis in 2008. Tasked with setting the agenda for a revision of the constitution, a randomly selected group of more than 900 citizens produced recommendations, including one—the nationalization of natural resources not already in private hands—that won overwhelming support when put to voters in a 2021 referendum. In Ireland, assemblies have worked alongside existing political institutions to address contentious issues such as same-sex marriage and healthcare policy, on several occasions issuing recommendations that were later put before the public. Most famously, an assembly convened in 2016 recommended removing the country's constitutional ban on abortion, a proposal approved by voters in 2018. Landemore devotes particular attention to French assemblies in which she participated as a researcher and observer. In one of them, set up in 2019 by the French government in response to the "yellow vest" movement, a nationwide wave of protests over fuel taxes and economic inequality that began the previous year, a group of 150 citizens was tasked with proposing climate policies. The group produced scores of recommendations, some of which were later adopted by the government.

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

Landemore's enthusiasm is infectious, and she identifies many real problems with modern democracy. But her suggestion that citizens' assemblies and referendums can effectively replace existing institutions is overly optimistic. The proposal raises practical concerns: participating in assemblies would require considerable time, and many citizens might be unable or unwilling to serve. Landemore favors compulsory participation, similar to jury duty in the United States. Yet avoidance of jury duty is common, and many Americans receive hardship exemptions, raising doubts about whether a mandatory

lottery system could secure the kind of sustained and socially diverse participation she hopes for.

Holding referendums in which the public ratifies or rejects assembly proposals adds further complications. Historically, referendums have often been plagued by low turnout, and blunt yes-or-no choices can oversimplify complex issues and leave outcomes vulnerable to media and pressure campaigns. The 2016 Brexit referendum illustrates these dangers well: many British voters had limited information about their country's membership in the European Union, the campaign was rife with misleading claims, and participation was uneven, making it difficult to conclude that the narrow result in favor of leaving the EU truly reflected the will of the people. Similar issues emerged in 2022 in Chile, where a constitution drafted by a convention not unlike Landemore's citizens' assemblies was rejected by voters who thought it too radical and complicated.

Beyond the practical problems lie broader political concerns that bear directly on the outcomes Landemore wants to realize: participation, liberty, equality, solidarity, and citizen rule itself. Citizens' assemblies would likely involve fewer citizens in meaningful political activity than representative democracy does today. By design, only a tiny fraction of the population would participate at any given time while the rest looked on. As for whether citizens' assemblies would cultivate civic values and solidarity among those who participate, look again to the example of jury duty. Although many people find jury duty worthwhile, there is little evidence that it leaves them with

a sustained interest in law or politics, much less a desire to make politics "a way of life." For many citizens, the good life simply does not entail politics as a full- or even part-time vocation. And although participants in assemblies might form strong bonds, it is far from clear whether those bonds would endure or generate solidarity among the wider public.

In addition to being overly optimistic about the benefits of a system composed of citizens' assemblies, Landemore does not fully grapple with the crucial democratic functions that elections, political parties, and campaigns perform. These institutions do not merely select leaders. They bring politics to the public. It is through electoral competition that politicians are incentivized to seek out, articulate, and respond to public concerns. It is through parties that policy agendas are developed and disseminated and citizens are mobilized and organized. It is through campaigns that citizens receive most of their political information.

Elections are not everything, but the competitive struggle for votes is one of the main mechanisms through which citizens are engaged, and parties serve as the connective tissue between governments and citizens. Landemore's system would eliminate this mechanism and sever that connective tissue but offers no way to replace their democratic functions.

This is the paradox of her proposal. A system designed to increase participation and civic engagement could instead do the opposite. If most citizens knew that they were unlikely ever to serve in an assembly, and if there were no parties, campaigns, or electoral contests to focus their attention in ways referendums cannot, why would they remain informed, organized, or engaged? Why would they follow policy disputes or even know what the central issues are? Rather than democratizing politics, turning the deliberative work over to citizens' assemblies may depoliticize it.

NO SILVER BULLET

There is no doubt that representative democracy is functioning poorly. But it is one thing to compare an existing system with an ideal and quite another to compare it with realistic alternatives. *Politics Without Politicians* is strongest when it lays out the advantages of citizens' assemblies and shows how they might improve contemporary democracy; it is weakest when it argues that they should replace representative institutions altogether. To use Landemore's own terminology, her book is better at making the "reformist" case she rejects than the "radical" case she advocates.

The greater use of citizens' assemblies in representative democracy could provide real benefits. Informed deliberation among citizens with different backgrounds and perspectives is valuable. As the Icelandic, Irish, and French examples show, assemblies might help established institutions break deadlocks on contentious issues or act as agenda-setting mechanisms, generating proposals that politicians and legislatures could then be obliged to consider, refine, and implement. Yet in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, the path toward stronger democracy lies in combining such innovations with more conventional

reforms designed to address deficiencies in representative systems and make them more responsive, representative, and effective.

In the United States, the party primary system is an obvious source of dysfunction. Turnout in primary elections—when parties choose their candidates for a general election—is extremely low, sometimes only 20 percent of eligible voters, and those who participate tend to be more ideologically extreme than the public as a whole. This system gives politicians powerful incentives to appeal to partisan minorities rather than broad coalitions of voters. Reforms to make legislative seats more competitive could include open primaries, which allow all voters, not just party members, to participate, and ranked-choice voting, which forces candidates to compete for second- and third-choice support beyond their base. Fusion voting, which allows multiple parties to nominate the same candidate, can similarly make the democratic system more responsive. This practice was widespread in the nineteenth century and exists today in some U.S. states, including New York. It gives citizens dissatisfied with the major parties an opportunity to express their preferences, allows small parties to exert influence over big ones, and encourages candidates to widen their appeal.

Institutional reforms can also reduce the pernicious influence of gerrymandering. The practice has occurred in many democracies; former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, for example, redrew legislative districts to cement his hold on power. In the United States, years of gerrymandering have helped ensure that at least 80 percent of seats in the House of Representatives are firmly in the hands of one party, encouraging politicians to cater to intense partisan minorities. One far-reaching response would be to adopt a proportional representation system in which each U.S. state would function as a single district, and legislative seats would be allocated according to each party's share of the statewide vote. Such a system, used in many European democracies, would eliminate the opportunity for gerrymandering and encourage the formation of multiple parties, which could improve minority representation, foster coalition building, and potentially reduce toxic partisanship. More modest reforms could also help. States could transfer the authority to draw electoral maps to bipartisan, nonpartisan, or even citizen-led commissions or delegate the task to computer programs that use neutral criteria such as population equality and geographic compactness to draw districts. Such changes would help ensure that voters choose their politicians rather than allowing politicians to choose their voters.

Campaign financing reform can strengthen democracy, too. In the United States, a series of court cases and legislative changes in recent decades have enabled a dramatic expansion of the role that wealthy Americans play in how campaigns are funded and, by extension, who runs for and wins office. One recent *New York Times* investigation found that billionaires, who account for a tiny fraction of one percent of American society, made 19 percent of all reported federal campaign contributions in 2024; this class

contributed an even larger share to some local campaign funds. Politicians who rely on small donors can be pushed toward extreme positions, too, because donors tend to be more partisan than average voters. Regulations to limit the role of money in politics or, better yet, a move to publicly fund campaigns could make politicians more responsive to ordinary citizens and broaden the pool of people able to run for office.

Yet institutional fixes alone will not be enough to reinvigorate democracy. Civic education will be equally crucial. Decades of disinvestment in the United States and other democracies have contributed to low levels of knowledge about how democracy works and how citizens can shape it. Expanding and improving civic education in schools and elsewhere could help people make more informed political choices, become more active participants in public life, and be better prepared to navigate misinformation, disinformation, and efforts by foreign and domestic actors to manipulate political preferences.

Democracy, as Landemore correctly notes, also depends on certain habits: mutual respect, a sense of shared community and solidarity, the ability to compromise and cooperate. But as observers of democracy from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam have argued, such habits are learned primarily in civil society through everyday interactions in neighborhoods, workplaces, religious communities, parent-teacher associations, running clubs, bowling leagues, and similar settings. In recent decades, Americans' participation in such associations has declined, making efforts to reverse the trend necessary. Initiatives such as the U.S.-based nonprofit Braver Angels bring together citizens from diverse backgrounds to develop the skills necessary for constructive communication across differences. Expanding student exchange programs that encourage young people to spend time in regions or on campuses very different from their own and public service programs such as AmeriCorps and Service Year Alliance that place participants in communities far from home could help rebuild the crosscutting ties democracy needs. In Europe, meanwhile, some have begun advocating for the revival of mandatory military or public service programs that have declined in recent decades, arguing that doing so would foster not only military preparedness but also social solidarity by requiring young people to spend extended periods living and working alongside citizens from different backgrounds.

Democracy is in trouble. There is no silver bullet, and the solutions must be wide-ranging and realistic. The reform agenda should include institutional innovations such as citizens' assemblies; changes to clearly dysfunctional political, electoral, and campaign finance systems; and bottom-up efforts to rebuild the social and cultural foundations of democratic life. Landemore's book is valuable not because it persuades readers that representative democracy should be abolished but because it dramatizes how much better the current system could be—and offers one of the many reforms that will be necessary if democracy is to live up to its potential.

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REVIEW ESSAY

Why America Gets Africa Wrong

U.S. Policy Will Get Worse Before It Gets Better

ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY

Treachery and Diplomacy: The Shadow Politics of U.S.-Africa Relations BY SOBUKWE ODINGA. Columbia University Press, 2026, 296 pp.

The Trump administration boasts that it has upended the United States' relationship with Africa. In its view, the U.S. government has historically promoted a liberal agenda on the continent through aid, democracy promotion, and human rights advocacy; President Donald Trump has pivoted to a proudly transactional approach that favors U.S. security and economic interests. As Nick Checker, the senior State Department official responsible for African affairs, declared in a speech on March 19, "The United States is resetting its relationship with Africa based on mutually beneficial partnerships rather than aid, dependency, and spreading divisive ideology. . . . It's a radical but necessary corrective to the reckless pursuit of liberal hegemony over the last 30 years."

Critics and supporters alike have bought the Trump administration's claim. "Trump's 'America First' approach is reshaping how the United States engages with Africa," a Tony Blair Institute report declared in February 2025. "Under the new administration, U.S.-Africa relations will be explicitly pursued within the context of U.S. interests." In December, *The Guardian* concluded that Washington's Africa strategy indeed constituted a "consequential pivot" in which "human rights and democracy promotion have been de-emphasized."

But the truth is that the difference between Trump's approach and that of previous U.S. administrations is a

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matter of degree, not kind. Trump's wholesale demolition of the U.S. Agency for International Development, restrictions on African visa seekers, punitive tariffs, courting of autocrats, and freewheeling, quid-pro-quo dealmaking are more nakedly transactional than the policies his predecessors pursued. But alongside public health interventions and democracy promotion, Washington has long pursued arrangements with African authoritarians and sought more informal kinds of deals on the continent than it pursued elsewhere. For many decades, U.S. Africa policy has been disjointed. And over the past 20 years, it has become even more so, as recent African migrants to the United States have become more influential in policymaking and have pushed for a country-by-country, rather than a continent-wide, approach.

Trump—who is feuding with South Africa and intervening in Nigeria for ideological reasons while taking a transactional approach in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—is continuing this trend. Indeed, in some respects, Trump's haphazard global foreign policy resembles Washington's traditional approach to Africa—so much so that what was once a distinct Africa strategy appears to have become the American approach to everywhere.

That historic U.S. approach has long confounded analysts. Most accounts of U.S.-African relations presume that African countries are essentially powerless, ripe for manipulation and exploitation by larger powers. But if that is so, why have U.S. policies often failed to achieve their objectives even as they benefit African elites? For instance, since 2007, the United States has supported Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni largely on the premise that Uganda would take a leading role in dismantling al-Shabab, the militant group, in Somalia—a key objective of the U.S. "war on terror." Two decades later, al-Shabab remains lethal and deeply entrenched in Somalia. Uganda's military, meanwhile, has benefited from billions of dollars in American support, and Museveni has faced minimal criticism from Washington even as he has rolled back his country's democratic progress and ruthlessly crushed his opponents.

A new book by Sobukwe Odinga, an international relations and African American studies scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, offers an answer: African leaders have frequently and successfully pushed the United States to implement policies that go against both its proclaimed values and its interests. And Black Americans—primarily the descendants of enslaved people, not recent immigrants from Africa—have had an unusually large and personal influence on Africa policy. They have lost influence in recent years, especially under Trump. But Washington's piecemeal approach persists, as does the White House's vulnerability to exploitation by authoritarians. Although the factors driving U.S. policy in Africa may be changing, the outcomes have changed less. Individuals and small lobbies still exert an outsize influence on policy, and important briefs and deals are handed to relatively marginal figures. And the United States still has an incoherent mix of ideological and transactional approaches to different countries and lacks a consistently applied continental strategy.

BLACK POWER PARADOX

Odinga positions Washington's Africa policy as the product of negotiations between three sets of actors—the U.S. government, Black American foreign policy advocates inside and outside government, and African heads of state. And he suggests that the United States has often bent to African interests, not vice versa. Within Washington, long-standing assumptions of Black and African inferiority, as well as the continent's perceived marginality to core U.S. interests, led to a "dearth of long-term policy planning" and allowed different factions to push their own agendas. That, in turn, generated contradictory outcomes and sometimes weakened the U.S. government's overall bargaining leverage.

Odinga also shows how African elites regularly and successfully prevailed on the United States to make moves that benefited them. Building on the work of Merz Tate, an early pioneer of African foreign policy studies, as well as more recent work by the scholars Moses Tesi and Pearl Robinson, Odinga emphasizes the "agency and guile of African leaders as they spurred Washington to back them in regional disputes, increase aid to their governments, and downplay criticisms of their domestic policies." He wants readers to take them seriously as influential actors motivated by interests and ideology. Through a mix of "candor and deceit" and "cold calculations and racial allegiances," African elites bargained cleverly with the U.S. government. During the Cold War, they often appealed to the United States' strategic need to place military bases in their territories to combat communism; after the Soviet Union's fall, they also proffered resource and intelligence deals. Consider Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator of Congo (formerly Zaire). In the mid-1980s, Mobutu successfully got the Reagan administration to pressure the International Monetary Fund and the Paris Club, a group of creditor nations, to give his country extraordinarily advantageous debt-restructuring deals by threatening to prevent Washington from using his country as a staging ground for covert efforts to fight communism in southern Africa.

There is another force that explains why U.S. policy in Africa did not resemble its policy elsewhere. In Odinga's telling, racial dynamics at home empowered Black Americans with considerable sway over U.S.-African relations. Black Americans long drew a connection between the condition of their communities and the subservient role to which geopolitics consigned African countries. Odinga usefully divides the relationship between Black Americans and Africa into its more radical and moderate wings. For twentieth-century Black radicals such as Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, and Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), identification with African struggles often took the form of solidarity politics and support for anticolonial and anti-apartheid struggles, including those that embraced violent resistance. Already ostracized by their government for their domestic acts, these radical voices had little direct impact on U.S.-Africa policy.

Black moderates, by contrast, were motivated by a mix of conservative and liberal ideals refracted through the experience of Black people in the United States, including a favorable

The real deal? Rwandan President Paul Kagame, Trump, and Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi in Washington, D.C., December 2025

view of capitalism, racial equality and inclusion, nonviolent politics, and an emphasis on political and social order that often aligned with conservative notions of policing and gender roles.

Odinga calls this ideology "Black moderate transnationalism" and refers to its practitioners as "Black moderate elites." This group—which included intellectuals, activists, corporate leaders, lobbyists, government officials, media outlets aimed at Black audiences, and advocacy organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and TransAfrica—fared much better than their more radical counterparts, and influenced U.S. policy toward Africa by pushing for policies that emphasized stability and development, even when they conflicted with democratic values.

Odinga's account of Black elites shaping U.S. Africa policy parallels the concept of the "politics of responsibility" that James Forman, Jr., developed to explain why Black politicians have often supported harsher drug laws despite their disproportionate harm to Black communities. Forman argued that class dynamics led Black elites to interpret community concerns about crime as support for punitive policies and justify these as protecting the Black middle class and broader community interests. Similarly, Black moderate elites involved in Africa policy frequently backed authoritarian and neoliberal approaches, framing them as necessary to safeguard the sovereignty and global reputation of African states. The beneficiaries were often African authoritarians whose statist strand of pan-Africanism (blending conservative tendencies of elitism, pragmatism, and authoritarianism with more radical humanistic

CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES

and liberationist ideals) found backing in Black American moderates, who also viewed increased engagement with African countries as a remedy for Africa's subjugated position globally as well as racial injustice in the United States.

In the name of pan-African solidarity, Black moderates thus threw their weight behind national security approaches and economic policies that might otherwise have been rejected as hypocritical. Through this "shadow politics," African elites gained crucial support in their negotiations with U.S. government agencies. During the Cold War, African leaders such as Mobutu and Liberia's William Tubman sought the backing of Black moderates such as Ralph Bunche and Charles Diggs, a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, to gain concessions. Odinga acknowledges that many Black moderates eventually abandoned Mobutu as the scale of his misrule became clear. And many championed policies that did benefit ordinary Africans, most prominently in their unwavering support for ending apartheid in South Africa. Indeed, the responsibility that Black moderates felt to improve U.S.-African relations was also the key factor that prevented U.S. policy toward African countries from turning entirely instrumental.

And it led the United States to forge a kind of security partnership with African states that differed substantially from those it sought with Asian or Latin American countries. Instead of binding defense agreements, Odinga argues, these more informal security partnerships relied on "sustained security cooperation, stable channels of communication, and the rapport and institutional memory of allied officials." During the Cold War, these included crucial relationships with Liberia and Zaire; afterward, the United States depended on such security partnerships with Ethiopia, Uganda, and, most recently, Nigeria. This informality enabled individual actors to shape bilateral relations with specific African countries and resulted in a U.S. Africa strategy shaped by bargaining between different constituencies rather than by institutions such as the Departments of State and Defense, which adhered to stricter guidelines.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Odinga asserts that this dynamic began to change after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, as the U.S. approach shifted toward counterterrorism and competition with China. He also notes, rightly, that Black Americans' engagement with Africa started to wane. The decline in governmental and foundational support for African studies, which once provided a route for Black Americans to enter government service as Africa experts, has accelerated this trend.

He does not remark on the rise of African immigration to the United States, which has produced more focused lobbies advocating on behalf of specific African countries. Over the past 25 years, the number of Black African immigrants in the United States has ballooned from 600,000 to over 2.4 million. Almost half the newcomers have arrived from five countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Somalia. They have become a substantial enough population to

warrant their own representative organizations. For example, the Nigerian American Political Action Committee, established in 2013, successfully lobbied for changes to U.S. security and economic policies toward Nigeria during the Biden administration.

And so despite the decline of Black moderate transnationalism, U.S. Africa policy remains a bargaining process dominated by individuals and interest groups and often delivers uneven outcomes. In a foreign policy space that Washington still considers marginal to its core interests, African elites continue to wield considerable influence over the U.S. government—even the Trump administration, despite claiming to wrest advantageous deals for Americans all over the world. Consider the 2025 "strategic partnership" the United States signed with Congo, which Trump promised would open the country's vast mineral reserves to American investors while displacing Chinese dominance over essential Congolese resources. Most commentators have portrayed this agreement as one-sided, primarily benefiting the United States.

But this conflates the interests of the Congolese people with those of the Congolese government. Facing growing discontent among his people as he maneuvers to run for a constitutionally prohibited third term, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi—supported by a high-powered lobbying firm with close ties to the Trump administration—hitched his survival to the United States, successfully bargaining for American assistance to fight Rwandan-backed rebels who had taken control of territory in the east of the country. Tshisekedi also convinced the United States to sanction former Congolese President Joseph Kabila, a key rival, as well as senior Rwandan defense officials for their role in supporting the insurgency. U.S. companies, meanwhile, face considerable logistical and other hurdles to accessing the promised resources, including a complex business environment dominated by Chinese firms.

Adopting a more consistent continental approach that prioritizes democratic values above trade and security interests may not win the short-term battle over resources with China, which is probably already lost. But it could gain the United States meaningful goodwill among Africa's restive young people, who are increasingly frustrated by the iron grip exerted on their societies by aging autocrats who reap gains from great-power competition.

Barring such a change, the United States' makeshift Africa policy is unlikely to change in the short term. But in the long run, it may well develop an even more transactional dynamic between Washington and the continent, even after Trump leaves the White House. For despite their paternalism and misplaced support for authoritarianism, the Black moderates whose influence is on the wane often believed they were working in the best interests of the African people. Without their moderating touch or any sort of pan-African consciousness underpinning U.S.-African relationships, African elites are the most likely to benefit, to the detriment of both ordinary Africans and American interests.

Letters to the Editor

True North?

To the Editor:

In "North Korea as It Is" (May/June 2026), Victor Cha recasts three decades of diplomacy as a strategic failure and claims that North Korean leaders were uniformly deceitful and "determined to build a nuclear arsenal at any cost." But Cha's narrative of futility is wrong.

Beginning in the early 1990s, North Korea was prepared to bargain away its nuclear program after South Korea normalized relations with Russia and China. Lacking friends and worried about its vulnerabilities, Pyongyang offered to gradually denuclearize in return for U.S. actions to improve relations, such as lifting sanctions. Although Washington frequently insisted on front-loaded steps toward denuclearization and delayed relief, when the two sides compromised, they were able to sign accords such as the 1994 Agreed Framework.

But the United States often overestimated its coercive ability and underestimated Pyongyang's resolve to safeguard its security in case diplomacy failed. That mistake became obvious when Kim Jong Un took power in 2011 and accelerated the country's weapons programs. At the Hanoi summit with Kim in 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump had a chance to stem the tide, but he grew impatient and walked out before lunch on the second day.

South Korea also contributed to this failure. Presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in built frameworks to engage the north, but in each case, their respective conservative successors dismantled that progress. From Pyongyang's vantage point, no commitment by Seoul carries weight beyond a single electoral cycle.

The Korean Peninsula today is more dangerous than at any point in three decades. It is important to understand what really happened to learn what to do in the future. Cha's simplistic history doesn't serve that purpose.

CHOI JONG KUN
Professor, Department of Political Science and International Studies, Yonsei University, and former First Vice Foreign Minister of South Korea

JOEL S. WIT
Distinguished Fellow, The Stimson Center

To the Editor:

Washington can no longer count on North Korea's near-term denuclearization because Pyongyang has embedded nuclear expansion in its constitutional identity, legal doctrine, and operational planning. Instead, Cha argues, the United States should pursue a cold peace focused on reducing risks to its homeland and preventing escalation.

But a cold peace for Washington could create hot risk for Seoul. Such a bargain would undermine the credibility of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, intensify regional nuclear anxiety, and ultimately damage U.S. interests. If dialogues with North Korea prioritize the security of the United States over South Korea's frontline vulnerabilities, Pyongyang will exploit that divide by targeting Seoul with nuclear posturing, limited attacks, and "gray zone" coercion—such as cyber-operations and naval harassment—that tests deterrence without reaching the threshold of full-scale war.

Serious negotiations would require consultation with Seoul and the credible threat of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. Joint U.S.–South Korean military exercises, regional missile defenses, Seoul's preemptive defense plans, and the American troop presence on the Korean Peninsula should not become bargaining chips. And any deal should include a commitment from Pyongyang to respect human rights—not as a moral add-on but as a requirement for success. Reducing pressure on North Korea while neglecting repression, forced labor, and information control would only entrench the Kim regime.

A realistic U.S. strategy must do more than manage crises. It must avoid shifting danger from Washington to Seoul. A true cold peace requires a regional order sustained by deterrence, diplomacy, and bilateral and multilateral allied cooperation.

LEE SHIN-WHA
Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Korea University

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To the Editor:

U.S. policy seeking to denuclearize North Korea has failed because it attacks a symptom while leaving the underlying ailment untouched. That ailment is the division of the Korean Peninsula and the existence of a North Korean regime that believes nuclear weapons guarantee its survival. A free and unified Korea is the only durable path to peninsular peace, human rights, and the elimination of the nuclear threat.

North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities are much more advanced today than they were three decades ago, when the first negotiations to end Pyongyang's nuclear program took place. But the policies that Cha advocates won't reverse this course.

Conventional wisdom holds that unification would be not only impracticable but also prohibitively costly. In reality, as we wrote in a report published earlier this year by the National Institute for Public Policy, adopting unification as the strategic end state of U.S.–South Korean

policy is achievable and essential to national security. Such an approach would emphasize promoting human rights, economic integration, and civil society engagement.

A unified Korea that is democratic, free of nuclear weapons, and economically integrated would serve the long-term strategic interests of Koreans, Americans, and U.S. alliances in Asia. The question is not whether the status quo can be managed better. It is whether the United States and its partners have the will to envision and support a new future for Korea.

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT, ROBERT JOSEPH, AND DAVID MAXWELL
Directors of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea and members of the Free and Unified Korea Working Group at the Global Peace Foundation

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Cha replies:

The cold peace with North Korea that I propose rests on three arguments. Washington's preoccupation with denuclearization has precluded interim negotiations that could decrease the growing threat to the American homeland. The absence of arms control dialogues or crisis hotlines between Washington and Pyongyang endangers Japan and South Korea, as well as the United States. And practical management of relations with North Korea in the short term is not necessarily the same as a permanent solution.

Choi Jong Kun and Joel Wit argue that I have incorrectly absolved the United States of responsibility for failed diplomacy with North Korea.

This reflects a belief that Washington can solve any problem it focuses on, and that the cause of failure is U.S. partisanship, not Pyongyang. Neither is true. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have made earnest diplomatic efforts to achieve denuclearization, but neither succeeded because North Korea was never willing to abandon its nuclear program. It is also hard to imagine that a paranoid North Korea would have permanently surrendered the entirety of its nascent nuclear weapons program to the United States—its number one enemy—for a verbal security assurance and permission to develop civil nuclear energy projects.

Lee Shin-wha suggests that a cold peace would neglect the interests of U.S. allies, especially South Korea. The notion that Washington's pursuit of arms control with Pyongyang would be tantamount to abandoning Seoul defies the logic of deterrence. Reducing the threat of intercontinental ballistic missiles to the American homeland enhances South Korean security by ensuring that Pyongyang could not hold U.S. cities hostage if Washington were to come to Seoul's defense. Moreover, reducing the number of U.S. ground troops on the Korean Peninsula (but not fully withdrawing them) retains the most important element of deterrence: direct involvement. If North Korea attacks, Americans would still be in the line of fire.

Unification could achieve denuclearization in theory, provided that a united Korea would give up the arsenal it would inherit. But proponents of unification fail to explain how to get there. The strategy I propose does not preclude the unification that Nicholas Eberstadt, Robert Joseph, and David Maxwell endorse. I view a cold peace as an interim solution designed to address a nuclear threat that is metastasizing right now. U.S. policy correctly calls for a Korea that is whole and free—that is, united and democratic. The policies I propose are just as likely to achieve that outcome as an ineffective denuclearization or sanctions policy, and they would reduce risks in the meantime.

Policy choices are always relative. If not a cold peace, what is the alternative? Staying stuck on denuclearization, blaming the problem on partisan politics, or advocating unification will neither stifle North Korea's nuclear program nor keep the United States or its allies safe.

The German Question

To the Editor:

In "Europe's Next Hegemon" (March/April 2026), Liana Fix offers an elegant, astute analysis of Germany's present security policy conundrum. Yet her concern about the dangers of renewed German military hegemony in Europe is overblown. Germany's democratic parties remain committed to Europe and to Western alliances, and they agree that the principal threat to German security stems from Russia. A democratic Berlin has every interest in continuing to support Poland, the Baltic States, and, of course, Ukraine. A militaristic and nationalistic Germany seems conceivable only if the

far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) comes to power.

Military hegemony needs economic strength, manpower, and political will to underpin it. Germany's sluggish economy hinders its ability to spend massively on its military. And its rapidly aging population cannot sustain the number of troops that would be necessary, even with technological innovations that could reduce demand for human soldiers. Berlin is currently struggling to recruit enough young people to sustain its 186,000 active troops, let alone the 203,000 it has promised NATO by 2031. Additionally, Germany's postwar culture of pacifism makes a surge of militarism that would support hegemonic military power—and its financial burden—unlikely.

Fix also underestimates the role of Russia in a future European security order. Its military power far overshadows anything Germany could conceivably muster. Even an AfD government might prefer to retain close military cooperation with its traditional European partners. Alternatively, the AfD might opt for appeasement and position Germany as the junior partner of a hegemonic Russia in Europe. Either way, Europe's next military hegemon will not be Germany.

HANNS W. MAULL
Adjunct Professor, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies–Europe

Fix replies:

Hanns Maull is right that a militaristic and nationalistic German hegemon in Europe is conceivable only with the AfD in power. But the risk of "involuntary" German hegemony should not be underestimated. Even if Berlin's intentions are benign, the sheer scale of its debt-financed rearmament, coupled with its large economy, will create a perception of German dominance that will breed mistrust and undermine the very European defense cooperation Berlin seeks to foster. Europeanizing German power is the only way to maintain a sustainable balance of power on the continent amid an American retreat.

Maull also underestimates the trajectory of Berlin's military expansion. Although the rapid infusion of capital into the defense industry may not immediately catapult the German military to the same level as its British, French, and Scandinavian peers, its budget will soon vastly surpass those of its neighbors and, over time, translate into better capabilities.

Germany's postwar culture of pacifism was always more myth than reality. That myth has now been shattered. The question is no longer whether Germany will become a major military power, but how that power can be embedded in Europe to prevent the dynamics Maull believes are impossible.

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THE ARCHIVE

January 1968

"The American Style: Our Past and Our Principles"

STANLEY HOFFMANN

As the United States marks its 250th anniversary at a time of national discord, Americans are reflecting on the legacy of their country's history. In 1968, another moment of domestic dissension, the historian Stanley Hoffmann considered how the United States' national narrative shaped its approach to the world—for good and for ill.

The American attitude to history strikes me as quite different; we tend to view it placidly and from a distance. Americans know that they are in it, that the garment burns, but they do not quite realize how impossible it is to shed the garment or wear it without discomfort. The attitude is one of complacency, but the complacency is threatened.

In the United States, where conservatism is the conservation of progress, there has been—in contrast to Europe—a kind of happy simplicity that is both a domestic blessing and an obstacle to understanding, a source of inner strength and a mental and emotional impoverishment. . . . Americans, whose history is a success story, tend to believe that the values that arise from their experience are of universal application, and they are reluctant to recognize that they are tied to the special conditions that made the American success possible.

The long experience of the United States in self-reliance has been followed by global entanglements which, while often brilliantly managed, have brought enormous disappointment and frustration. These would have been less if the expectations engendered by America's happy past had been more modest; as they are, they have in turn perpetuated a lingering nostalgia for a past that could not have been more different from the present. This has not paralyzed American foreign policy; it has, however, created a permanent tension between the needs of the external situation and America's inner psychological needs and hopes, and it has shaped the mood and manner in which the United States has picked up the challenge.

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