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HOW STRONG ARE THE STRONGMEN?

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Essays

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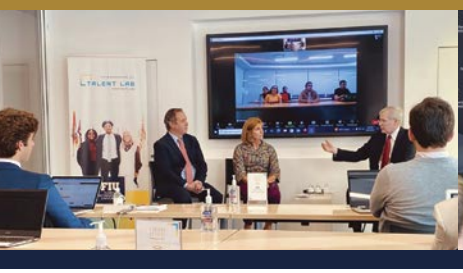

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The Weakness of the Strongmen

What Really Threatens Authoritarians?

STEPHEN KOTKIN

Not long ago in the sweep of history, countries that had once been buried behind the Iron Curtain, and even some Soviet republics, were transformed into members of the solidly democratic club. Some of those that weren't, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, experienced mass revolts against rigged elections and corrupt misrule amid widespread public yearning to join the West. Free trade was again celebrated as an instrument of peace; Kant's "democratic peace theory" enjoyed a revival.

Western democracy promotion, inept as it could be, struck fear into authoritarian corridors of power. Ever-shriller authoritarian denunciations of supposed Western conspiracies to foment "color revolutions" seemed to confirm a direction toward democracy. In the early 2010s, spontaneous uprisings rocked the heavily autocratic Middle East and

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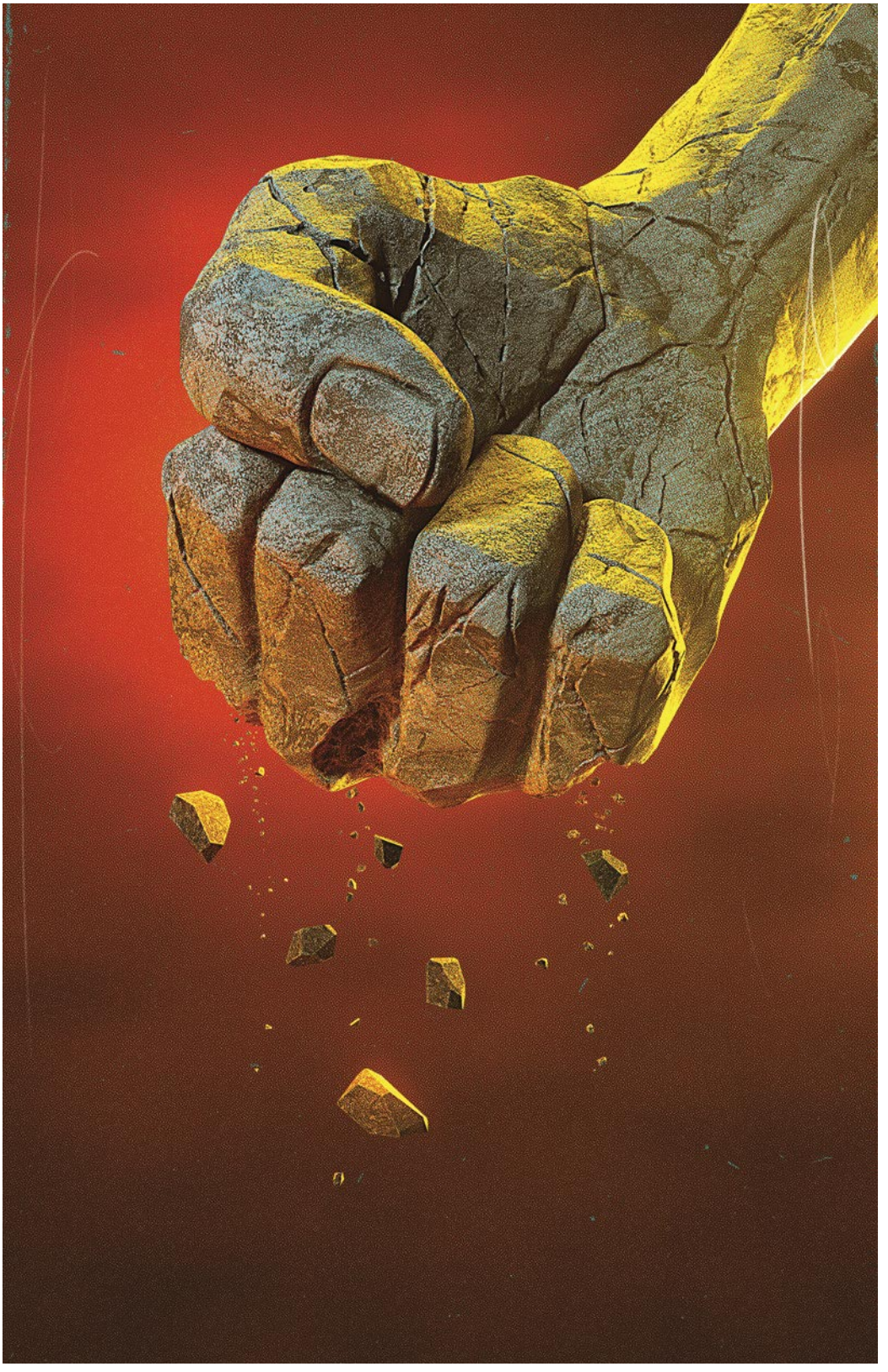

Illustration by Daniel Downey

North Africa. Hopes for political loosening persisted in the stubborn holdouts of China, Iran, and Russia. Large-scale demonstrations had broken out in Iran in 2009 and, in 2011–12, similar protests accompanied Vladimir Putin's announcement that he would return to the Russian presidency after a brief stint as prime minister. Many clung to what they considered signs that Xi Jinping, who rose to become China's top leader in 2012, would be a reformer.

In the blink of an eye, however, the authoritarians flipped the dynamic, driving the democracies onto the back foot, where they remain. Arab autocrats, Iran's mullahs, and Putin cracked down viciously. In China, Xi elevated himself to something akin to emperor, driving an even more resolute version of authoritarianism. In well-established democracies, meanwhile, fear spread about the decay of liberal institutions and norms.

The authoritarians relied on an innovative set of tactics to suppress democratic influence from abroad or from within their societies: branding organizations that receive overseas funding as "foreign agents" (essentially, traitors) and using tax inspections to disqualify opposition candidates from running for office. These techniques were combined with the tried-and-true practice of dominating the media. And then, the coup de grâce: continuing to decry nonexistent Western plots to take them down, the authoritarians—thanks to technological innovations produced by free societies—developed new ways to meddle forcefully in democratic polities and sometimes even destabilize them. Now, the authoritarians watch as freely elected democratic leaders praise and emulate them.

And yet: beware those who once hailed "the age of democracy" and now proclaim "the age of autocracy." Formidable as these regimes appear—and, in fact, can be—they are shot through with weaknesses. They can mobilize vast resources and personnel in pursuit of ambitious national projects but suffer debilitating incapacity stemming from corruption, cronyism, and overreach. They last far longer than generally anticipated but all the while remain prone to sudden runs on their political banks. With the right strategies, they can be jolted off balance. Democracies, despite a growing loss of confidence bordering on despair, retain innumerable strengths and deep resilience, and can get back on the front foot.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What is authoritarianism? And what—and who—is an authoritarian? Given how important this phenomenon has always been and

the prominence it has recently reacquired, it might seem surprising how difficult it can be to answer those questions. At the most basic level, authoritarianism involves weak or near-absent institutional limits on executive power. Initially, authoritarians unabashedly ruled in the name of the few, but ever since the French Revolution, nondemocratic regimes have taken on the trappings of democracy: staged elections, rubber-stamp legislatures, constitutions granting nominal rights. "Modern authoritarianism," as the political scientist Amos Perlmutter defined it, is the rule of the few in the name of the many.

Perlmutter, writing in 1981, singled out "authoritarianism/totalitarianism" as "this century's most remarkable political phenomenon." But the slash separating (or combining) the two terms concealed a challenge: namely, explaining the difference between them. As it happens, the sociologist Juan Linz had already taken this up, and his experience offers a cautionary tale. Born in 1926 in Weimar Germany, where hyperinflation bankrupted his father's business, the young Linz witnessed the breakdown of democracy and the onset of Hitler's dictatorship. Linz and his Spanish mother relocated to Spain in 1932, where Linz lived through the 1936 military putsch and the civil war that it provoked. During Franco's dictatorship, he graduated from the University of Madrid. In 1950, he crossed the Atlantic to pursue a Ph.D. at Columbia University, where he soon began to teach. He later shifted to Yale and, in the decades that followed, became one of the world's foremost experts on regime types and democratic stability.

When Linz entered the profession, the world was seen as divided between two basic regime types: democratic and totalitarian. Where, he wondered, should one place Franco's Spain? It was patently not democratic, but also not totalitarian like Nazi Germany or the Stalinist Soviet Union. The classic schema advanced by the likes of Hannah Arendt, as well as Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, had no room for Iberia. In 1963, Linz presented a long paper titled "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain." Despite its banal title, it constituted a breakthrough in explicating a third type. Linz offered a mostly negative definition: unlike totalitarianism, authoritarianism didn't have a concentrated single source of power or a pervasive ideology, and it could muster only minimal mass mobilization. The major attribute authoritarian regimes possessed, rather than lacked, Linz suggested, was limited pluralism. The distinction remained uncertain, and for all his achievements, Linz never nailed it down. He tried "Sultanistic

regimes," which fell flat, and by 2000 had come up with "chaocracy" (the rule of chaos and mobs). All the while, a consensus built around the too-broad rubric of "hybrid regimes."

Typologies can sometimes help one grasp how such regimes sustain themselves or implode or are overthrown. For example, scholars have shown that authoritarian regimes that rely on hereditary succession tend to be more stable. But such insights do not translate into policy action. For that purpose, it is better to identify not types but constituent parts—what can be thought of as the five dimensions of authoritarianism—and their susceptibility to countermeasures. Admittedly, a policy-oriented framework will not satisfy those who prefer strict definitions and typologies. Nonetheless, it could serve as a foundation from which to push today's authoritarian regimes onto the back foot.

THE IRON FIST

The first dimension is obvious: no authoritarian regime could survive without security police and military forces capable of domestic repression. Compared with their social spending or economic investment, authoritarian regimes extravagantly overcommit funds to the agencies, equipment, and training they need for massive repression. They expend staggering resources on surveillance and censorship of the Internet, social media, and related technologies and services, often alongside paid and voluntary human monitoring of neighborhoods and workplaces. Coercive apparatuses vary widely among authoritarian countries, which inherit legacy structures from previous regimes or previous incarnations of their own regimes. Think of the Iranian shah's secret police, the SAVAK, which the revolutionaries angrily dissolved in 1979 only to carry over many of its practices, prisons, and even personnel into a new organization, SAVAMA.

Authoritarian regimes relentlessly reorganize their repressive apparatuses, but rarely to streamline their functions. On the contrary, they deliberately assign agencies and operatives to overlapping jurisdictions, ensuring that they are, to an extent, at daggers drawn. Sometimes such agencies engage in sabotage against one another, as officials regard going on the offensive as the best defense against colleagues poised to go after them. In communist China, the jockeying for supremacy between the security police and the People's Liberation Army has at times been decisive in power struggles. In Russia, the civilian repressive apparatus persecutes the military, which leaps at

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every chance for revenge. Meanwhile, anticorruption bodies—always more than one—are feared by all, including one another.

Professionals in repression, whether fingernail pullers or computer hackers (sometimes one and the same), have the means to take down not just their rivals but also their superiors and even their country's ruler. They at once ensure regime survival and pose the greatest threat to it. That is why, for example, presidential bodyguards are almost never integrated into the main repressive apparatus. In Russia under Putin, just as it was under Stalin, the bodyguard directorate (today known as the FSO) stands alone, separate from the main successors to the KGB (the FSB and SVR), the multiple counterintelligence units, and the also self-standing National Guard. Paranoia rules.

Cronies and mediocrities might run the critical security police or armed forces, a circumstance observed in Putin's war against Ukraine, which was planned and overseen until May 2024 by a former construction foreman with whom the dictator had spent some bare-chested time in the Siberian wilderness. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the repressive muscle or the capacity for learning and correction of these mechanisms and militaries. They monitor, disappear, imprison, and butcher. They are highly fractious, however, roiling with jealousies, resentments, and enmities, which rulers aggravate to exercise control. Intelligence agencies in the United States and other Western countries closely follow these cleavages, of course, and can sometimes recruit the disaffected or the ambitious to provide insider information.

These regimes take great pains to cultivate façades of unity and approval, which makes them vulnerable when disunity and disapproval are exposed. Many officials in authoritarian regimes chafe at the conflation of the ruler's interests with the country's, at cronies hoarding all the spoils, and at the concealed national debilitation that ensues. Washington and its allies should systematically call out these divisions, as well as the deep resentments felt within regimes over malfeasance and corruption, aiming to drive wedges between the elites and the ruler. Of course, naming specific disaffected individuals could cause their imprisonment or execution. Carelessness could backfire. Still, discontent, thwarted ambition, and offended patriotism are no secret, and available to exploit. When such regimes figuratively or literally push their officials out of windows—as they do without any Western pressure—democracies need to emphasize how

such barbarism reveals weakness, how it constitutes a tacit admission that dissatisfaction suffuses officialdom, and how the regimes fear its spread. "Outwardly strong, inwardly brittle," an internal Chinese critique, should be the name of a relentless public campaign that forces the Chinese regime to continually deny it.

CASH RULES EVERYTHING AROUND ME

The second dimension of an authoritarian regime is the nature of its revenue streams. All governments require sources of funding, of course, and most get them through a wide array of taxes. Taxes render governments dependent on their people, and although authoritarian regimes do not mind obtaining revenues that way, they are loath to depend on the consent of the people if they can get away without doing so—and many can. They have alternative sources of revenue, often gushing right out of the ground.

Among the most stubborn misconceptions about authoritarian regimes is the idea that they rest on a de facto social contract, whereby the regimes raise living standards and in exchange the people surrender their freedom. Obviously, if an authoritarian regime fails to raise living standards, its ruling circle does not admit its failure to fulfill its side of the contract and leave power. Nor can the people force its exit by taking the rulers to court for failure to comply. Authoritarians are happy to have GDP growth, but they do not require it, and they feel no imperative to satisfy the material aspirations of ordinary people. Unfree people can sometimes be more easily pacified if their incomes are rising and opportunities for their children are expanding. But in China, the authoritarian country where such a contract is most frequently alleged to exist, those conditions have never held for large segments of society. The Chinese people understand the true contract under which they live: if they keep disappointments and doubts largely to themselves and publicly profess loyalty, then the authorities might not come after them.

Authoritarian regimes can survive with little or no economic growth, thanks to those wielding truncheons, but not without cash flow—and the best source of that comes from material that nature deposited into the earth hundreds of millions of years ago, which can be sold on world markets for hard currency. Beyond mother lodes of oil or natural gas, ready cash can also be generated with diamond or gold mines, precious metals, and rare minerals. All it

takes is some extraction equipment, labor (often forced), railroads, and ports. But these regimes also find new ways to generate cash flow. North Korea once counterfeited U.S. $100 bills at scale. Then it innovated, discovering that it could hack its way into foreign central bank accounts and cryptocurrency exchanges. The regime also rakes in cash, especially in foreign currencies, the old-fashioned way: by dispatching soldiers and laborers abroad for a fee.

In the case of Putin's Russia, oil and gas exports help fund the regime—so much so that such revenues have covered as much as a quarter of the costs of the war against Ukraine. China, India, and Turkey have together purchased close to $400 billion in Russian oil since 2023, sometimes to consume it, sometimes to resell it at a markup. Moscow has innovated, too, assembling a shadow fleet of decrepit tankers as well as a coterie of sketchy insurers and shell companies (a time-honored Western invention) to evade a U.S.-devised price cap.

In authoritarian regimes, paranoia rules.

But the need for cash also creates vulnerabilities. Oil becomes money only when it traverses seas or crosses international land borders and is then refined and shipped to consumers. Washington and its partners could sanction oil refineries in China, India, and Turkey, raising those countries' costs and lowering Russia's revenues while helping coordinate alternative sources. A new EU draft proposal would allow member states to board and detain shadow-fleet tankers, which are already under sanctions. As for pipelines, cyber-capabilities can cause repeated temporary disruptions, reducing Russia's revenues.

At first glance, China might look like an exception to the idea that Western countries can exploit an authoritarian regime's need for cash. China consumes most of its own natural resources, and is the world's largest importer of raw materials. It also collects taxes, including a value-added tax that is its biggest source of income. But its other big source is what it earns from finished-product exports, which account for roughly 20 percent of China's GDP and on which corporations pay taxes. Retaliatory tariffs and other trade restrictions could thus choke off much of the regime's cash flow if they are executed by a broad coalition of cooperating countries, which would need to invest substantially in their own reindustrialization and in alternative supply chains—which they should be doing, anyway.

TALL TALES

The third dimension of authoritarianism is the stories a regime tells about itself, its people, its history, and its place in the world. Authoritarians always try to suppress the stories they do not want their people to see. But they understand that even effective suppression is insufficient on its own; they also need to propagate visions of the nation and the world that resonate with ordinary people. These stories vary across regimes, but elements recur. They aim to spread fear to bolster national cohesion, featuring the collusion of internal and external enemies: ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, labeled as terrorists; elites, intellectuals, democrats (usually but not always in scare quotes); the International Monetary Fund, Jews, George Soros, foreigners; the Great Satan (the United States), the Little Satan (Israel). Authoritarian narratives also evoke a period of national greatness in the past that was undone by hostile forces but will be restored as soon as today's enemies are vanquished by the nation's sole savior: the regime and current ruler.

Anti-Westernism is the core trope of today's authoritarian regimes, and they can frequently draw on Western sources for material. Some of the greatest hits: NATO attacked Russia, the West encourages coups and installs puppet governments, the West is striving to maintain hegemony over the world majority. And then there is the simplest and most effective of all the authoritarian stories: "The East is rising, the West is declining."

People living under these regimes, however, do not accept regime narratives at face value. Plausible enemies, saboteurs, and spies must occasionally be paraded before them, and plausible tales of U.S. hostility toward China or Russia (preferably straight from the mouths of Americans themselves) must be cited alongside implausible ones. Regime stories must speak to ordinary people, to their sense of violated fairness, their struggles and aspirations. Not everything in these narratives will comport with their experiences, but many people will excuse discrepancies as long as some of it does. The Chinese nation and the Russian nation were, in fact, great imperial civilizations, and few inhabitants of those places dispute that they deserve to be great again.

The centrality of narrative in the operation, legitimacy, and survival of authoritarian regimes makes them vulnerable. They are especially exposed where they are most active: in wielding history. China drills home stories of what it calls its "century of humiliation" beginning in the 1800s, and these resonate with large numbers of Chinese people.

But there are also compelling stories about the more than half century of self-humiliation under Chinese Communist Party rule: the CCP has killed far more Chinese people than foreign interventions ever did. Similarly, the CCP takes credit for China's economic miracle, but the boom resulted primarily from the diligence and ingenuity of the Chinese people; party officials have often been parasitic on the country's economic success, expropriating businesses once they have become successful. The party casts itself as the great defender of Chinese civilization and Confucianism. But the CCP continues to be the desecrator of philosophical and religious traditions as well as innumerable monuments, and the persecutor of monks, writers, artists.

To tell those stories, democracies would have to invest more in penetrative communications and persuasive content. The glory days of the Voices, as American and European radio stations broadcasting into the Soviet Union were known, were gone even before the Trump administration eliminated their funding earlier this year. It has become difficult to maintain virtual private networks (VPNs) that allow people to evade Internet restrictions in countries such as China; then again, Washington has barely tried. The CCP, meanwhile, controls the algorithm on the app TikTok, which serves as a dominant source of news for nearly half of Americans under the age of 30.

THE DECIDERS

The fourth dimension of authoritarianism is the control that a regime exerts over life chances: the way the state reaches deep into the lives of its subjects. The more the state serves as the principal employer, the harder it is for people to refuse to praise it, let alone speak out against it. In regime hands, housing becomes a weapon, whether via state ownership, licenses to register property ownership, or residency permits, such as in China's urban *hukou* system of household registration. State-controlled education means that the authorities can deny children admission to school if a parent or family refuses to perform whatever political tasks might be demanded of them. Individuals and families begin to volunteer to serve the regime, even if they detest it, in the hopes of obtaining or retaining employment, a place to live, or educational opportunities; having a chance to vacation at state-owned resorts; or just securing a passport or an exit visa. In some ways, control over quotidian affairs empowers regimes more than their repressive apparatuses—and does not require far-reaching forms of "tech authoritarianism."

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Few states control life chances fully, of course. Black markets and corruption flourish, providing alternative spaces and options. But the more the state controls your life chances, the more the state has power over you and the less power you have. At the highest levels of such control, authoritarian states become totalitarian. They push subjugation to the maximum, incentivizing denunciations of any perceived nonconformity. Neighbor is pitted against neighbor, coworker against coworker, as the people themselves undermine the social bonds and trust that might otherwise enable a modicum of autonomy from the state.

An authoritarian regime's control over its subjects' life chances is yet another source of strength that also creates weaknesses—albeit fewer than do the other dimensions. The private sector can, in theory, provide a vital antidote. If you can start your own business, join others in doing so, or move freely from one private employer to another based on your qualifications and hard work, you are less subject to state control. The same holds for one's ability to buy or rent private housing, attend nonstate schools, or form nongovernmental organizations.

But authoritarian regimes can exert massive influence over the private economy, and particularly over the largest employers, when a single person or a small group sometimes owns the enterprise (or the housing stock). What is more, harsh economic sanctions designed to punish regimes often instead end up punishing ordinary people and driving private enterprises either out of business or into the hands of the regime for help. That is what happened in Russia after the imposition of Western sanctions following Putin's widening of the war against Ukraine in February 2022. Moreover, even when private markets are allowed to flourish, they can entrap people, as happened when Xi decided to puncture China's property bubble, leaving untold millions with crushing debts, incomplete homes, and job losses—and thus often more vulnerable to and dependent on the regime. Still, the freedom that derives from legal, smaller-scale market activity can be a godsend.

CONDUCIVE OR CORROSIVE?

The fifth and final dimension of authoritarianism is not a feature of a regime per se but the geopolitical environment in which it exists. A global order can be conducive to or corrosive for authoritarian regimes, and is almost always some combination of both, but what matters is the degree and the trendlines.

This is the dimension in which the United States has the most potential wherewithal to unsettle the autocrats. For a system putatively constructed to ensure that democratic ideals and free markets flourished, the U.S.-led world order has for a long time been remarkably conducive to authoritarian regimes. Consider, for example, the fact that such regimes usually require mass transfers of technology, since they have generally lagged behind the world's most advanced economies, which are democracies. The latter have been more than happy to have their private sectors supply nondemocracies, including Putin's Russia and communist China, with what they needed to develop. In 2016, according to the *Financial Times* journalist Patrick McGee, Apple pledged to invest $275 billion over five years to help Xi transform China into a crucial supply-chain hub and skilled-worker behemoth.

Authoritarian regimes also desperately need access to the lucrative markets of the West to sell their commodities and finished goods. The decisive U.S. domestic market was opened to communist China in 1980 and to Russia in 1992, when they were respectively granted "most favored nation" trading status. Both were also eventually admitted to the World Trade Organization without having to meet all the conditions required for admission and without being part of the U.S. security order. Authoritarians were allowed to make free use of the global financial system and receive foreign direct investment, which in the case of China was often routed through British-ruled Hong Kong. Today, Chinese-language commentary on the country's trade with and investment in India pointedly warns not to repeat the mistakes that Washington made with China.

European countries, in particular Germany, became the crucial customers of Russian energy products, which could be developed at scale solely in cooperation with Western oil majors and service firms. At its peak before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian gas accounted for 45 percent of European imports in terms of volume. Even some four years into the Kremlin's attempted eradication of Ukrainian sovereignty, Russia is still responsible for around 12 percent of European gas imports. In 2024, European countries spent more money importing Russian energy than they did aiding Ukraine financially, effectively footing the bill for Russia's aggression.

Japan proved to be one of authoritarian China's most important sources of technology transfer and foreign direct investment, but

Europe deepened its dependence on China, too, becoming a lucrative market for Chinese exports as they advanced up the value chain. In this regard, however, the United States is the main offender. The deliberate transfer of American manufacturing and critical supply chains to a country ruled by a communist monopoly regime was one of the most breathtaking gifts ever given to an authoritarian country, greater even than the bonanza of advanced technologies that the United States and European countries bestowed on Stalin's Soviet Union. The wealth generated by Western technology transfers made China the first country in history to become the world's greatest trading nation without a real navy; China gladly relied on the U.S. Navy to secure global sea-lanes. Beijing then used the proceeds to build its own navy, which is now eclipsing the American one.

Criticizing such folly comes easily. The intention, however, was never to support authoritarianism but to undermine or at least soften it—to carry out what the West Germans dubbed *Wandel durch Handel*, or "change through trade." Western governments and pundits could look back on the spectacular successes of postwar West Germany and Japan, as well as those of the latter's two former colonies, South Korea and Taiwan, and imagine that related transformations could be brought about in postcommunist Russia and even communist China. But Eurasian landmass empires have been stubbornly autocratic for nearly their entire existence, despite repeated attempts at democratic revolutions. They have refused to bend to the West, even as they borrowed technologies and ideas from it, and proudly uphold their civilizations as superior.

When Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping articulated a policy of "reform and opening," in the late 1970s, it was not a commitment to become a responsible stakeholder in the U.S.-led international order. It was a strategy to use that order to modernize a woefully poor China, depressed by Communist rule, while hiding its intentions and biding its time, for however long it took, before assuming its rightful place in an alternate international order shaped by Beijing. It happened far faster than Deng or anyone else had imagined it could. The CCP was also mindful that past communist parties that had pursued political liberalization had come to realize that they were in fact liquidating themselves, as happened in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Had the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev never come to power or never attempted to liberalize, the

CCP might have embarked on its own suicidal political liberalization. Instead, the Chinese leadership learned history's lesson.

In warmly welcoming closed, illiberal regimes into the open, liberal global order, Washington and its allies were not demonstrating an ignorance of history. They just chose the wrong history as a guide. Sometimes the global order was, as designed, corrosive to authoritarianism. Still, it allowed and even incentivized the United States and other democratic countries to make choices that were conducive to autocrats. Vital market and tech access constituted the greatest leverage the United States and the West had over the authoritarians. It was essentially squandered.

A regime's need for cash creates vulnerabilities.

The opportunity remains, however, to push back vigorously. Russia's exports of oil and gas and China's exports of manufactured goods remain their lifelines. China can ramp up its purchases of Russian oil and gas, for instance, but it cannot make up for all the revenue that Russia would lose if Europe managed to wean itself off imports of Russian energy. And Russia can buy more finished goods from China, but it cannot make up for all the revenue that China would lose if the United States and European countries significantly reduced their own imports of such goods.

Despite the clarity of these vulnerabilities, the United States and its friends cannot make up their minds on whether (and how) to "de-risk" their relationships with China or to effectuate a rapprochement or even some sort of grand bargain. They struggle to gird themselves against Russia as global energy demand continues to rise, especially with China controlling much of the alternative energy supply chain. At the same time, Washington has turned on its allies over their security free-riding and shortcomings in trade reciprocity, both of which the United States itself had partly encouraged. The failure of the West's big bet on corroding the great Eurasian authoritarians has, for the time being, turned the West against itself. Meanwhile, authoritarian cooperation, above all between Beijing and Moscow, keeps getting deeper. Yet those countries ultimately face significant limits, which become visible when their partnerships are stacked up against the combined wherewithal of Western countries and their partners.

Alliances are built on trust and attraction, otherwise known as soft power, and they are the most effective tools that democracies have

in their struggle with autocracies. To be sure, anti-Western and particularly anti-American sentiment retains perennial purchase in all corners of the globe (and in the United States, too), owing to the very real histories of European and American imperialism and the sheer preponderance of U.S. power. This ideology provides considerable opportunity for authoritarian regimes—but many of the people living under them continue to be attracted to Western ideals, institutions, and lifestyles. That soft power is largely an emergent property, rather than something that can be guided by a government. Still, a successful democratic example with good governance, high living standards, social mobility, and freedom will always be the most corrosive force against authoritarianism. But the United States is perhaps as far from that, in various ways, as it was in the 1970s.

MAN IN THE MIRROR

Now comes the elephant in the room: U.S. President Donald Trump, whose second term has aroused domestic and international trepidation about American authoritarianism. After all, if the president is an authoritarian, or if the United States is becoming an authoritarian country, how could it lead the democratic world in a fight against authoritarianism?

Warnings about the breakdown of American democracy derive partly from disappointments over policy reversals on contentious issues: immigration, crime-fighting, energy, abortion, foreign alliances. The ferocity and scope of Trump's counterrevolution have stunned progressive revolutionaries and the far larger number of Americans on the center-left who for decades had complied (or had been intimidated into silence) as left-wing orthodoxies swept through and reshaped establishment institutions. What many of them see as an authoritarian assault on such institutions, more Americans see as an overdue restoration of common sense. This back-and-forth struggle to dominate American institutions testifies to their surpassing value and to their insusceptibility to permanent subordination.

One American institution, however, could be viewed as problematic, just as the Antifederalists argued in the 1780s and Linz argued two centuries later: namely, presidentialism. Trump's exercise of presidential power should surprise no one. Executive orders—which are not expressly provided for in the Constitution—go back to George Washington, and too many presidents have had recourse to them. Impoundment (the delaying or withholding of congressionally

mandated spending) is also absent from the Constitution, but presidents of both parties have practiced it. The power to issue absolute pardons, explicitly stipulated in the founding document, has been exploited with bipartisan intemperance. Trump is a shameless, concerted abuser of this lamentable executive inheritance. But his predecessors would recognize it.

The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., published *The Imperial Presidency* in 1973. He went easy on the phenomenon's gold standard, Franklin Roosevelt, whose policies he favored. (Democrats tend to like presidential power when their party holds the office.) The Caesarism inherent in the original American presidency got turbocharged not just by the New Deal but also by the country's ascension to superpower status. Still, it would matter far less if Congress were doing its job. Following Richard Nixon's abuses, Congress did seek to constrain the imperial presidency, but as the decades have passed it has largely failed to stick to the task. On the contrary, congressional majorities have often sacrificed the institution's prerogatives to presidents of their own party and sabotaged their institution's operations with debilitating procedural changes, such as centralizing power away from congressional committees.

Trump's second term does have novel aspects: for example, his assertions of absolute authority over all federal government bodies and personnel, the so-called administrative state. These actions claim support from a theory known as "the unitary executive." The current Supreme Court has generally shown strong backing for this form of sweeping presidential power, in the name of holding career officials accountable. Conservatives have long decried how Republicans get elected president only for the federal bureaucracy to obstruct their policies. The problem is real, although exaggerated. And Trump's response—political purges and enforced sycophancy across the executive branch—offers no remedy. The unitary theory might add a veneer of legitimacy to his commanding the Department of Justice to pursue vindictive indictments of his critics and ease up on his law-breaking supporters, but it will bequeath that same validation to his successors.

Trump has also made a show of deliberately exceeding his constitutional authority, including by imposing, suspending, and reimposing tariffs and using fig-leaf declarations of "emergencies." (One standout in his sewer of social media posts: "He who saves his Country

does not violate any Law.") His strong-arming of universities, law firms, and media companies is a response to real problems, but his actions seem aimed more at harming those entities—and expanding his dominion over them—than at crafting enduring fixes. Although the courts move slowly and through multiple levels, judges appointed by presidents of both parties have ruled many of these steps illegal.

Critics of Trump's authoritarian wishes and methods have a significant point, one shared by a solid majority of voters, who justifiably look askance at his pathetic envy of strongmen, demonstratively brutal enforcement of immigration law, performative deployment of National Guard units to urban areas, bullying, and epic self-dealing. Trump and his supporters celebrate his singular imperative to transgress—then, when institutions move to hold him to account, they complain that he is being singled out. Still, even at his picaresque worst, Trump's presidency has not placed the United States on some irreversible slide to authoritarianism.

Combating authoritarianism requires patience and resolve.

Nothing delivers a better appreciation of democratic resilience than close study of authoritarian regimes. The United States has no real coercive apparatus, let alone one that consumes the lion's share of its budget. For revenue, the government depends not on some cash-flow machine but entirely on taxpayers (and voters) who operate in a vast, open-market economy. Storytelling is endlessly contested, and recourse to propaganda provokes resistance and derision. The state exercises little control over life chances. Nothing the term-limited, lame-duck Trump has done, or might yet try, could significantly move the needle on any of those dimensions. As for the fifth dimension, China's power is having a corrosive effect on democracies, including in the United States, which has clumsily adopted measures that resemble the CCP's mercenary mercantilism. But such steps cannot coalesce into wholesale self-destruction of the open U.S. model.

Rather than institutionalized authoritarianism, what threatens the United States is bipartisan fiscal insanity, a deep erosion of basic government performance, severely diminished public trust in institutions, and the absence of a shared national narrative, all of which are interrelated. Trump didn't start these fires, and he won't put them out. He and too many of his opponents feed off and contribute to

the country's extreme distraction and its resulting inability to craft a robust strategy of national renewal that would put the authoritarians on the back foot.

The seductions of immutable hierarchies, an imagined golden age, or the transformative power of violence can persist in open, tolerant societies, and political entrepreneurs can, for a time, make hay with them. Populism in all its guises surfaces problems but rarely solves them. The erosion of government performance helps get populists elected, but their governing tends to worsen that erosion, and this dynamic, alongside flagrant corruption, erodes their popularity. One of the abiding strengths of any genuinely liberal order—domestic or international—is that within it illiberalism can exist, and do damage, without posing an existential threat to it. Institutions and citizens of such an order should neither overrate the risk nor underrate their own strength and potential to prevail.

NO GUARANTEES

Linz's primary subject, Franco, is long dead, and so is his authoritarian Spain. Every strongman and would-be strongman in power today will be dead, at some point. For authoritarian regimes, survival is uncertain, and never more so than during inescapable successions.

But combating authoritarianism requires patience and resolve. It does not entail overthrowing every such regime or, indeed, any of them. The United States can topple weaker authoritarian regimes, but it cannot ensure their replacement by a better alternative. Time and again, Washington has demonstrated that it lacks the complex toolkit, cultural understanding, and sustained attention to establish enduring rule-of-law institutions and democratic political cultures on foreign soil, whether by force of arms, diplomacy, trade, or some combination thereof. Besides, Washington cannot directly bring down nuclear-armed authoritarian adversaries such as China and Russia without risking Armageddon. Instead, the goal should be to shape an environment that makes authoritarian regimes even less confident about their continued existence and, therefore, more preoccupied with their domestic affairs and less able to risk acting coercively abroad. The desired outcome is proactive multidomain competition and occasional cooperation—in other words, cold war instead of hot war.

Combating authoritarianism also requires that democracies get their own houses in order, which is particularly urgent in the United

States because of its weight. No single country in recorded history has amassed so much power across so many domains simultaneously. That Americans profoundly disagree on what promotes or threatens their country's strength, and also on the appropriate degree of U.S. involvement in world affairs, is itself a strength. What is not, however, is a loss of a shared sense of a positive national identity and purpose. Some argue that instead of expending resources and effort to knock its adversaries off balance, the United States should invest in itself and its distinct advantages, including existing and new relationships with allies, friends, and partners. That position relies on a false binary: reinvigorating national purpose and solidifying relationships is, in fact, knocking one's adversaries off balance.

Neither the United States nor China is going to vanish. Therefore, they must share the planet. Washington's path could not be clearer: build substantial leverage with which to negotiate (or, if necessary, enact with like-minded countries) more advantageous and stable terms for planet sharing. These should favor an open and secure global commons, economic arrangements that foster opportunity at home and abroad, and sovereignty—which coercive spheres of influence (masquerading as a multipolar world) profoundly threaten but which alliances enhance for all.

The U.S.-led postwar order did not fail. It succeeded. It aimed to facilitate "the rise of the rest," and it did, spectacularly so. But the countries that built and led the order did not prepare for the predictable results of that success: a relatively smaller share of global GDP for the advanced, wealthy countries of the G-7 and a relatively larger share for everyone else, with corresponding demands for more voice. Now the global order must be updated for a new era, one in which China—a supreme beneficiary of the existing order—possesses the wherewithal, and not just the ambition, to try to supplant it.

After World War II, ordered liberty took hold across much of the world because the United States became a superpower and acted like one, for worse but also for better. Today, the demand for U.S. power is essentially unlimited: bring Ukraine into NATO, defend Taiwan, sign a security treaty with Saudi Arabia. The supply, however, is not. And so Washington must adjust. Commitments must come into alignment with capabilities. This is finally happening. As the United States necessarily (albeit erratically) rebalances its global posture to deal with new circumstances, it is possible to see

the advent of what might be called middle-power horizontalism: deeper economic and security cooperation, especially among the countries of northern Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This is a highly encouraging development, partly galvanized by Trump—a kind of latticework of additional integration that does not entail displacing the United States but enhancing its ability to lead. This will be the work of a generation.

All the major authoritarian regimes have shown themselves to be committed to achieving unencumbered sovereignty by driving U.S. power from their immediate regions and collapsing Washington's alliances. All share the goal of undermining and weakening the United States and its allies in any way they can. Despite not being subjected to aerial bombardment or amphibious invasion, open societies are under constant attack. China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and other anti-Western authoritarian regimes spread disinformation, exfiltrate confidential personnel files, purloin intellectual property, harass and sometimes abduct their own nationals on Western soil for exercising free-speech rights, pay criminals and gang members in Western societies to commit arson or sabotage, plant malware in financial, electrical, and water systems, and much more. "Peace" in the sense of that blissful time between wars has been lost. The gray zone is the new twilight zone.

Nonetheless, the future can still be shaped, and the open and secure global commons can be reinvented for another long run. The Ukrainians stood up to a full-scale Russian invasion and dragged the entire West into the fight. The Israelis knocked the teeth out of Iran's manifold proxies and even the Islamic Republic itself, and then pulled Washington in. The Taiwanese for three consecutive elections have selected the presidential candidate most despised by the CCP. The United States can neither eliminate nor transform the Eurasian authoritarians, but it can reenergize itself and, in the process, make it harder for the authoritarians to marshal their strengths and easier for their weaknesses to hold them back. The American experiment has always had to contend with bouts of disorder, disarray, and doubt. But the United States has also periodically rediscovered and renewed itself, sometimes in profound ways, and it must do so again. Its authoritarian adversaries are displaying audacity and resolve, but the nature of their regimes always presents an opportunity: their loyalists are their true enemies within.

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The Price of American Authoritarianism

What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?

STEVEN LEVITSKY, LUCAN A. WAY, AND DANIEL ZIBLATT

When Donald Trump won reelection in November 2024, much of the American establishment responded with a shrug. After all, Trump had been democratically elected, even winning the popular vote. And democracy had survived the chaos of his first term, including the shocking events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Surely, then, it would survive a second Trump presidency.

That was not the case. In Trump's second term, the United States has descended into competitive authoritarianism—a system in

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Illustration by Emmanuel Polanco

which parties compete in elections but incumbents routinely abuse their power to punish critics and tilt the playing field against their opposition. Competitive authoritarian regimes emerged in the early twenty-first century in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, Viktor Orban's Hungary, and Narendra Modi's India. Not only did the United States follow a similar path under Trump in 2025, but its authoritarian turn was faster and farther-reaching than those that occurred in the first year of these other regimes.

The game, however, is far from up. The fact that the United States has crossed the line into competitive authoritarianism does not mean that its democratic decline has reached a point of no return. Trump's authoritarian offensive is now unmistakable, but it is reversible.

Two things can be true at once. First, Americans face an authoritarian government. In 2025, the United States ceased to be a full democracy in the way that Canada, Germany, or even Argentina are democracies. Second, as the Democratic Party's success in the November 2025 elections shows, multiple channels remain through which opposition forces can contest—and potentially defeat—Trump's increasingly authoritarian government. Indeed, the existence of avenues for contestation is in the very nature of competitive authoritarianism.

Reversing the United States' slide into authoritarianism will require democracy's defenders to recognize the twin dangers of complacency and fatalism. On the one hand, underestimating the threat posed to democracy—believing that the Trump administration's behavior is simply politics as usual—enables authoritarianism by encouraging inaction in the face of systematic abuse of power. On the other hand, overestimating the impact of authoritarianism—believing the country has reached a point of no return—discourages the citizen actions required to defeat autocrats at the ballot box.

OPERATION WARP SPEED

A year ago in these pages, two of us (Levitsky and Way) predicted that the United States would descend into competitive authoritarianism during Trump's second term. We anticipated that Trump, like elected autocrats elsewhere, would move quickly to weaponize state institutions and then deploy them in a variety of efforts to weaken or intimidate his political rivals.

Indeed, the Trump administration has done exactly that, going after multiple targets and shielding allies from accountability. To

weaponize the state, elected autocrats must purge and then pack it. Following the blueprint created by authoritarian governments in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Venezuela, the Trump administration removed professional civil servants from the Justice Department, the FBI, and other key government agencies and put loyalists in charge who were committed to using those agencies to attack opponents. When sitting officials balked at doing what was asked of them, they were summarily removed and replaced with more pliable officials (including, in the Justice Department, personal lawyers of Trump who had little relevant experience).

These newly weaponized public agencies were then quickly deployed against the president's past and present opponents. Under orders from Trump, they launched or have threatened to launch investigations into dozens of public figures he views as political enemies, including Letitia James, the New York state attorney general; Senator Adam Schiff, a California Democrat; Jack Smith, who served as a special prosecutor in the Justice Department during the Biden administration; the philanthropist George Soros; civic watchdog organizations such as Media Matters; and former Trump officials turned critics James Comey, John Bolton, Christopher Krebs, and Miles Taylor.

Most of those singled out have faced petty charges, such as the accusations of mortgage fraud levied against James, Schiff, and the Federal Reserve governor Lisa Cook. As every autocrat knows, if determined investigators look long and hard enough, they can invariably find some infraction—a mistake on a tax or mortgage form, a violation of a little-enforced regulation—committed by a person he wants to target. When rules or regulations are enforced selectively, targeting political foes, the law becomes a weapon.

Even if few prosecutions result in convictions or prison time, such investigations are themselves a powerful form of harassment. Targets are forced to spend their savings on lawyers and to devote substantial time and mental energy to their defense. They may be required to take leave of their jobs, and their reputations often suffer.

A weaponized justice system can be used to protect government allies, too. Trump's justice system has shielded government officials and supporters from prosecution. Even as it pursued critics for petty infractions, for example, it halted the prosecution of the "border czar" Tom Homan, whom undercover FBI agents had recorded accepting a $50,000 cash bribe in September 2024, before his appointment.

More generally, Trump's unrestrained use of the presidential pardon—above all, his pardoning of nearly all the participants in the January 6 attack on the Capitol, including those convicted of assaulting police officers—sent a clear signal that illegal and violent acts undertaken on his behalf would be tolerated, even protected.

The Trump administration also turned its sights on individuals and groups that finance the opposition and civil society. Trump ordered the Justice Department to investigate ActBlue, a Democratic Party fundraising platform, and the Open Society Foundation, a major funder of civil society organizations; according to an October 2025 report in *The Wall Street Journal*, the administration plans to direct the Internal Revenue Service to target Democratic Party donors. And like elected autocrats in El Salvador, Hungary, India, Turkey, and Venezuela, Trump has bullied independent media. He has sued *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has opened investigations into a raft of establishment media outlets, including ABC, CBS, PBS, NPR, and Comcast, which owns NBC.

Fear of retribution has begun to tilt the political playing field.

Such actions have been accompanied by a broader attack on civil society. Like competitive authoritarian governments in Hungary, India, Mexico, and Turkey, the Trump administration has attacked institutions of higher learning, launching investigations into dozens of universities, illegally freezing billions of dollars of their congressionally approved research funding, and pressing for the removal of several of their leaders. The administration has also effectively barred the federal government from hiring leading law firms with ties to the Democratic Party, such as Perkins Coie and Paul, Weiss, suspending their employees' security clearances and threatening to cancel their clients' government contracts.

Ominously, the Trump administration has also sought to politicize the armed forces. To prevent the weaponization of the military for partisan ends, the United States and other established democracies have developed professionalized security forces and elaborate laws and regulations to shield them from political influence. Autocrats often seek to break down those institutional barriers and weaponize the security forces. They do so by either creating new security agencies or radically

transforming existing ones to evade established legal frameworks and oversight mechanisms. The Trump administration's expansion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and its transformation of the agency into a poorly regulated paramilitary force is a clear example.

At the same time, Trump has crossed redlines with the regular armed forces. In a June 2025 speech at Fort Bragg, he goaded a crowd of army soldiers in uniform to jeer at elected Democratic officials. Moreover, the deployment of the National Guard in U.S. cities (on flimsy pretexts and, in some cases, against the will of elected local and state governments) has raised a serious concern that the administration will intimidate citizens and crack down on peaceful protests. Then, in September 2025, Trump told top U.S. military officials to prepare to deploy in U.S. cities and fight a "war from within" against an "enemy from within." This is language reminiscent of the military dictatorships that ruled Argentina, Brazil, and Chile in the 1970s.

One form of authoritarian behavior that we did not anticipate a year ago was the Trump administration's routine subversion of the law—and even the U.S. Constitution. Although the Constitution gives Congress, not the executive branch, the authority to appropriate funds and set tariffs, Trump has usurped that authority, freezing or canceling spending appropriated by legislators and dismantling entire agencies established by Congress. He has also repeatedly imposed tariffs without legislative approval, usually by declaring national emergencies that did not exist (neither Canada nor Brazil posed an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to U.S. security). Indeed, most of the administration's signature policy initiatives in 2025, including the establishment of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, the imposition of sweeping tariffs, and military assaults off the coast of Venezuela, were all carried out illegally, undermining Congress's authority.

MISSING THE FOREST

Many Americans still do not view the Trump administration's behavior as a major departure from the practices of previous U.S. administrations. This interpretation is wrong. Modern U.S. history is indeed replete with examples of antidemocratic behavior and blatant violations of rights, including nearly a century of Jim Crow rule in the South, the Red Scare of 1919–20 that led to the arrests of purported radicals without due process, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the McCarthy-era blacklisting of suspected

communists in the 1950s, the FBI's surveillance and harassment of civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, and President Richard Nixon's well-documented efforts to spy on and harass his political rivals.

But overtly authoritarian abuse largely disappeared in the United States after the civil rights reforms of the 1950s and 1960s and the post-Watergate reforms of the 1970s. Since 1974, no government, Democratic or Republican, has engaged in anything remotely like the Trump administration's politicized attacks on critics and rivals. None of Trump's three predecessors—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden—politicized the FBI. All three left existing FBI directors in place until the end of those directors' terms despite their links to partisan rivals. And all three presidents subsequently appointed experienced, professional FBI directors with whom they shared no strong personal or political relationships. Obama, for example, appointed James Comey, a longtime Republican who went on to make a statement about an FBI probe involving the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton that may have cost her the election.

Likewise, Trump's predecessors did not seriously politicize the Justice Department. Under Bush, Obama, and Biden, politicians whom the department investigated and prosecuted were widely viewed as having committed serious crimes, and crucially, were both Republicans and Democrats. Bush's Justice Department investigated the Republican representative Mark Foley as well as the Democratic representative Jim Traficant. Under Obama, the department investigated the Democratic representatives Jesse Jackson, Jr., and Anthony Weiner, as well as the Republican representative Michael Grimm. Under Biden, the Justice Department investigated Senator Robert Menendez, a Democrat, as well as the president's own son, Hunter Biden.

In fact, Bush, Obama, and Biden bent over backward—sometimes at great cost—to avoid the appearance of political interference. Biden's attorney general, Merrick Garland, hesitated to prosecute Trump for his attacks on democracy in the weeks following the 2020 election, only doing so after the House committee investigating the January 6 attacks on the Capitol uncovered overwhelming evidence of criminal activity. Rather than risk weaponizing the law, Garland's Justice Department slow walked other criminal cases against Trump as well.

The Bush, Obama, and Biden administrations did not attempt to politicize the military, reorient its mission to target domestic

"enemies," or deploy the National Guard to cities against the will of elected local officials. None of them sued major media outlets, used the FCC to threaten media companies if they did not alter their programming or other content, or attempted illegal extortion against law firms, universities, or other civil society institutions. Finally, Bush, Obama, and Biden never questioned the results of elections, tried to overturn election results, or sought to exert federal control over local and state election processes. In each of these critical areas, the Trump administration stands alone in its authoritarianism.

WITHDRAWAL SYNDROME

The Trump administration's authoritarian offensive has transformed American political life, perhaps even more than many of its critics realize. Fearing government retribution, individuals and organizations across the United States have changed their behavior, cooperating with or quietly acquiescing to authoritarian demands that they once would have rejected or spoken out against. As Senator Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, put it, "We are all afraid. . . . We're in a time and place where I have not been. . . . I'm oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice because retaliation is real."

Fear of retribution has begun to tilt the political playing field. Consider how the U.S. media landscape has changed. Numerous outlets have engaged in political realignment or self-censorship: *The Washington Post* has altered its editorial line, shifting markedly to the right, and Condé Nast gutted *Teen Vogue*'s influential political reporting. CBS canceled the Trump critic Stephen Colbert's prominent late-night comedy show and imposed tighter controls on its most influential news program, *60 Minutes*; its parent company, Paramount, then restructured CBS to bring in a more conservative editorial staff. According to a May 2025 report in *The Daily Beast*, the CEO of Disney, Bob Iger, and the president of ABC News, Almin Karamehmedovic, told the hosts of the country's leading daytime talk show, *The View*, to tone down their rhetoric about the president.

What makes self-censorship so insidious is that it is virtually impossible to ascertain its full impact. Although the public can observe firings and the cancellation of programming, it can never know how many editors have softened headlines or opted not to run certain news items, or how many journalists have chosen not to pursue stories out of fear of government retribution.

As in other competitive authoritarian regimes, changes in media coverage have also been driven by government measures to ensure that key media outlets are controlled by supporters. In Hungary, the Orban government took a series of steps to push independent media outlets into the hands of political allies: for example, it leveraged its control over licensing and lucrative government contracts to persuade Magyar Telekom—the parent company of the country's most-read news website, *Origo*—to fire the site's editor and later put it up for sale. Flush with cash from government-allied banks, a private company with ties to Orban easily outbid competitors and gained control of *Origo*. Like the more than 500 other Hungarian news outlets now owned by Orban loyalists, *Origo* ceased critical coverage of the government.

A similar process is underway in the United States as Trump's allies move to take over major news outlets with assistance from the administration. Skydance Media's acquisition of Paramount—greenlighted by an FCC that until recently tended to disapprove of big media mergers—gave the pro-Trump Ellison family control of CBS, which subsequently shifted its programming to the right. The Ellisons have sought to acquire a newly formulated U.S. version of TikTok in addition to Warner Bros. Discovery, which owns CNN. Given that Fox News and X are already owned by wealthy right-wing figures, these moves have the potential to place a considerable share of legacy and social media platforms in the hands of pro-Trump billionaires.

Fear of retaliation has also affected political donors' behavior in ways that could tilt the electoral playing field against the opposition. Faced with a government that has explicitly declared its intent to use the Justice Department, the IRS, and other agencies to investigate people who finance the Democratic Party and other progressive causes, many wealthy donors have retreated to the sidelines. One of the Democrats' largest donors, Reid Hoffman, has scaled back his political contributions as well as his public criticism of Trump since the president began his second term, saying he fears retribution. Other major donors have similarly held back funds from the Democratic Party, helping to generate a marked fundraising advantage for Republicans ahead of the 2026 midterm elections.

Business leaders, foundations, and other wealthy donors have quietly distanced themselves from progressive causes they once

supported—including civil rights, immigrant rights, and LGBTQ rights—to stay out of the federal government's cross hairs. According to *The New York Times*, the Ford Foundation is now scrutinizing grants it has distributed that officials "fear could be criticized" as partisan. The Gates Foundation, meanwhile, has halted grants administered by a major consulting firm with ties to the Democratic Party.

For individual donors, steering clear of certain causes to avoid a costly confrontation with the government is an act of prudence. But such inadvertent collaboration with an authoritarian administration can have a devastating impact on civic and opposition groups as they are simultaneously targeted by the government and shunned by erstwhile supporters.

The gravest danger is not repression but demobilization.

Fear of direct government retribution has also led major law firms, universities, and other influential institutions to pull back, weakening the United States' civic defenses. Major Washington law firms have hesitated to hire former Biden administration officials and limited or ceased their pro bono work for causes that the Trump administration opposes. According to *The Washington Post*, plaintiffs in roughly 75 percent of the lawsuits challenging Trump's executive orders during his first term were represented by large top-tier law firms. Only 15 percent of such plaintiffs were represented by top firms in 2025. With the most powerful law firms on the sidelines, opponents of the administration have struggled to find legal representation, turning to smaller firms that lack the personnel and deep pockets to effectively challenge the administration in the courts.

Universities and colleges across the country, for their part, have responded to government threats by dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and restricting students' right to protest. And institutions and organizations have complied with government pressure to crack down on free expression. Dozens of teachers, university professors, and journalists were suspended or dismissed for social media commentary they posted after the right-wing commentator and activist Charlie Kirk was gunned down in September 2025. Although some were punished for expressing approval of Kirk's killing, others—including the *Washington Post* columnist Karen Attiah—were apparently targeted simply for criticizing his work.

TURNING BACK THE TIDE

None of these developments, however alarming, should be cause for fatalism or despair. The United States has entered an authoritarian moment. But there are multiple legal and peaceful ways out. Indeed, a defining feature of competitive authoritarianism is the existence of institutional arenas through which the opposition can seriously contest power. The playing field might be uneven, but the game is still played. The opposing team remains on the field, and sometimes it wins.

The most important arena for contestation in competitive authoritarian regimes is elections. Although they may be unfair, elections are not mere window-dressing. Competition is real, and outcomes are uncertain. Take India. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of an emergency in 1975 brought widespread repression. Within 24 hours, 676 opposition politicians were in jail. Her government imposed strict media censorship and ultimately arrested more than 110,000 critics and civil society activists over the course of 1975 and 1976. When Gandhi called elections in January 1977, many opposition leaders were still in prison. Yet the opposition Janata Party—a hastily formed coalition of Hindu nationalists, liberals, and leftists—managed to win the March vote, remove Gandhi from power, and restore Indian democracy.

In Malaysia, the long-ruling coalition Barisan Nasional controlled virtually all traditional media, maintained a massive advantage in resources (few businesses dared donate to the opposition), and used gerrymandering and manipulation of voter rolls to tilt the electoral playing field. Opposition forces nevertheless managed to win a parliamentary majority in 2018, putting an end to more than half a century of authoritarian rule.

After 2015, Poland descended into competitive authoritarianism as the governing Law and Justice party weaponized the state by packing the courts, the electoral commissions, and publicly owned media with loyalists. Nevertheless, left and center-right opposition parties forged a broad coalition and won back power in the 2023 elections.

The governments of competitive authoritarian regimes often rig elections, but these efforts can backfire. In Serbia, egregious fraud in the 2000 presidential election triggered a massive protest movement that toppled the country's autocratic president, Slobodan Milosevic. In Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in

2004 after Viktor Yanukovych used large-scale ballot stuffing to steal the presidential election. The protests forced a new election, which the opposition won.

The U.S. opposition, moreover, enjoys several advantages over its counterparts in other competitive authoritarian regimes. First, although American institutions have weakened, the United States retains powerful institutional bulwarks against authoritarian consolidation. The judiciary is more independent—and the rule of law generally stronger—than in any other competitive authoritarian regime. Likewise, notwithstanding the Trump administration's efforts to politicize the military, the U.S. armed forces remain highly professionalized and thus difficult to weaponize. Federalism in the United States remains robust and continues to generate and protect alternative centers of authority; ambitious and powerful governors are already pushing back against Trump's efforts. Finally, despite worrisome signs of media self-censorship, the United States retains a more vibrant media landscape than Hungary, Turkey, and other similar regimes do. Even though the Trump administration has tilted the playing field, the persistence of these institutional constraints will likely enable the opposition to continue to contest seriously for power. The Democratic Party's big victories in the 2025 off-year elections showed that U.S. elections remain highly competitive.

The United States also possesses a well-organized and resource-rich civil society. The country's enormous private sector has hundreds of billionaires, millions of millionaires, and dozens of law firms that generate at least $1 billion a year in revenue. The United States is home to more than 1,700 private universities and colleges and a vast infrastructure of churches, labor unions, private foundations, and nonprofit organizations. This endows U.S. citizens with vast financial and organizational resources for pushing back against authoritarian governments. Such countervailing power greatly exceeds anything available to oppositions in Hungary, India, or Turkey, let alone in El Salvador, Venezuela, Russia, and other autocracies.

The U.S. pro-democracy movement also benefits from a strong and unified opposition party. Most oppositions in competitive authoritarian regimes are fragmented and disorganized: in Hungary, for example, the opposition to Orban was split between the weak and discredited Socialist Party and the far-right Jobbik, which allowed Orban's Fidesz party to coast to victories in 2014 and 2018.

In Venezuela, the main opposition parties were so discredited and weakened that they could not even field their own presidential candidates when Hugo Chávez ran for reelection in 2000 and 2006. By contrast, the U.S. opposition is united behind the Democratic Party, which—for all its flaws—remains well organized, well financed, and electorally viable.

Finally, Trump's limited popularity may hinder his efforts to entrench authoritarian rule. Elected autocrats are far more successful in consolidating power when they enjoy broad public support: Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, Chávez in Venezuela, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Vladimir Putin in Russia all had approval ratings above 80 percent when they imposed authoritarian rule. Trump's approval rating is stuck in the low 40s. Less popular authoritarian leaders, such as Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Pedro Castillo in Peru, often fail.

It remains unclear how far Trump will go to manipulate future elections. Given that he attempted to overturn the 2020 election and his allies have sought to distort the 2026 midterms by openly pushing for mid-decade gerrymandering in Republican-controlled states, some manipulation seems likely—for example, measures to restrict ballot access, voter intimidation, or a refusal to accept results in some districts. Because the last few U.S. presidential elections have been so close and the margins of control in Congress are so tight, even relatively modest manipulation could be decisive in 2026 or 2028. But that is a risk, not a certainty.

In the United States, then, opposition forces can seriously contest power at the ballot box, in the courts, and on the street. No single arena will suffice. Pro-democratic forces cannot afford to wait for the 2026 and 2028 elections; they cannot simply rely on the courts to defend democracy; and by themselves, No Kings rallies will not restore democracy. Citizens must therefore work through all three channels. Although it is impossible to know how, when, or even if these strategies will succeed, the United States' prospects for returning to democratic rule remain good.

THE COMPLACENCY TRAP

In this context, the gravest danger is not repression but demobilization. Opposition activists who treat a Trump dictatorship as a fait accompli and repression and rigged elections as inevitable risk

creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Democratic erosion accelerates when citizens and elites withdraw from contestation—when, out of fear, exhaustion, or sheer resignation, promising candidates decline to run for office, donors pull back, lawyers stop filing lawsuits, and citizens tune out. The outcome of the United States' authoritarian turn depends less on the regime's strength than on the opposition's willingness to continue playing a difficult game.

If the Republican Party were to retain control over all major branches of government after 2026, the prospects for entrenchment would increase. Further purges and weaponization of the bureaucracy, increased politicization of the courts and the military, and tighter control over the media and universities could follow. Such developments would narrow the existing channels for contestation or close some off, making a return to democracy more difficult. But as events in Argentina, Chile, India, and Thailand show, even sharp authoritarian turns are reversible.

The most likely medium-term outcome in the United States is neither entrenched authoritarianism nor a return to stable democracy. Rather, it is regime instability: a protracted struggle between authoritarian impulses and democratic solidarity. In the absence of a radical transformation of the Republican Party, the most optimistic scenario for the coming decade is probably a slide back and forth between dysfunctional democracy and unstable competitive authoritarianism, depending on which party holds national power. In this sense, American politics may come to resemble Ukraine's in the 1990s and early 2000s, which oscillated between democracy and competitive authoritarianism as pro-European or pro-Russian forces variously controlled the executive branch. As with Poland's rounds of voting during the past decade, the next few elections in the United States will not only be contests between competing policies but involve a more fundamental choice between democracy and authoritarianism, as well.

To navigate this moment, Americans must sustain a kind of double vision, recognizing that their country is confronting authoritarianism while not forgetting that avenues for democratic contestation remain open. Losing sight of either truth invites defeat: complacency if the danger is underestimated, fatalism if it is overestimated. The outcome of this struggle remains open. It will turn less on the strength of the authoritarian government than on whether enough citizens act as though their efforts still matter—because, for now, they still do.

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How AI Is Systematically Transforming Education

By Dr. Stephen Hodges, CEO, Efekta Education Group

Education today faces deep inequities in access, a global shortage of qualified teachers, and outdated systems that leave millions of K–12 students unprepared for a rapidly changing, technology-driven world. Efekta Education partners with ministries of education, educators, and policymakers to improve English proficiency among public and private high school students.

For decades, educators have dreamed of delivering to every student the kind of personalized instruction that drives extraordinary results. Benjamin Bloom called it the "2-Sigma Problem": where one-on-one tutoring produces outcomes two standard deviations above traditional classroom learning. Until now, achieving that on a national scale has been impossible.

Intelligent learning systems, adaptive teaching platforms, and AI teaching assistants are beginning to change that—bringing high-quality, personalized education to more classrooms and narrowing the divide between those with access to the best teachers (and resources) and those without it. The implications extend far beyond schools: how countries learn, compete, and prosper may soon be defined not by geography or wealth but by how well they harness this educational transformation.

Efekta Education's AI learning solutions are helping millions of students and teachers—tailoring lessons to individual needs, providing instant feedback, and freeing teachers from administrative tasks so they can focus on nurturing human strengths such as curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking. This amplifies teachers' impact and helps teaching remain one of the most creative and meaningful professions in the world. For students, this points to an education less dictated by the accident of birth, where they live, and the schools they attend.

Starting with the biggest opportunity: English

English opens doors to better jobs and global collaboration. At scale, it can uplift entire economies. Yet there is a shortage of roughly 20 million English teachers, and few of the two billion people studying English will achieve fluency without new approaches.

Efekta, an Education First (EF) company, builds on EF's 60-year legacy teaching languages to millions worldwide. Across Latin America, Efekta's platform and AI teaching assistant (Addi) have been rolled out to more than four million students, making it the world's largest AI-powered learning trial.

In Brazil, after two years using the Efekta platform, students in Paraná improved their annual state English assessment scores by 32.5 percent, evidence that the 2-Sigma barrier can be overcome when intelligent technology meets sound pedagogy.

Addi, which was recently recognized with Apple's Cultural Impact Award and Fast Company's "Next Big Things in Tech" honor, is just the beginning. With the right public-private collaboration, this generation could be the first in which every learner has a tutor, every teacher an assistant, and every nation a knowledge-driven edge—at roughly the price of a single textbook per student.

And English is just the start. Efekta's technology is designed to extend into mathematics, science, and other languages, creating solutions that address multiple educational gaps simultaneously.

If your ministry, institution, or company is exploring how AI can enhance language learning and student outcomes, we'd welcome a conversation. Together, we can turn the promise of equitable, AI-supported education into lasting economic growth.

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Efekta Education. Teach smarter. Learn Faster.

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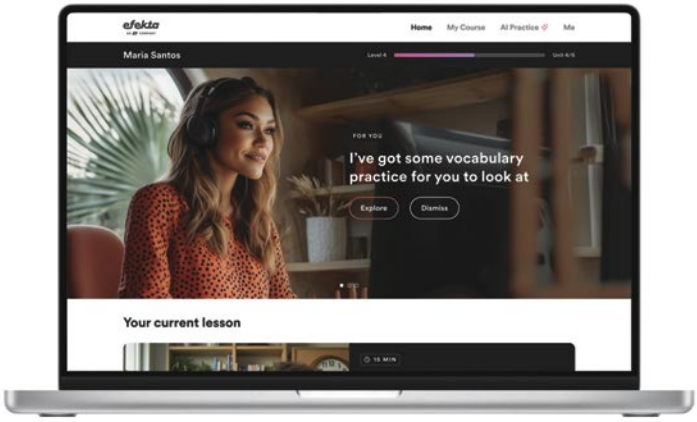
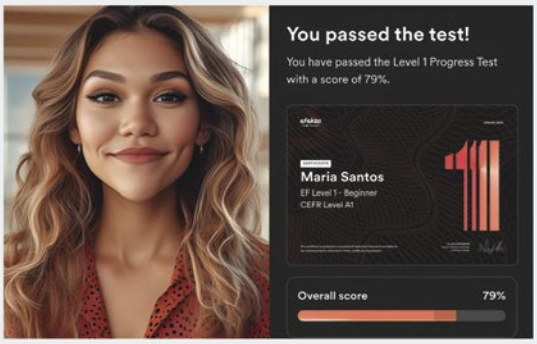
- Drive English proficiency at large scale in public and private high schools.



English opens doors to opportunities.

When taught at scale, English can uplift entire economies. Yet, few of the 2 billion people currently studying English will achieve fluency due to teacher shortage, learning quality, and accessibility.

Efekta partners with ministries of education, educators, and policymakers to achieve systematic English proficiency improvement within public and private high school systems on regional and national levels.



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By blending proven teaching methods with advanced technology – supporting students and teachers alike.

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The Illiberal International

Authoritarian Cooperation Is Reshaping the Global Order

NIC CHEESEMAN, MATÍAS BIANCHI, AND JENNIFER CYR

During the interwar years, support for revolutionary, anticapitalist parties by the Soviet-led Communist International laid the groundwork for the expansion of communism after World War II. Following the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-led international order promoted liberalism and democracy, albeit unevenly, enabling waves of democratic transitions worldwide. Today, political cooperation across borders is advancing autocracy. The momentum lies with a mix of authoritarian and illiberal governments, antisystem parties—typically but not only on the far right—and sympathetic private actors that are coordinating their messaging and lending each other material support.

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What links these actors is not where they sit on the political spectrum, but how they relate to democratic institutions and liberal values, including constraints on executive power, safeguards for civil liberties, and the rule of law. From illiberal leaders within historically democratic states, such as U.S. President Donald Trump, to fully established autocrats, such as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko—often referred to as "Europe's last dictator"—they share a readiness to personalize power, weaken checks and balances, and deploy disinformation to erode accountability. By hollowing out pluralism and delegitimizing their opponents, these leaders, to varying degrees, roll back political rights and civil liberties. And by pooling resources, amplifying disinformation, and shielding one another diplomatically, they participate in cross-border illiberal networks whose growing capabilities and influence are tilting the global balance in favor of autocracy.

This "illiberal international" was perhaps most visible in Beijing in September 2025, when three of the world's most prominent autocrats—Chinese leader Xi Jinping, North Korean ruler Kim Jong Un, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose countries cooperate closely on economic and security matters—stood together, projecting defiance of liberal norms. But that summit was just the tip of the iceberg. In 2024 alone, the Authoritarian Collaboration Index published by the U.S.-based nonprofit Action for Democracy tracked more than 45,000 high-level meetings, media partnerships, and other such incidents of coordination among "authoritarian regimes, authoritarian-leaning governments, and authoritarian-leaning opposition parties" around the globe.

Cooperation among democracies, meanwhile, is faltering. Twentieth-century Western support for democracy was often self-serving and inconsistent, but at its peak, it encouraged political liberalization by using economic incentives, a powerful ideological brand, and coordinated diplomatic pressure. After the Cold War, conditions on aid, trade access, and diplomatic engagement continued to reward reform and isolate repression. Yet the funding, energy, and capabilities of the democratic alliance have declined as the institutions of the liberal order lose their potency and the conviction of remaining members wavers. Some former champions of democracy—most notably the United States under Trump—are actively enabling or legitimizing illiberal networks. Even countries that have remained proudly democratic have become more cautious and reactive, taking steps to mitigate interference in their own affairs but stopping short of taking the fight to illiberal regimes.

As the capability gap between authoritarian and democratic networks widens, authoritarian rule has become easier to sustain and democratic backsliding harder to combat. This development should be worrying not only to those who care about political rights and civil liberties. Authoritarian countries are more prone to conflict, instability, and repression than democratic ones, and most of them perform poorly when it comes to inclusive development, producing a world that is less safe, less free, and less prosperous. And as long as democratic coordination remains less bold and less inspired than its authoritarian counterpart, there is every reason to expect that autocracy will continue to spread.

A WORLD SAFE FOR AUTOCRACY

Liberal democracy has become an endangered species. The world is a quarter century into a democratic recession; according to the widely cited Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index, 45 countries shifted away from democracy and toward autocracy in 2025. Only 29 countries can now be considered full democracies.

Digging a little deeper, the outlook is even worse. For much of the twentieth century, democracies typically managed to recover after backsliding. In Uruguay, a democratic restoration followed less than ten years after a 1933 coup; in India, 1977 elections ushered in a rocky but durable democratic revival after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's centralization of authority in the 1970s. In recent decades, however, rebounds have become rare and precarious. In research published in the *Journal of Democracy*, we found that since 1994, of the 19 countries that experienced a period of autocratization and then successfully recovered their previous level of democracy, 17 began backsliding again within five years. Instead of snapping back into shape, democratic institutions remain damaged.

One of the biggest changes in the past three decades is the rise of the support network that autocrats and would-be autocrats now enjoy. There are historical precedents for cross-border coordination among autocrats, from the fascist axis of the 1930s to Soviet-backed networks during the Cold War. But the authoritarian alliance that has emerged since the early 1990s, when autocracy was in recession worldwide, is different in form and content from those that came before.

First, it is increasingly well resourced. There are now roughly as many authoritarian countries in the world as democratic ones, but autocracies collectively have more people and are growing wealthier.

Today, governments on the authoritarian spectrum (including many that hold elections, such as India) together represent more than 70 percent of the world's population. They also enjoyed a 46 percent share of global GDP (measured by purchasing power parity) in 2022—up from just 24 percent in 1992—according to V-Dem data. That number is expected to rise further. Authoritarian states' willingness to manipulate politics across borders has grown with their economic and military power, and their ability to do so has expanded with advancements in digital technology. A new tier of regionally influential middle powers, which includes countries such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, has lent additional strength to authoritarians' global influence. And whereas the years after the end of the Cold War saw new democratic regional bodies established or existing ones, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, strengthened, for the past few decades most new regional organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 and the Alliance of Sahel States in 2023, have been formed among authoritarians.

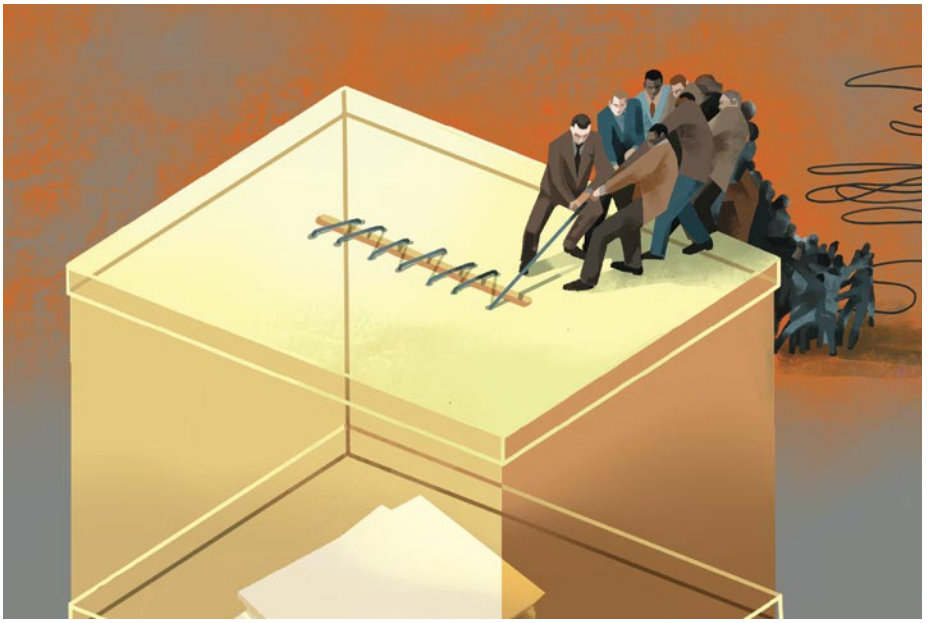
Today's illiberal international is not directed by Beijing or Moscow, the way the Soviet-led Communist International, or Comintern, and later the Warsaw Pact structured ideological and military coordination during the Cold War. Instead, it operates as a collection of overlapping networks that provide fertile ground for the construction of a more authoritarian world. The disparate elements of this system—Russian mercenaries, money from the ruling dynasties of the Arab Gulf states, Chinese and U.S. surveillance technologies, and far-right political parties in Europe and North America—are not organized from a single command center, nor do they always work toward the same purpose. But their activities often reinforce one another. Authoritarians in the Central African Republic and Mali, for example, have received security assistance from Russian private military companies, which in turn were financed by illicit gold deals between companies in these countries and the UAE. Meanwhile, the UAE has used Russian mercenaries to funnel arms to its allies in countries such as Sudan. Together, these relationships entrench authoritarian control.

Collaboration takes several forms. One involves direct cooperation among nondemocratic powers, most notably China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela. These countries often share military intelligence and extend diplomatic protection to one another. Through vetoes at the United Nations (in the case of China and Russia), joint statements in

multilateral forums, and defense and trade agreements that lack oversight measures, they help create a permissive environment in which repression is normalized and accountability diluted. By offering economic lifelines to sanctioned countries, they reduce the effectiveness of Western efforts to foster democracy and deter repression. And by defending each other's human rights records and promoting institutions such as the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization as alternatives to Western-led groups, they signal to would-be autocrats that authoritarian governance can command legitimacy and support on the global stage.

These five countries also interfere across borders to varying degrees. Despite regularly invoking sovereignty to deflect criticism of their own human rights abuses, they do not hesitate to intervene in other countries' political systems and civic institutions to empower groups aligned with their worldviews or to discredit critics and pro-democracy forces. Russia, for example, has covertly funded sympathetic political parties, spread disinformation through state-sponsored news outlets such as RT and Sputnik, and launched social media campaigns and cyberattacks to distort public debate and influence elections in countries including France, Moldova, and Romania. Similarly, China has used its network of Confucius Institutes (organizations promoting Chinese language and culture), diaspora associations, and state-linked media to shape political discussion and suppress criticism abroad, including by pressuring universities, intimidating journalists, and supporting pro-Beijing candidates in places such as Australia and Taiwan. In effect, these efforts extend authoritarian influence into democratic arenas while eroding the norms of transparency and pluralism on which democracy depends.

Authoritarian middle powers are also deploying military and financial tools to entrench illiberal governance and suppress democratic openings abroad. Turkey's supply of Bayraktar TB2 drones to incumbent strongmen in countries at war, such as Azerbaijan and Libya, has given those leaders decisive battlefield advantages and reinforced military regimes resistant to international accountability. The UAE has likewise supported repressive actors across Africa and the Middle East, including Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, one of the belligerents in the country's civil war that the UN has accused of committing horrendous atrocities. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has backed autocratic leaders and counterrevolutionary movements since the Arab Spring, most notably giving financial and diplomatic aid to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime



in Egypt since the 2013 military coup that brought him to power—and that put a definitive end to Egypt's short-lived democratic opening.

Illicit or criminal networks are often integral to these international collaborations. Shell companies, covert donations, and opaque real estate ventures launder money that bankrolls political actors abroad. These flows exacerbate corruption and represent a direct threat to democracy as they infiltrate legislatures and parties in the very countries that still aspire to defend liberal norms. The "Laundromat" corruption network in Azerbaijan, for example, spent nearly $3 billion in bribes to people, including European lawmakers, who would mute criticism of the country's human rights abuses and whitewash its record at the Council of Europe, a regional human rights organization. In Spain, the far-right party Vox, which advocates restrictions on minority rights and opposes gender equality legislation, confirmed that it received a loan of around $10 million from MBH Bank (then MKB Bank) in Hungary for its 2023 electoral campaign. According to reporting by Reuters and Politico Europe, MBH Bank is partly owned by a close ally and former business partner of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Although the loan's legality is contested, the occurrence of a transaction between a far-right campaign and a financial institution embedded in Orban's patronage network is significant. With this kind of funding available from illiberal regimes, would-be autocrats and

defenders of authoritarianism can more easily keep their causes alive and gain a financial advantage over their pro-democracy rivals.

TRUST BUSTERS

Another key part of the illiberal project is the diffusion of authoritarian-friendly ideologies. Illiberal governments, politicians, intellectuals, and civil society groups around the world design and share narratives that reject democratic norms and values. They rarely hold the same worldviews—illiberal and autocratizing leaders can sit at opposite ideological extremes—but their messaging tends to have features in common. It often includes calls to roll back women's rights and limit protections for LGBTQ communities, for instance. In Europe and the United States, right-wing parties and organizations typically frame these rights as threats to traditional family structures, religious freedom, or national identity, whereas their counterparts in Russia and parts of Africa and Latin America often portray gender equality and reproductive rights as foreign, Western impositions that undermine cultural sovereignty. More important than these variations, however, is the shared aim of the messaging: to sow doubt about democratic institutions, the universality of human rights, and the legitimacy of Western morality and government.

Such attempts have become ubiquitous. The European External Action Service, the EU's diplomatic agency, has compiled since 2023 an annual Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats that documents efforts by actors such as China and Russia to spread harmful and divisive disinformation. The third report, released in March 2025, analyzed a sample of more than 500 incidents of information manipulation that were promoted through more than 38,000 channels. Many of these information campaigns boosted messages associated with right-wing politics and populism, but their broader effect is to erode trust in democratic governance and normalize illiberal or antidemocratic speech.

A 2024 campaign in France, for example, saw five coffins draped in the French flag and marked "French soldiers in Ukraine" placed near the foot of the Eiffel Tower, a stunt designed to generate both offline and online attention. French authorities suspect that Russian-linked actors planned the display to inflame public anger at the French government over its policies in support of Ukraine's resistance to Russia's 2022 invasion. Earlier, in a Russian operation known as Doppelgänger, first

exposed in late 2022, actors linked to Moscow created cloned versions of major European media outlets. These websites circulated pro-Kremlin disinformation about Ukraine, the Paris Olympics, and other topics in European politics. The stories they produced were then picked up by Russian diplomatic accounts in countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Slovakia, as well as by far-right media outlets and online influencers in Europe and the United States, extending the reach of the campaign.

Some narrative diffusion is more closely coordinated. The Make Europe Great Again rally in Madrid in February 2025, co-hosted by the right-wing European party Patriots.EU, gathered far-right parties from across the continent. The Conservative Political Action Conference, an annual gathering of conservative activists and politicians, began in the United States but has been staged in Hungary and Poland in recent years, too, drawing in thousands of participants from countries across Europe, Latin America, and beyond. Attendees endorse each other in speeches, cultivate networks of contacts, and share ideas, building international connections that provide visibility and legitimacy for domestic movements. And because these events include both conventional conservative discourse and outright disinformation, they can blur the boundary between the two, making authoritarian messaging appear more palatable to mainstream audiences.

Criminal networks are often integral to authoritarian collaborations.

Sometimes, the promotion of illiberal visions of governance and development is even more overt. The Chinese Communist Party, for example, has increased the training programs it provides regularly for party leaders and government officials in African countries including Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania. The sessions have been described, by at least one participant, as teaching government officials what can be achieved "without the messiness of democracy."

Sympathetic business leaders have also grasped new opportunities to amplify illiberal narratives for global audiences. For instance, since taking over Twitter (now X) in 2022, Elon Musk has used the platform to spread right-wing disinformation about politicians and candidates he opposes. He has dismantled safeguards against extremist content, too, and relentlessly attacked the mainstream media. These highly visible interventions into politics both inside and outside the United States

amplify hate speech, endanger the freedom of the press, empower politicians and citizens who target minorities and marginalized groups, and impede citizens' ability to make informed choices at the ballot box.

If the goal of illiberal messaging is to reduce popular confidence and trust in democratic institutions, it appears to be working. According to the political scientist Will Jennings, trust in national parliaments in democratic countries has declined by around eight percent since 1990, reflecting a "public discontent with politics" that "has expanded in terms of its scope and intensity." In turn, the erosion of trust has weakened the social contract that sustains representative government, leaving democracies more vulnerable to populist demagogues, institutional paralysis, and the gradual normalization of authoritarian alternatives.

MAN TO MAN

A final way that autocratic and authoritarian-leaning leaders support each other across borders is through personal relationships. When former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro faced prosecution over an alleged plot to overturn the result of Brazil's 2022 election, for instance, Trump publicly condemned Brazil's judiciary, and the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned the lead judge in the case. Trump also imposed an extra 40 percent tariff on Brazilian goods, which Brasília interpreted partly as punishment for the government's pursuit of Bolsonaro.

Personalized engagement is not always reliable. Orban and Putin once shared a close working relationship, grounded in energy deals and mutual illiberalism. Their cooperation made Hungary heavily dependent on Russian gas and gave Moscow a channel for influence within the EU. But the partnership soured after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, when EU sanctions and funding freezes forced Budapest to quietly seek alternative energy sources, leading to tensions in its relationship with Moscow. A similar marriage of convenience connected Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the UAE in the early 2010s, when Emirati investments helped Erdogan entrench his patronage networks and centralize power. But Turkey's relationship with the UAE soon collapsed during the Arab Spring protests over Erdogan's support for political Islamists the Emirati government opposed. Authoritarian cooperation may be expedient, but it tends to be brittle. Cooperation is not always successful in protecting authoritarian figures, either. Brazil's Supreme Court convicted Bolsonaro in September for his role in the coup plot, despite Trump's taunts and tariffs.

Still, these informal ties matter. Having backers abroad gives illiberal leaders financial lifelines, diplomatic cover, and evidence of external legitimacy—advantages that can blunt domestic pressure and help them survive sanctions or internal dissent. In turn, this transnational support raises the stakes for potential challengers, who have less reason to think the government will hesitate to retaliate against them. Resistance to authoritarian creep thus becomes riskier and less likely to succeed.

OUT OF THE FIGHT

For decades, democratic networks had the upper hand. Democracies shaped the twentieth-century global order by creating and upholding institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and a wider constellation of international financial and legal bodies that embedded liberal norms, provided collective security guarantees, and demonstrated the material benefits of belonging to the democratic alliance. Yet democracies have failed to preserve their advantages. Democratic institutions' preference for procedural neutrality and consensus has allowed illiberal actors to test the limits of—and often bend—those institutions from within. Democracies, moreover, are struggling to recruit other countries to their side. In regions such as Latin America, where the United States spent much of the twentieth century supporting military rule, many countries were already skeptical of Washington's post–Cold War pivot urging governments to democratize. Across Africa and Asia, leaders who are regularly asked to "choose democracy" see fewer and fewer reasons to do so as their citizens grow dissatisfied with electoral systems that do not deliver desirable economic results.

Even the pro-democracy narrative, which inspired citizens and movements throughout the twentieth century, has become stale and uninspiring. Some major democracies have begun to avoid the term "democracy" altogether. In the United Kingdom, for example, successive governments have described their foreign policy in terms of promoting "open societies," deliberately deemphasizing the defense of democracy so as not to embarrass authoritarian partners. And attempts to reinvigorate the democratic brand—such as the Summit for Democracy, which U.S. President Joe Biden convened in 2021, 2023, and 2024—instead reveal its shortcomings, generating little enthusiasm from civil society and drawing even less public attention.

The current U.S. administration has also forfeited leadership of the democratic alliance. In July 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio instructed American diplomats to "avoid opining on the fairness or integrity" of foreign elections and on "the democratic values" of foreign countries. And the administration's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development has removed essential funding for investigative journalists, human rights monitors, election observers, and other pro-democracy groups around the world. Europe, where austerity measures and mounting fiscal constraints have tightened foreign aid budgets, is unlikely to pick up the slack. Groups that might otherwise act to defend democratic norms are therefore scrambling to cover core costs, leaving a clear lane for authoritarian governments and movements.

Democracies are playing by the rules of a game that no longer exists.

Democrats are playing by the rules of a game that no longer exists. They are relying on sterile communiqués, predictable conferences, and cautious diplomacy while their opponents have become more ruthless, more imaginative, and better networked. Halting the expansion of the illiberal international will require democracy's defenders to rethink their approach.

The first step is to reclaim the narrative. Pro-democracy actors need to make democratic values culturally relevant, meet citizens where they are, and show them how democracy improves everyday life. A recent example in France illustrates the potential for such a strategy: ahead of the 2024 legislative elections, a WhatsApp network of 130 activists, influencers, and grassroots organizers—figures trusted within their communities—produced short videos, memes, and message templates that explained the stakes of the election, countered misleading information, and encouraged people to vote with a tone that was personal, hopeful, and creative. Participants in the network also created an open group on Telegram to share tips for getting involved in the campaign, including ways to volunteer on election day, with more than 30,000 users.

Democracies must also address authoritarian disinformation more effectively. The EU has made some progress: its 2022 Digital Services Act required large platforms such as Meta and X to remove illegal content swiftly, disclose their content-moderation algorithms, and curb the amplification of disinformation through recommendation features, and European diplomats regularly call out Chinese and Russian state-linked

media and troll networks for spreading fabricated stories. But one regional effort is not enough. Just as authoritarian governments share tactics and amplify one another's messaging, democratic governments must pool resources and intelligence and jointly establish clear standards for online platforms to promote information integrity.

Financing is key. Democratic governments must expand and protect funding channels to ensure that activists, independent journalists, and civic organizations can investigate corruption, expose disinformation, and mobilize citizens without fear of financial retaliation. They can offer tax deductions, matching grants, and public-private partnerships, for instance, to encourage the private sector to channel corporate social responsibility funds toward media freedom and civic innovation. Democracies must also shut down the illicit financial flows that fill authoritarian coffers. This requires intelligence sharing, cross-border asset tracing, and greater enforcement of legal tools such as EU anti-money-laundering directives, sanctions like those of the United States' Magnitsky Act that target human rights abusers, and anti-bribery and asset recovery provisions under the UN Convention Against Corruption. The EU has begun to make progress in these areas and may take further steps under its recently announced "Democracy Shield" initiative, but democratic governments overall need to do much more to cut authoritarian actors off from the financial and diplomatic systems that sustain them.

Finally, today's democratic alliance needs diverse leadership. European and North American countries should not be the only ones to set the agenda. Democracy promotion requires a broad coalition with new ideas and new energy, and this momentum is likely to come from other parts of the world. In July, for instance, participants at the Democracia Siempre (Democracy Always) summit, hosted by Chile and attended by leaders from Brazil, Colombia, Spain, and Uruguay, agreed to assemble an international network of government and civil society members to work toward the goal of building inclusive, responsive democracies.

Democracy is being contested in every arena, and it must be defended in each and every one. This will require democratic governments—and pro-democracy civil society groups, media, and international institutions—to not only strengthen their political systems at home but also take on the illiberal networks that are empowering authoritarian movements around the world. Superior coordination is giving autocracy an edge. Until the remaining members of the democratic alliance update their own strategies, all they face is further decline.

How China Wins the Future

Beijing's Strategy to Seize the New Frontiers of Power

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

When the Chinese cargo ship *Istanbul Bridge* docked at the British port of Felixstowe on October 13, 2025, the arrival might have appeared unremarkable. The United Kingdom is China's third-largest export market, and boats travel between the two countries all year.

What was remarkable about the *Bridge* was the route it had taken—it was the first major Chinese cargo ship to travel directly to Europe via the Arctic Ocean. The trip took 20 days, weeks faster than the traditional routes through the Suez Canal or around the Cape of Good Hope. Beijing hailed the journey as a geostrategic breakthrough and a contribution to supply chain stability. Yet the more important message was unstated: the extent of China's economic and security ambitions in a new realm of global power.

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Illustration by Eoin Ryan

Beijing's efforts in the Arctic are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As early as the 1950s, Chinese leaders discussed competition in the world's literal and figurative frontiers: the deep seas, the poles, outer space, and what the former People's Liberation Army officer Xu Guangyu described as "power spheres and ideology," concepts that today include cyberspace and the international financial system. These domains form the strategic foundations of global power. Control over them determines access to critical resources, the future of the Internet, the many benefits that derive from printing the world's reserve currency, and the ability to defend against an array of security threats. As most analysts focus on the symptoms of competition—tariffs, semiconductor supply chain cutoffs, and short-term technological races—Beijing is building capabilities and influence in the underlying systems that will define the decades ahead. Doing so is central to President Xi Jinping's dream of reclaiming China's centrality on the global stage. "We can play a major role in the construction of the playgrounds even at the beginning, so that we can make rules for new games," Xi said in 2014.

Beijing has positioned itself well for this contest. It approaches these frontiers with a consistent logic and playbook. It is investing in the necessary hard capabilities. It is partnering with other countries to embed itself in institutions and flooding these bodies with Chinese experts and officials, who then campaign for change. When it cannot co-opt existing institutions, it builds new ones. In all these efforts, Beijing is highly adaptive, experimenting with different platforms, reframing positions, and deploying capabilities in new ways.

American policymakers have only started waking up to the full extent of China's success at building power in key areas of today's world. Now, they are at risk of missing its commitment to dominating tomorrow's. The United States, in other words, is not just abdicating its role in the current international system. It is falling behind in the fight to define the next one.

TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

In 1872, the British sent a ship to retrieve the world's first store of polymetallic nodules: clumps of ocean debris that can contain critical minerals such as manganese, nickel, and cobalt. But it was not until the early 1960s that scientists posited these nodules could have significant financial benefits. In the mid-1970s, the U.S. company Deepsea Ventures, a subsidiary of Tenneco, claimed that it could fill nearly all the military's demand for nickel and cobalt by mining the Pacific Ocean floor.

Deepsea Ventures never got the permissions it needed to dredge up huge quantities of nodules, and eventually, it folded. But meanwhile, other international actors had begun negotiations over countries' rights and obligations regarding the world's oceans. These negotiations culminated in the adoption of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which came into force in November 1994. It included governance rules over the deep-seabed resources that lay beyond countries' territorial waters. The parties to the convention established and, along with the world's major mining companies, funded the International Seabed Authority to manage these resources.

China began its own research into deep-seabed mining in the late 1970s. Its scientists and engineers developed prototypes of submersibles and machines that can mine as well as survey the ocean floor. In 1990, Beijing established the state-controlled China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association to coordinate its seabed prospecting and mining in international waters. It built seabed mining capabilities into its five-year plans starting in 2011. And in 2016, Beijing passed a deep-seabed law designed to develop China's scientific and commercial capabilities and to provide a framework for engaging in international negotiations regarding ocean floor resources. In the process, China created at least 12 institutions dedicated to deep-sea research and built the world's largest fleet of civilian research vessels.

When China cannot co-opt existing institutions, it builds new ones.

Xi has targeted the deep seabed as a priority area for Chinese leadership. "The deep sea contains treasures that remain undiscovered and undeveloped," he said in May 2016. "In order to obtain these treasures, we have to control key technologies in getting into the deep sea, discovering the deep sea, and developing the deep sea." China already dominates land-based global supply chains of rare-earth elements, and a lead in deep-seabed mining would only enhance its chokehold over these minerals. Deep-seabed mining would also advance another Chinese security imperative by facilitating the mapping of the seabed and the laying of undersea cables that can be used in support of naval and submarine warfare. "There is no road in the deep sea," Xi said in 2018. "We do not need to chase [after other countries]: we are the road."

As China's domestic capabilities have expanded, so has its role in the International Seabed Authority. Since 2001, Beijing has served almost

continuously on the ISA Council, the 36-member executive body that makes key decisions about mining regulations, contract approvals, and environmental regulations. China supplies significant support to the body, including by submitting papers and commenting on drafts. It has placed its own experts and officials in key ISA technical roles, and it provides more monetary support for the ISA than any other country. It has positioned itself to exert greater influence in shaping the rules and regulations that govern the exploration and exploitation of seabed resources. Chinese firms have already secured five seabed mining exploration contracts from the ISA—the most of any country.

China is actively courting emerging and middle-income economies with its deep-sea capabilities, encouraging countries and companies that need Chinese-built platforms, vessels, or processing capabilities to align themselves with Beijing's interests. China has established a research partnership with the Cook Islands with an eye toward eventually exploiting the seabed minerals in the area, and it is exploring a similar agreement with Kiribati. In 2020, in partnership with the ISA, Beijing established a training and research center in Qingdao to provide officials from developing countries with practical experience, such as operating underwater vehicles, and with opportunities for joint research. And within the BRICS, a ten-country group named for its first five members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), China has sought to build cooperation via a BRICS deep-sea research center in Hangzhou.

But Beijing has also faced troubles along the way. Despite its cooperative initiatives, China is in a small minority of countries that advocate for a more accelerated approach to mining. According to a Carnegie Endowment report, in 2023 Beijing "single-handedly" prevented the ISA from discussing marine ecosystem protection and a precautionary pause on mining licenses. This places it at odds with almost 40 other ISA members, which support a pause or moratorium on mining until rigorous monitoring and environmental safeguards are in place. China has also not convinced BRICS members: Brazil supports a ten-year precautionary pause, and South Africa wants strong environmental frameworks and economic protections. India favors faster development but is wary of China's use of research vessels for military purposes. And many governments in the Asia-Pacific, such as those in Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Palau, and Taiwan, are worried about military-motivated incursions into their exclusive economic zones by China's deep-sea survey vessels. Although Beijing has not yet won the rule-setting battle in the ISA, it is not sitting

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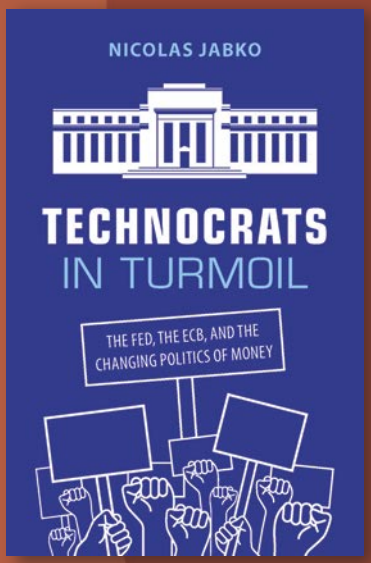

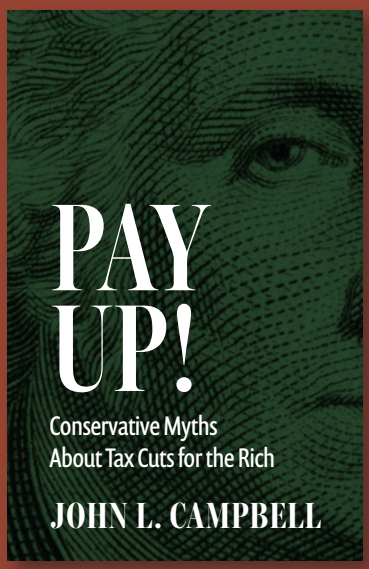

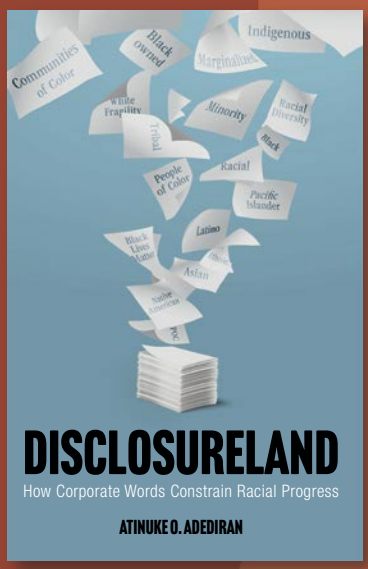

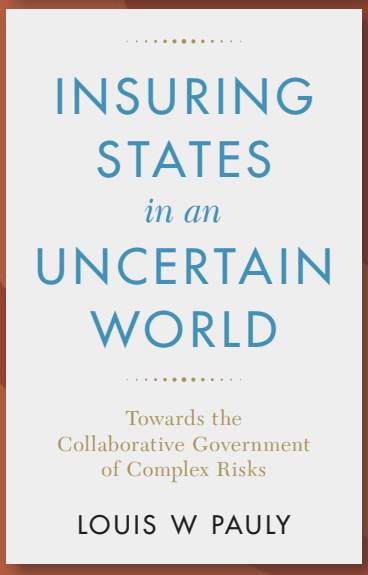

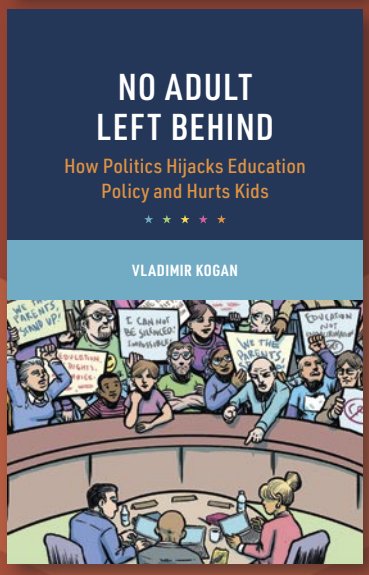

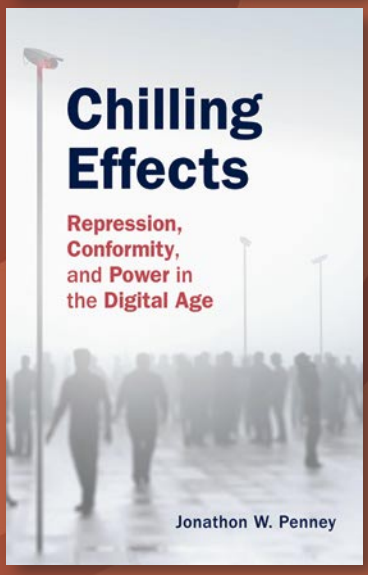

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still. It is investing furiously in dual-use seabed mining technologies—those valuable for both civilian and military purposes—such as autonomous underwater vehicles and crewed submersibles that will enable it to dominate commercial seabed mining and, as one Chinese military analyst wrote, attack opponents' large ship formations and naval bases.

OUT IN THE COLD

The deep ocean is hardly the only frontier that Xi wants to master. In 2014, he also declared his intent to make China a great polar power. Like the seabed, the Arctic is rich in natural resources, containing an estimated 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil supplies, 30 percent of its undiscovered natural gas, and significant stores of rare-earth elements. As the ice there melts, it will also be home to new shipping corridors—like the one used by the *Istanbul Bridge*. In a 2018 white paper on the Arctic, Beijing promised to build a "polar Silk Road" by developing such routes and investing in the region's resources and infrastructure. It also reframed Arctic governance to include issues such as climate change and to advance the rights of non-Arctic countries. "The future of the Arctic concerns the interests of the Arctic states, the well-being of non-Arctic states, and that of humanity as a whole," the paper declared. "The governance of the Arctic requires the participation and contribution of all stakeholders."

Beijing's interest in the Arctic is not new. In 1964, China established the State Oceanic Administration, a government agency whose mandate included conducting polar expeditions. Its Arctic-related research accelerated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1989, the government founded the Shanghai-based Polar Research Institute, and it expanded its Arctic research capabilities and partnerships throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In 2013, China became an observer to the governing Arctic Council, which consists of representatives of Canada, Denmark (which includes Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States, as well as indigenous peoples. Since then, China has become one of the council's most active observer members, participating in a wide array of working groups and task forces. Chinese researchers continue to argue that China should play a larger role in Arctic decision-making because climate change has made the Arctic an issue of global commons and because Chinese companies are essential to Arctic shipping and energy.

Beijing's efforts have encountered resistance. Arctic countries have grown concerned about becoming overreliant on Chinese investment

and the resulting security risks. Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden all rejected or canceled a number of Chinese Arctic projects in their territories. According to a 2025 study by the Belfer Center, of China's 57 proposed investment projects in the Arctic, only 18 are active.

But while democratic countries have mostly closed themselves off to new Chinese investment, a different kind of state has opened its doors: Russia. Since 2018, China and Russia have institutionalized their bilateral consultations on the Arctic. Their relationship became especially pronounced after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022 and was economically isolated from the rest of the Arctic Council's members. Since then, Chinese companies have signed agreements to develop a titanium mine and a lithium deposit, as well as to construct a new railway and deep-water port. Together, China and Russia's capabilities for Arctic exploration, commerce, and patrol far exceed those of the United States. China has also used its partnership with Russia to enhance its military access to the region. Starting in 2022, the two countries have even conducted multiple joint exercises, including in the Bering Sea, the Chukchi Sea, and the greater Arctic Ocean, as well as a joint bomber patrol near the coast of Alaska. Beijing and Moscow have also teamed up to bring the BRICS more directly into Arctic discussions. They established a BRICS working group on ocean and polar science and technology, and Russia has invited the body to develop an international scientific station on the Svalbard archipelago.

Xi has targeted the deep seabed as a priority area.

China's outreach, however, has come up short. Brazilian and Indian engagement with the Arctic has been primarily through bilateral partnerships with Russia. Some Indian analysts have expressed outright concern about China's expanding role in the region. And despite the seeming alignment between China and Russia, Moscow has not supported Beijing's pitch for an expanded role in Arctic governance. Their shared military exercises are largely performative. In 2020, the Russian Foreign Ministry's special envoy to the Arctic Council, Nikolai Korchunov, agreed with then U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's comment that there are two groups of countries, Arctic and non-Arctic, and suggested that China had no Arctic identity. That same year, Moscow charged a Russian professor who studies the Arctic with high treason after he provided China with classified materials relating to submarine detection methods.

BOLDLY GO WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE

Then there is the final frontier: space. As early as 1956, China deemed space exploration a national security priority. On the heels of the Soviet and U.S. satellite launches in 1957 and 1958, Chinese leader Mao Zedong pronounced, "We too shall make satellites." The country then followed through, launching Dong Fang Hong 1 into orbit in April 1970.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, China created an extensive space program driven by scientific, economic, and military imperatives. In 2000, the government published its first white paper outlining its priorities in outer space. They included making use of the resources of space, achieving crewed spaceflight, and undertaking space explorations centered on the moon. Space is also a particular priority for Xi. "Developing the space program and turning the country into a space power is the space dream that we have continuously pursued," he said in 2013. In 2017, China laid out a road map to become a "world-leading space power by 2045," with planned major breakthroughs. It has delivered: in addition to its advancing commercial space program, China has developed sophisticated space warfare capabilities, including a growing constellation of reconnaissance, communications, and early warning satellites. Of the more than 700 satellites that China has placed in orbit, over one-third serve military purposes. The country's 2022 white paper heralded all this progress. Some U.S. space officials and experts believe that China will surpass the United States as the leading space-faring nation within the next five to ten years, including by being the first to return humans to the moon since the U.S. Apollo 17 mission in 1972.

As with the deep seabed, China's significant technological capabilities and the frontier's more open governance enable Beijing to play a significant leadership role in space. Beijing has become an important partner for other less developed countries interested in space research and exploration. It boasts bilateral agreements with 26 states. It also collaborates with the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs to carry out experiments from its Tiangong space station.

Beijing's most meaningful bid for space leadership, however, is the planned International Lunar Research Station, a joint effort between China and Russia first announced in 2017. It is slated to begin as a permanent base at the moon's south pole and eventually expand into a network of orbital and surface facilities supporting exploration, resource extraction, and long-term habitation. China aims to get 50 countries, 500 international research institutions, and 5,000 overseas researchers

to join the ILRS by offering them opportunities for scientific training, cooperation, and access to some Chinese and Russian space technologies. To that end, it has pitched the ILRS through multilateral organizations, such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Beijing and Moscow have positioned the ILRS as an alternative to the U.S.-led Artemis program—Washington's attempt to get back to the moon—and to the Artemis Accords. The accords, established in 2020 by the United States and seven other countries, set forth nonbinding principles and guidelines for peaceful space exploration, the use of space resources, the preservation of space heritage, interoperability, and the sharing of scientific data. The accords are designed to be consistent with existing international space treaties and conventions; as of early November, 60 countries have signed on.

One senior Chinese expert described the accords as an American attempt to colonize and establish "sovereignty over the moon." But China has been relatively unsuccessful at drawing countries into its venture. The ILRS has attracted only 11 states in addition to China and Russia, several of which have either no space program or only a nascent one. Two of the countries that joined the ILRS, Senegal and Thailand, later also joined the Artemis Accords. The broader appeal of the latter stems from several factors. Unlike the ILRS, the accords build on existing scientific, security, and commercial relations between NASA and other countries. They provide smaller states with opportunities to advance their own space industries. They offer clear norms of transparency, interoperability, and data sharing, and they do not entangle countries in Russia's isolation from much of the world's economic and scientific endeavors. Finally, unlike with the ILRS, countries that sign the Artemis Accords will have an opportunity to send their astronauts to the moon through NASA's lunar program.

China's broader approach to governing space has also run into difficulties. In 2022, only seven other countries joined it in voting against a UN First Committee resolution to halt direct-ascent antisatellite missile tests, which produce destructive space debris. In 2024, China abstained from a UN Security Council vote condemning the placement of nuclear weapons in outer space—a motion supported by all other members except Russia. Beijing and Moscow's attempts to draft their own treaty on preventing and placing weapons in space have garnered support from only a limited number of countries, such as Belarus, Iran, and North Korea.

But Beijing has plowed ahead. It continues to push its governance frameworks and invest in space-related technologies. And if Beijing does return humans to the moon first, it will gain a powerful symbolic edge over the United States that will boost its efforts to shape norms and technologies in the space race.

HARDWIRE AND HARD POWER

China wants to dominate more than just physical domains. Xi also wants Beijing to rule the cyber realm. Over the course of his tenure, China has become a telecommunications powerhouse. His 2015 Digital Silk Road initiative has enabled two Chinese telecommunication companies, Huawei and ZTE, to earn approximately 40 percent of the market in global telecommunications equipment, measured by revenue. China's Beidou satellite system boasts greater positioning accuracy than does GPS in many parts of the world. Chinese undersea cable technologies are also rapidly increasing their share of the global market.

Beijing also wants to set the global standards for future strategic technologies. Its initiatives, such as the China Standards 2035 strategy, have dramatically increased the number of Chinese participants in and proposals before standard-setting bodies. In 2022, according to *Nature*, Huawei alone submitted over 5,000 technological standard proposals to more than 200 standards organizations. (Some outside observers have reported that Beijing has undermined best practices by insisting that Chinese companies vote as a bloc for Chinese proposals and by offering companies financial incentives to make them, leading to a large number of poor proposals.)

For China, setting standards is not only about securing commercial wins. It is also about establishing favorable political and security norms. China's proposal for a new Internet architecture, called New IP, is a case in point. In 2019, Huawei, China Mobile, China Unicom, and China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology jointly submitted New IP to the International Telecommunication Union's telecommunication standardization advisory group. According to the *Financial Times*, Chinese officials argued that the 1970s-era Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, today's system for routing and delivering data, will not be able to support the demands of the future Internet—such as the widespread adoption of autonomous vehicles. Beyond technical practicalities, Chinese leaders believe that the current Internet, built on a U.S.-designed protocol, reflects an American-led governance system that does not align with Beijing's interests. New IP, by contrast,

embeds state control, including by making it easier for central authorities to shut down parts of the network. New IP is thus China's bid to hardwire its own technical and political preferences into the global Internet.

The negative reactions to China's proposal from Japan, the United States, and Europe, as well as from leading Internet engineers, were swift. Experts argued that the existing system was flexible enough to evolve and that New IP would fragment the Internet into state-controlled networks. Europeans pointed out that the current protocol had not hindered the development of AI or other important technologies. They also argued that established technical bodies, not the International Telecommunication Union, should set standards.

China worked hard to recruit support for its vision from emerging and middle-income economies. It created a BRICS Future Network Research Institute to coordinate R & D in 6G, AI, and new Internet protocols. It also made the case that its proposed Internet protocols, combined with its Digital Silk Road financing, equipment, and training, would help close the digital divide with emerging economies. A handful of African states—Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—stepped up to support the New IP proposal. But enthusiasm elsewhere was muted. Notably, as the China analysts Henry Tugendhat and Julia Voo have observed, there was no correlation between a country's receipt of Digital Silk Road assistance and its support for New IP.

Some of China's other digital efforts, however, are making more progress. Many BRICS countries, including Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, are cooperating commercially with Huawei. And China is trying to lay the foundations for a state-controlled Internet through a succession of new proposals and technologies. Huawei, for example, has rebranded China's New IP proposal as "Future Vertical Communication Networks and Protocols." As a group of Oxford University researchers has noted, China "forum shops" its proposals, often presenting the same or similar ones in multiple bodies, looking for buy-in. At a March 6G workshop before a standard-setting organization, Chinese participants pushed for a "completely new 6G core network" technology that enables greater control, which Huawei is already developing. Moreover, China continues to advance a routing system for Internet data that would grant network providers and governments more control over data traffic. Experts say that Beijing has rolled this system out in several African countries.

A RENMINBI FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

One of the last remaining pillars of U.S. global predominance is the central role of the dollar in the world economy. The dollar remains both the most traded currency and the dominant reserve currency. This grants the United States several advantages: lower borrowing costs for its government and corporations, the ability to restrict access to dollar-denominated transactions, and the continued primacy of U.S. financial markets.

China, however, is committed to expanding the international use of its currency, the renminbi, and to knocking the dollar off its pedestal. In the wake of the global financial crisis, China piloted a renminbi trade settlement scheme in 2009 with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Hong Kong, and Macau. China's initial efforts to internationalize the renminbi did not gain traction, but it persisted. It introduced renminbi-denominated bonds, expanded currency swap lines with more than 30 countries, and established clearing banks to facilitate renminbi transactions in major financial centers. In 2015, it launched the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, which is designed to provide an alternative to the U.S.- and European-dominated Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, better known as SWIFT. Today, China's payment system connects more than 1,700 banks globally.

Global finance, more than in any other frontier domain, has been fertile ground for China's efforts to advance its interests through multilateral frameworks. Beijing has used the Belt and Road Initiative to push partner countries to accept renminbi in contracts. Some Chinese economists have even advocated requiring Belt and Road participants to settle in renminbi. These endeavors have worked: by June 2025, the share of China's bilateral goods trade settled in renminbi reached almost 29 percent.

China's efforts have been bolstered by U.S. and European sanctions. In a speech before the Chinese Communist Party's Central Finance Work Conference in October 2023, Xi underscored the point. "A small number of countries treat finance as tools for geopolitical games," he said. "They repeatedly play with currency hegemony and frequently wield the big stick of financial sanctions." Iran and Russia, among the world's most sanctioned countries, have obviously abandoned the U.S. dollar in bilateral trade. But Brazil, India, and South Africa have also supported the adoption of local currencies and a connected BRICS payments system, even if they have not expressed interest in undermining the dollar's central role.

As with its other strategic endeavors, China's efforts to promote its currency have faced setbacks. The renminbi accounts for only 2.9 percent of global payments by value, and its share in global foreign currency reserves actually peaked in 2022, at 2.8 percent. Today, it is hovering around 2.1 percent. Full renminbi internationalization requires greater capital account openness, financial liberalization, and less government intervention in monetary policy—steps that would risk undermining the Communist Party's control over the economy.

But China is also willing to move away from the dollar and expand the use of local currencies without increasing the use of the renminbi. And at that, it has succeeded, thanks in part to Washington's weaponization of the dollar and other countries' concerns about the sustainability of American debt. Foreign ownership of U.S. treasuries has declined from 49 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in 2024.

RACE TO THE TOP, RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Xi has made it clear that he wants to reform the international system in ways that reflect Chinese economic, political, and security interests. He wants China to lead in the exploitation of the deep seabed, the Arctic, and space. He wants to create a new Internet protocol that cements state control. He wants to create, invest in, and trade within a global financial system that the United States and the dollar do not dominate. To realize these objectives, Beijing has spent years—in most cases decades—marshaling an extraordinary level of state and private resources, developing human capital, trying to capture existing institutions, and developing new ones. Perhaps most important, Beijing has persisted. It bides its time, adapts its tactics, and seizes opportunities to make gains as they arise.

China has not won yet. In fact, in many respects, the country's efforts have come up short. The world has not fully embraced China's vision of change in any domain. Even middle-income and emerging economies, which China often purports to represent, have been wary of Beijing's proposals. But China's strategy has yielded notable success in each frontier. The government holds a leading position within the ISA. It has established itself as a leader in commerce in the Arctic, gained military access to the region, and is reframing narratives about who gets a seat at its decision-making table. In space, it has transformed itself into a top scientific and military power. It is making headway in standard-setting bodies that will help create and

govern the world's technological infrastructure. It has diminished the role of the dollar in the international financial system, increased the role of its own currency in foreign trade, and expanded the reach of its alternative payment system. And the capabilities China has accumulated in each of these domains, whether scientific, diplomatic, military, institutional, or physical, position it to keep advancing its vision. That means despite its failures to date, Beijing is unlikely to change course, and it will continue to make progress.

Beijing could return humans to the moon before Washington does.

To respond, the United States has three options: step back and grant China the space it wants, try to find common ground, or actively compete. Option one is untenable; stepping back would impose material costs on the United States' ability to ensure its political, economic, and national security. Option two is attractive, and the two countries could expand scientific cooperation in the deep sea and in space. But in most domains, the gap between the countries' respective visions is too vast to bridge, at least in the near term.

That leaves only option three. But to compete, defend, or improve current governance in frontier domains, the United States will need to rebuild its capabilities and reclaim its reputation as a responsible global leader. Washington's hard capabilities—including polar icebreakers, deep-seabed mining prototypes, financial payment innovations, telecommunications technology, and lunar exploration and other space technologies—either already lag well behind those of China or soon will. To fix that, the United States will need to invest in each.

U.S. President Donald Trump has taken some initial steps in this direction by issuing executive orders that support the construction of Arctic security cutters, that deregulate space-related industries, and that support sending astronauts to Mars. Trump's orders also support the development of seabed mining technologies. And Washington is backing stablecoins and other digital assets to enhance demand for the dollar, as well as promoting the American AI technology stack globally. But these steps do not provide the type of long-term road map that China has given its officials and industries. The United States needs a comprehensive strategy in each domain that includes a clear vision of U.S. economic and security objectives, significant

investment in critical near-term hard capabilities, and sustained support for research and development to ensure long-term competitiveness. Financing these investments will require innovative forms of government–private sector cooperation, along the lines of the Biden administration's CHIPS and Science Act on semiconductors and Trump's Defense Department partnership on rare-earth minerals with MP Materials. The United States will also need to work with allies and partners to ensure that these domains' governing institutions reflect values of transparency, openness, and market competition. Otherwise, the United States will not be able to match China's ability to change a domain by simply claiming it.

Washington will also have to reestablish its stature as a responsible global leader. Trump's tariff war, for example, has accelerated de-dollarization by making the United States an unreliable arbiter of the global economy. As the economist Kenneth Rogoff has noted, threatening countries only encourages them to diversify their currencies. The Trump administration's threat to ignore International Seabed Authority prohibitions on seabed mining will cause rifts with many U.S. allies and may upend the ISA regime. This could trigger a literal race to the bottom—one that China is far better prepared to win than the United States, given its capabilities. In areas such as Internet governance and the global financial system, Washington will need to deploy its full suite of technological, financial, and diplomatic tools to get other countries to buy into the U.S. vision.

The United States still has a window of opportunity to reaffirm its value proposition and align the world with its leadership. Despite Trump's erratic behavior, Washington remains a more desirable partner for most governments. But the administration will need to reconcile its "America first" orientation with the reality of an increasingly multipolar world by combining transactional deal-making with a broader strategic framework that delivers real benefits to other countries. The first Trump administration's creation of the Artemis Accords offers a useful model. It framed the accords as rules-based, transparent, cooperative, and inclusive while also providing capacity-building programs in areas such as space law, resource governance, and satellite data. Initiatives that embody this same type of innovation, openness, and true partnership distinguish American leadership from Chinese leadership, and they provide the best chance for sustaining U.S. influence across the uncharted frontiers of the international system.

China's Long Economic War

How Beijing Builds Leverage for Indefinite Competition

ZONGYUAN ZOE LIU

For much of the past year, China's response to trade tensions has continually surprised hawks in Washington. In December 2024, when the Biden administration imposed new export restrictions on advanced chips, Beijing immediately answered by banning exports of several metallic elements to the United States. In April 2025, after the Trump administration threatened huge tariffs on China, Beijing dug in, imposing strict export controls on seven rare-earth minerals vital to defense and clean energy manufacturing. In May, China stopped buying U.S. soybeans, the largest U.S. export to China by value. And in October, after the United States extended existing export restrictions on Chinese companies to all of their majority-owned subsidiaries, China added five more rare earths and a broad array of advanced processing technologies to its own export controls. These

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increasingly bold measures not only posed a major threat to U.S. and global supply chains but would also have significant domestic consequences. The message was unmistakable: China is prepared to absorb pain to put real pressure on the United States.

If the approach was bold, however, it was not reckless. By opting for calibrated retaliation, Beijing preserved negotiating space and kept off-ramps open. After U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met in South Korea in late October, China agreed to postpone many of the restrictions. Yet calibration should not be mistaken for weakness. Alongside its announced moves, China has developed a potent arsenal of nontariff barriers and legal instruments that it can draw on when needed. Discarding the strategic restraint that had previously characterized its approach to the United States, China has shown it is ready to weaponize its supply chain dominance.

This tough stance has been reinforced by domestic political considerations. Chinese leaders and negotiators are determined not to relive the public backlash that followed the 2020 Phase One trade agreement between Beijing and the first Trump administration, which to many Chinese commentators seemed as lopsided against China as the treaties that Western colonial powers brokered with the Qing dynasty. For Xi, who has vowed to end China's "century of humiliation," another deal that appears to favor the United States is politically untenable, and his willingness to stand up to Washington has become a means of solidifying his position as the country's paramount leader ushering in a "national rejuvenation."

Yet Beijing's approach cannot be reduced to retaliatory tactics or nationalism. China's leaders have spent years preparing for Trump's return and view the trade war as part of a much larger contest that is likely to last for decades. In the short term, Beijing's priority is securing the concessions on advanced technology needed to accelerate semiconductor development in China and reduce reliance on imports. In the medium term, it aims to deepen technological capacity, diversify export markets, and capture a larger share of value-added exports in global supply chains to reduce U.S. leverage. In the long run, it intends to build an alternative global trading and financial architecture strong enough to strip the United States of its unilateral sanctioning power. Above all, China wants recognition that its core interests lie beyond even the threat of Western interference—that it has full freedom of action within its sphere of influence, including

Taiwan and its regional periphery, and that it can engage economically with the world on terms no less favorable than those accorded to the United States or other great powers.

In essence, China is attempting a geopolitical feat without precedent. It seeks to obtain an equal place alongside the United States without triggering "the Thucydides trap"—the tendency for rising and established hegemons to come to blows. Unlike earlier revisionist powers, China intends to complete its ascent through the steady accumulation of economic power and influence rather than through military conquest. To succeed, it must not merely draw even with the United States but surpass it in some areas, to the point that any U.S. refusal to acknowledge its superpower status appears absurd to the rest of the world.

China is attempting a geopolitical feat without precedent.

As this protracted struggle unfolds, conventional side-by-side comparisons of economic data or military capability are unlikely to provide a clear indication of which side is ahead, which is slipping behind, and why. When success in one domain comes at the expense of another, the ultimate effect on national power or influence can be ambiguous. As history has shown, a country's global influence also depends on less tangible qualities such as the values it projects, its reputation, and its ability to attract allies and partners. To come to a clearer overall assessment of China's quest for power, it is useful to borrow from a discipline that thrives on uncertainty and tradeoffs. In credit finance, banks and lenders assess a business's creditworthiness by applying a series of broad criteria commonly referred to as "the four Cs": capacity, capital, character, and collateral. Translated into geopolitics, this framework offers a structured way to evaluate China's continuing rise and its implications for the United States.

As Washington retreats from multilateralism and becomes more consumed by domestic polarization, Beijing will continue to exploit opportunities to advance its own geopolitical goals. On paper, it is well positioned to do so: it can mobilize resources at an immense scale, it dominates green energy supply chains, it commands the world's largest standing army, and its artificial intelligence companies have shown they can keep abreast of their American counterparts. But the United States retains other forms of global influence and clout that will be hard for China to match. As a close examination of the four Cs suggests,

the contest between Washington and Beijing will not only be determined by which country has the best AI models or the most ships. Hard-to-quantify dynamics are likely to be as important as raw empirical advantages and hard power. To prepare for this long struggle, then, the United States will need to better understand what China is seeking and how it stacks up against American power in different domains, and where Washington's own policies are falling short.

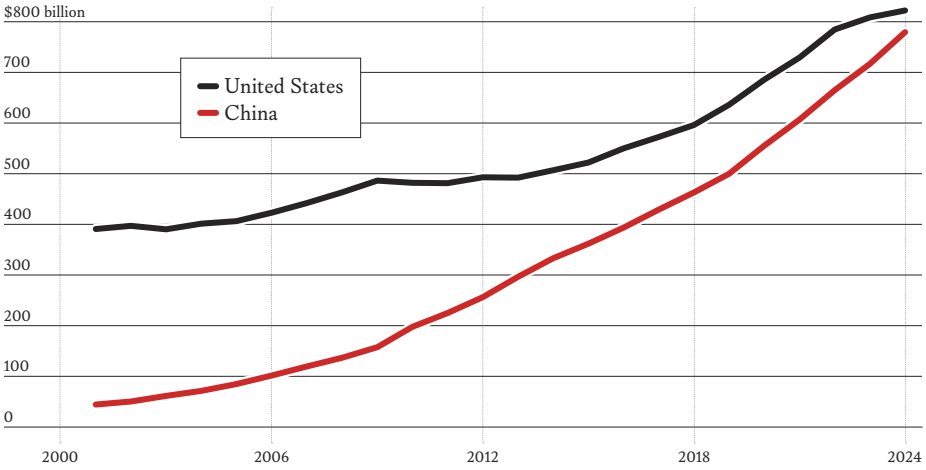
NATION OF MILLIONS

China's global power is founded on its immense population and resources, or what might be called its capacity. As long ago as the thirteenth century, Marco Polo marveled at the extent of China's cities, wealth, and territory in *The Travels of Marco Polo*, whose original Italian title was *Il Milione*, or *The Million*. Today, that vastness has enabled China to mobilize resources for growth at a scale and speed that eclipse most competitors. In 1978, China was among the poorest countries, with a per capita GDP of about $157, less than one-60th that of the United States and less than one-tenth of Brazil's. Now, it is the second-largest economy and exports more goods and services than any other nation on earth.

This unprecedented ascent has been built on the backs of China's easily exploited migrant laborers, a subset of its workforce that grew from roughly 30 million in 1989 to nearly 300 million in 2024. These low-paid workers have fueled the country's explosive growth, manning factories, operating ports, building infrastructure, and making China the industrial powerhouse of the world. Today, the Chinese Communist Party is betting that the country's huge army of engineers and scientists can do the same for technology and innovation. Already, China has nearly caught up to the United States in spending on research and development. Chinese researchers now publish more papers in elite scientific journals and file more patent applications than their American counterparts. Behind these figures lies a deep well of human talent: China produces roughly 3.6 million STEM graduates annually, over four times the U.S. total.

Yet this enormous capacity also poses one of China's biggest challenges. It has left the economy lopsided and reliant on foreign markets to absorb excess output, leading to growing friction with many Western governments. And China's industrial and supply chain dominance has pushed many countries to reduce their dependence on the country, eroding Beijing's principal source of leverage. China's extraordinary

Research and development expenditure, billions of U.S. dollars



Source: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Note: Measured in 2015 prices and adjusted for purchasing power parity.

industrial power thus presents a paradox: the country can produce almost anything cheaply and at enormous scale, yet the more it uses this strength, the faster the world turns against it.

Beijing's almost singular focus on building its industrial base has also stunted the development of a balanced domestic market. Chronically weak household demand has prevented the Chinese economy from becoming a self-propelling engine. For household consumption to account for the same share of GDP in China as it does in the United States, the average Chinese family would have to consume 70 percent more—a tall order. In fact, China's consumer spending growth has slipped to its lowest levels in over a decade, with retail sales growth in 2024 around 3.5 percent, well below the double-digit gains of earlier years. Consumer prices fell year-on-year in several months of 2025, signaling deflationary pressure in parts of the economy. Falling prices reduce corporate profits, further increasing the true economic cost of maintaining bloated industrial capacity.

China's massive industrial capacity has made it especially dependent on the United States. In addition to being the leading destination for Chinese exports, the United States has served as a vital source of best practices that Chinese policymakers and companies

have repeatedly drawn on to craft their own approach to industrial, financial, technological, and military development. Even in sectors in which Chinese companies have long outpaced American competitors, such as electric vehicles and batteries, the United States remains an indispensable source of talent, research networks, and demand. These realities contribute to the conundrum that Xi faces in negotiating with the second Trump administration: if China is to eventually stand on its own against the United States, it must first pull its rival closer so it can lean on American expertise in sales and product design.

History has shown that capacity alone does not make a superpower. In the early twentieth century, Germany boasted a world-beating industrial base and top engineering talent but ultimately failed to establish enduring regional hegemony. Starting in the 1960s, Japan enjoyed decades of dominance in automobile manufacturing and electronics but failed to translate this advantage into geopolitical power before the rest of the world caught up. Even when capacity helped create a superpower, that status could be short-lived if other attributes were weak. The Soviet Union developed a vast industrial and scientific sector and achieved spectacular technical feats, such as the first space flight and the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Yet political and bureaucratic sclerosis, combined with an unbalanced statist economy, ultimately led to its demise. Today, China has the industrial capacity of a superpower, but it will need to match that strength in other domains to consummate that status in geopolitics.

RICH BUT NOT QUITE GLORIOUS

Along with capacity, aspiring superpowers need to have immense capital—the ability to deploy vast sums of money to influence behavior and shape outcomes abroad. China now holds over $3.3 trillion in official foreign exchange reserves, more than any other country. The Communist Party's near-complete hold over China's financial system also allows it to invest state funds with a speed and scale that would be unthinkable almost anywhere else.

Moreover, China has transformed its massive foreign exchange hoard into an active instrument of financial statecraft through its sovereign leveraged funds. These vehicles finance the party's industrial policies, back Chinese firms' strategic acquisitions overseas, and partner with foreign institutions to reduce political resistance to Chinese capital. At the 2024 summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, for example,

Xi pledged more than $50 billion in renminbi-denominated loans to African countries, much of it underwritten by the China Development Bank and other state-backed institutions. These loans are as much about securing political support for China's expanding corporate footprint as they are about promoting the international use of the renminbi.

Yet China's capital and financial power is more constrained than its headline figures suggest. Consider the overall status of the renminbi in the global financial system. On paper, the preeminence of the U.S. dollar looks vulnerable, with the dollar accounting for just 56 percent of global reserve allocations, a 30-year low. Yet despite China's position as the world's leading trading nation, much of the dollar's lost share has shifted not to the renminbi or other currencies but to gold and other nonsovereign assets. Since 2008, central banks have increased their gold holdings by 25 percent to the highest level since 1970. By contrast, the dollar still dwarfs the euro, which accounts for roughly 20 percent of reserve allocations, and the renminbi, which holds just two percent. Thus far, the diversification away from the dollar appears to be less an endorsement of an alternative currency than a reflection of waning confidence in the U.S.-led financial order.

Still, China has been building financial infrastructure to reduce global dependence on the dollar, if not to replace it outright. In 2024, China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System grew by 47 percent, compared with just 12 percent growth for SWIFT, the Western-dominated interbank system responsible for moving most of the world's dollars between countries. For now, CIPS handles only a fraction of the global transactions that SWIFT does, but the system has the capacity to be scaled up rapidly. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for example, Western governments expelled Russian banks from SWIFT. To bypass Western sanctions, Russian entities began to adopt CIPS, and today, nearly all of Chinese-Russian trade—99 percent—is conducted in renminbi and rubles.

To truly challenge the dollar, however, China would have to make the renminbi fully convertible and dismantle the capital controls that underpin its system of financial repression. It would also need to allow foreigners to hold renminbi-denominated assets on a far greater scale. Some progress has been made: since 2020, foreign holdings of renminbi-denominated bonds have risen 83 percent, to $597 billion. But that figure would need to increase more than 20-fold to match foreign holdings of U.S. corporate and government debt securities.

Until China allows far greater foreign access to its debt, there will simply not be enough renminbi-denominated assets for investors to replace their dollars even if they wanted to.

Meanwhile, China's growth model is reaching its limits. The very mechanisms that once fueled the country's rise—a state-dominated financial system, suppressed consumption, and export-dependent growth—are now constraining its future. For decades, the government used capital controls, artificially low deposit rates, and an undervalued currency to funnel household savings into industrial sectors. In effect, Chinese households subsidized the country's rise through foregone returns while the rest of the world splurged on discounted Chinese goods. That model is no longer sustainable: foreign exchange reserves have barely grown since 2017, and the social costs of financial repression are mounting.

Beijing has a persistent deficit of soft power.

China's aging population now lacks the savings to support itself. Younger workers must shoulder the burden of caring for two sets of elderly parents amid rising living costs and eroding household consumption, driving a collapse in domestic demand. The country's family formation rate—the proportion of adults who establish a new household unit within a given period—is among the lowest in the world, and its population began shrinking in 2023, far earlier than Chinese planners had projected. Eventually, China will have to scale back overseas investments to fund social welfare.

Xi's government is betting that new technology can offset these financial pressures—that China can innovate its way out of demographic decline and export its way out of industrial overcapacity. The assumption is that by achieving and maintaining global dominance in advanced industries, Beijing will generate enough prosperity to mitigate structural weaknesses at home. Yet this will require a precarious balancing act: sustaining growth, maintaining social stability, and managing demographic decline all at once. Failure in any one of these tasks could upend China's bid for global economic leadership.

As Beijing is learning, although capital can be deployed more flexibly than capacity, it is also exhaustible and is rarely decisive on its own. Abundant financial resources do not guarantee lasting power. In the sixteenth century, imperial Spain was awash with silver imported from the New World, but the empire's structural fragilities had already

sealed its decline. China's accumulation of capital has come with its own liabilities: built on domestic repression and export dependence, it also remains constrained by the renminbi's relatively small profile in the international system, which limits China's financial leverage abroad. Ultimately, the country's rise to superpower status will hinge not just on industrial capacity and capital but also on its leaders' ability to convert national assets into enduring global influence.

SOLIDARITY WITHOUT ALLEGIANCE

In credit analysis, a company's character—its established way of conducting business and cultivating goodwill—relates to how it uses its capacity and capital. Analogously, China's character, or the way it asserts itself on the world stage, can be understood by examining how it uses its vast industrial base and financial resources. Guided by its own creed, Beijing tends to wield economic power according to its own precepts rather than global norms or external expectations. Beijing's approach is inseparable from the Communist Party's pursuit of domestic legitimacy, which hinges on its promises to deliver ever-greater economic prosperity and end China's century of humiliation at the hands of Western powers. In addition to justifying the party's authority at home, this narrative of historical grievance provides the foundation for an assertive foreign policy, galvanizing Beijing's recurring appeals to sovereignty and noninterference and its claims of affinity with countries across the developing world.

Yet China's moral posture imposes constraints. From the 1980s through the early 2010s, Beijing emphasized partnership with the United States and the West; "socialism with Chinese characteristics" depended on integration into the U.S.-led global trade system and access to Western technology and finance. But to China's leaders, integration was never the goal. It was merely the means to accelerate modernization and restore national strength. The party's larger objective was to learn from the West without becoming it.

As China's economic and military power grew and Washington became disillusioned with its stalled liberalization, the relationship soured and the party recalibrated. Since 2018, Xi has set aside integration and made self-reliance the organizing principle of China's national strategy. This shift was reinforced by the first Trump administration's restrictions on Chinese tech giants such as Huawei, which exposed China's vulnerability to export controls. In response, "national

rejuvenation" came to mean autonomy and insulation from Western pressure. China's rapport with the United States and its allies has thus evolved from pragmatic engagement to principled divergence.

Nonetheless, Beijing does not seek to export an alternative set of Chinese values or send its ideology abroad, as the Soviet Union once did. Instead, its aims are almost exclusively strategic: to reshape global norms around sovereignty and development in ways that advance its own interests. By defining itself largely in negative terms—it is not Western, not liberal, not subordinate—Beijing has succeeded in cultivating solidarity among some states but has struggled to inspire genuine allegiance.

China's global influence is further constrained by weak cultural affinities with other countries. Unlike Western powers, whose alliances are reinforced by shared heritage, language, and values, China lacks comparable cultural or societal linkages. Largely transactional, its partnerships are not grounded in moral obligation or historical kinship. China's relations with its neighbors and closest cultural kin, Vietnam and Taiwan, remain among its most adversarial. And although the Chinese diaspora is vast and economically dynamic—a great many of the world's major cities have a Chinatown—the party sees Chinese people living abroad as potential sources of ideological risk and has been known to monitor and intimidate them. In both cases, Beijing's approach has inhibited the formation of organic, trust-based ties between China and other societies, leaving it with a persistent deficit of soft power.

China's defensive pragmatism has also made it reluctant to play a constructive role in conflict resolution. Although it claims to be a neutral power, for example, Beijing has maintained solidarity with Moscow in its war in Ukraine under the banner of opposing Western "hegemony." The pro-Russian stance has fed growing concerns in Europe, whose leaders and policymakers increasingly view China as both an economic competitor and a security threat. Such tensions help explain why China often commands respect but not affection. It is seen as formidable but not completely trustworthy; its leadership powerful but not quite legitimate. Without moral leadership to complement its material strength, China's global role remains that of a power to be managed—and, perhaps, feared—but not one to be followed.

MIDDLE KINGDOM MISTRUST

If capacity defines what a country can do, capital determines the resources it can draw on, and character describes how it chooses to

act on the world stage, the fourth C addresses a more elusive question. In credit analysis, the function of collateral is to reassure lenders when there is a lack of trust that a company will make good on its loans. In geopolitics, this might be termed credibility, or whether a country can persuade other nations that it will make good on its promises and intentions. Achieving credibility is arguably the ultimate prerequisite for superpower status. It cannot be bought or declared by fiat; it must be earned through practice. It is the glue that sustains alliances, stabilizes expectations, and transforms influence into global leadership.

The United States can no longer count on its traditional advantages.

Credibility is the weakest dimension of China's geopolitical power. Despite its immense capacity, great wealth, and expansive overseas footprint, the country faces persistent skepticism about its intentions. China has invested heavily in international campaigns to project its reliability and legitimacy—including in climate diplomacy, UN peacekeeping, and its sprawling Belt and Road Initiative, the global development program on which China has spent some $1.3 trillion and signed agreements with around 150 countries. Yet despite their scale, these efforts have not delivered the credibility Beijing seeks. In some cases, China has exaggerated its actual contributions, sowing mistrust about its agenda. For example, it has presented itself as a leading international source of development financing, even though multilateral development banks, private investors, and traditional Western lenders still account for a larger cumulative share.

In other cases, China's overseas investments have unwittingly amplified doubts about its reliability and transparency. Consider the widely held view that Beijing has been deploying "debt trap" diplomacy with poorer countries, deliberately ensnaring them in unsustainable debt to seize strategic assets. Although empirical studies have found little evidence of such deliberate intent, the pervasiveness of this narrative shows the extent to which China's opaque lending practices and the political leverage that appears to be built into its financing model have led to global unease.

International anxieties about China's industrial overcapacity follow a similar pattern. In many Western capitals, a belief has taken hold that China's enormous excess production is the result of a deliberate strategy to dump cheap goods in their markets and destroy their industrial

bases. In fact, overcapacity appears to be largely an unintended consequence of China's long-standing economic growth model. Yet Beijing has been unwilling to confront the problem because of its determined quest for industrial leadership and the entrenched interests of local governments, state-owned enterprises, and state-controlled banks. As a result, the charge has stuck, reinforcing broader misgivings about the country's intentions.

Western theories about China's stagnating growth have provided yet another reason to doubt the country's credibility. According to the "peak China" thesis, Beijing faces a fatal long-term economic slowdown because of mounting and irreversible structural problems. In this view, the disparity between China's official optimism and the observable malaise in the Chinese economy raises questions not only about the reliability of Chinese data but also about China's projection of power in the world. Some China watchers have speculated that accumulating economic pressures could cause Beijing to abandon its peaceful rise, opting for aggressive or coercive action to secure its interests while it can.

China's expanding control of overseas ports and critical infrastructure has added to these suspicions. Chinese state-affiliated entities now hold stakes in more than 100 overseas port projects around the world, over 70 percent of which have potential military as well as civilian capabilities. Although evidence of militarization remains limited, Western defense strategists warn that these dual-use facilities could evolve into a global network for the Chinese navy. Once again, negative perceptions have been fueled by Beijing's lack of transparency as well as its unhelpful tendency to blur boundaries between state and commercial actors. Although the fears may be overstated, they remain plausible enough to call into question China's overseas investments on national security grounds. In this sense, Beijing's credibility deficit is cumulative and largely self-inflicted.

Of course, rising powers have invited suspicion about their motives throughout history. In the 1980s, Japan faced accusations of "aid imperialism," and its growing trade surplus, high-profile purchases of American assets, and strong technological and manufacturing prowess fueled fears that it threatened American dominance, prompting protectionist measures. Yet the speed and scale of China's rise have brought it a credibility problem far greater than that of its predecessors. Beijing's opacity, fragmented policymaking, and continual fusion of state, commercial, and strategic motives have thus created a

self-reinforcing cycle. The more China asserts leadership, the more its actions invite skepticism—leaving it strong in capacity and financial power yet uncertain in character and weak in credibility.

ENDURANCE TEST

China should not be underestimated. Under Xi, it has spent the last 13 years consolidating strength and girding itself for a competition for global power that could last decades. It has suffered reversals, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Communist Party's draconian lockdowns exacerbated structural economic problems, eroding the faith of Chinese society in ever-improving prosperity. Yet the country has maintained its overall trajectory: incremental accumulation of economic strength combined with a growing assertion of strategic autonomy. That has served China well in the trade war with the United States. No other government has gone tit for tat with Washington on tariffs and export restrictions and emerged mostly unscathed. For the first time since its rivalry with the Soviet Union, the United States faces a peer competitor that is capable not only of defying its power but also of forcing it into an accommodation.

Assessed by the same four Cs, the United States can no longer count on its traditional advantages. After World War II, the United States' capacity was unmatched; its overwhelming industrial power, financial heft, and scientific achievement set the standard for excellence in nearly all fields. For decades, the United States has also led the world in character and credibility, exporting its values, its prosperity, and its security umbrella to dozens of countries while defending the system of global markets based on the U.S. dollar and the rule of law that it largely built. But these strengths have faded, and with them, the sense that American preeminence is a fact of nature.

When Washington last faced a rising superpower, at the dawn of the Cold War, it could rely on a coalition of confident allies. That is less true today. Combined with the fiscal recklessness and weaponization of economic policy that the United States has demonstrated in recent years, the second Trump administration's disdain for alliances and its maximalist trade posture have had a real effect on international perceptions. In October 2025, Canada announced its intention to double its exports to countries other than the United States—a kind of "de-risking" approach that was once reserved for China. Beijing has noticed these fractures and is working methodically to widen them.

On the other hand, China faces its own persistent limitations. Precisely because they have such power to transform industries and markets, the country's unparalleled capacity and capital have become liabilities. In the absence of a strong positive vision of global leadership, it continues to fall short in both character and credibility, raising questions about its larger intentions and the terms of its rise. And its domestic issues, including weak consumption and a growth-slowing demographic shift, pose significant challenges of their own. Even if Beijing can mitigate these problems, the United States' incumbent position in the world order and its enviable natural resources may provide structural bulwarks that China is unable to surmount.

The best-case outcome, then, is likely a stabilized confrontation—confined to the political, economic, and diplomatic spheres and carefully insulated from military escalation—in which neither side can achieve a decisive victory. China has already concluded that it is in a protracted contest with the United States. If Washington does not want to erode its position further, it must put aside short-term tactics and settle into the same long game. But it must also recognize what the contest is really about. Contrary to the assumptions of many U.S. policymakers, China's leadership does not seek to unseat the United States or to replace a global system from which China has greatly benefited. But it does seek to end the U.S. strategy of containment and to obtain a de facto veto over unilateral U.S. actions, such as sanctions. By ratcheting up its actions against China, the Trump administration has inadvertently reinforced Beijing's determination to consummate its superpower status.

For the United States, success in this contest, then, is unlikely to lie in punitive actions against Beijing. Instead, Washington must shore up its traditional credibility in the world and use it to steer China along a less hostile path, presenting Beijing with dilemmas rather than ultimatums and seeking to shape outcomes over time rather than dictate them immediately. For China, in turn, success will require resisting U.S. pressure and sustaining its current trajectory to the point where its rise becomes too costly for the United States to try to contain. And it will require overcoming international skepticism about Beijing's larger aims. In view of their mismatched strengths and weaknesses and their increasingly shared deficit of trust from the rest of the world, however, both sides will likely find that any larger victory remains elusive. This contest will hinge not on pivotal moments but on the slow test of strategic endurance.

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The End of the Israel Exception

A New Paradigm for American Policy

ANDREW P. MILLER

The bond between the United States and Israel has remained extraordinarily close for three decades. The United States has remained in lockstep with Israel through the heady days of the 1990s peace process with the Palestine Liberation Organization; the second intifada, the five-year Palestinian uprising that began in 2000; and then, over the next two decades, a series of conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. The bond endured through Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attack on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza, with two U.S. presidential administrations providing largely unconditional diplomatic and military support to Israel.

But the Gaza war has also made clear that maintaining this type of bilateral relationship comes with steep costs. With few exceptions—

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Illustration by Danielle Del Plato

most notably the cease-fire that went into effect in early October 2025—Washington has struggled without success to shape Israel's conduct of the war. That failure is not an anomaly; it is rooted in the nature of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Although the United States and the United Kingdom may have a "special relationship," the United States and Israel have an "exceptional relationship": Israel receives treatment that no other ally or partner enjoys. When other countries buy U.S. weapons, the sales are subject to a bevy of U.S. laws; Israel has never truly been compelled to comply. Other partners refrain from displaying overt preferences for one American political party; Israel's leaders do so and face no consequences. And Washington does not typically defend another country's policies that are contrary to its own, nor does it block mild criticism of them in international organizations—but this is standard practice when dealing with Israel.

This exceptionalism has hindered the interests of both countries, in addition to inflicting immense harm on the Palestinians. Rather than helping ensure Israel's survival—the policy's ostensible intent—unconditional U.S. support has enabled the worst instincts of Israeli leaders. The results have been the relentless increase in illegal Israeli settlements and settler violence in the West Bank and mass civilian casualties in Gaza, along with famine in some areas. American support has enabled reckless Israeli military actions across the Middle East and exacerbated Israel's own existential dangers. In the United States, the war in Gaza has dramatically eroded public support for Israel, with unfavorable attitudes toward Israel at record highs across the political spectrum.

The relationship cannot continue in its current form indefinitely. It requires a new paradigm, one more consistent with how Washington engages other countries, including its closest treaty-bound allies. This new paradigm should entail clear expectations and limits, accountability for compliance with U.S. and international law, conditions on support when Israeli policies go against U.S. interests, and noninterference in domestic politics—in short, a far more normal bilateral relationship.

For the United States, this long-overdue adjustment is a strategic, political, and moral imperative. From preventing Israel's annexation of the West Bank to forging a common strategy to address Iran's nuclear program, a normal U.S.-Israeli relationship would produce better outcomes than an exceptional one that too often incentivizes dangerous Israeli behavior and depletes Washington's global influence. If the United States delays this transformation, the result may be damage to its

international position, Israel's near-total alienation from the American people and the rest of the world, and the collapse of Palestinian society in Gaza and eventually the West Bank. Changing course before it is too late is in the best interests of all—Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians.

NO DAYLIGHT

Although the United States and Israel have had a unique bond since Israel's founding, their relationship has not always taken its current exceptional form. Until President Bill Clinton's administration, U.S. support did not translate to a blank check. American presidents did not hesitate to disagree with Israel's government in public or to impose consequences to try to change its behavior. U.S. administrations frequently supported—or abstained from—UN Security Council resolutions critical of Israeli actions, particularly settlement construction. During the 1956 Suez War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israeli wars in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, and the first intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s, American presidents threatened to sanction or cut off weapons shipments to Israel.

But then, the end of the Cold War and the decisive U.S. victory in the first Gulf War seemed to create propitious circumstances for a comprehensive Middle East settlement. In pursuit of that goal, Clinton and his team offered practically unconditional rhetorical and material support to Israel, premised on a belief that a strong Israel with unstinting U.S. backing was more likely to take risks for peace. They avoided displaying differences between the United States and Israel—even routine U.S. statements objecting to Israeli settlement construction were diluted, and words such as "occupation" fell out of the official U.S. lexicon. They sometimes offered increased military support as an incentive for Israeli concessions but did not withhold it as leverage. They shunned coercive measures, irrespective of Israel's conduct.

That American approach was based on four core assumptions. First, U.S. and Israeli interests were overwhelmingly aligned, if not identical, including the shared objective of a negotiated peace between Israel and the Palestinians and other neighbors. Second, Israel better understood its own interests and the threats it faced from hostile states whose strength was comparable to its own. Third, it would be better to resolve any differences between the two allies in private, because public "daylight" between them emboldened Israel's enemies. Finally, when push came to shove, Israel would accommodate significant

American concerns to preserve a relationship that was essential to its long-term survival.

The relationship that developed from this starting point was truly singular in its expectations, standards, and modus operandi. Propelled in part by a formidable pro-Israel political lobby in the United States, it has persisted without substantial modification. Washington still exhibits extreme deference not only to Israeli leaders' judgment but also to their domestic political needs. It provides, without conditions, massive amounts of military aid: a 2016 memorandum of understanding promised $3.8 billion per year, a daily transfer of over $10 million in American taxpayers' money, and Congress regularly adds more. The United States is expected not only to avoid publicly criticizing Israel but also to support Israel's position in international bodies, most conspicuously by vetoing UN Security Council resolutions to which Israel objects, whether or not they reflect U.S. policy. And Israel is rarely if ever subjected to certain U.S. laws and policies, particularly statutory restrictions related to human rights violations that apply to all recipients of U.S. aid.

Unconditional support has led inexorably to moral hazard for both countries. Israel has no reason to accommodate American concerns and interests because refusing to do so costs nothing. Instead, Israel is emboldened to pursue maximalist positions that are often incompatible with U.S. interests and sometimes with Israeli interests, too. Israel has dealt severe blows to enemies it shares with the United States, and the practical guarantee of American support may help deter adversaries from attacking Israel. But because Israel's power far surpasses that of all rivals, this support creates a perverse incentive for Israel to act rashly and without necessity, confident that U.S. backing will continue regardless of the outcome of its adventurism. And unflagging support implicates the United States in Israel's actions, occasionally inviting direct retaliation against U.S. forces. Israel, in turn, chafes at the heightened scrutiny it receives from some segments of the American public because of the aid it enjoys.

Israeli leaders are hardly infallible in their judgments, including about developments in their own region. That is true of leaders anywhere, but Israel's history has predisposed some of its policymakers to focus excessively on day-to-day survival and to misapprehend or ignore strategic dynamics as a result. It is tragically ironic that Israel's two largest intelligence blunders—the failure to prevent one surprise attack that started the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and another one, 50 years

later, on October 7—were caused not by a lack of tactical intelligence but by overly rosy strategic assessments that led Israeli leaders to dismiss warning signs. The United States should not disregard Israel's judgments, but neither should it blindly substitute them for its own.

When both Israel and the United States have well-intentioned leaders committed to peace, the relationship's flaws can be mitigated. Yitzhak Rabin, who served his second term as Israel's prime minister from 1992 until his assassination in 1995, understood that stiff-arming Washington might not immediately damage the partnership, but he was wary of long-term harm. He recognized that U.S. concerns were sincere and rooted in a shared objective of peace, notwithstanding differences over what peace would entail. The exceptional relationship might have been justifiable in those exceptional circumstances. Imperfect though Rabin was—he oversaw extensive settlement growth, for example—he was a responsive U.S. partner. Although he never publicly acknowledged the goal of establishing a Palestinian state, his signing of the Oslo accords with Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, in 1993 was a step in that direction and was supported by more than 60 percent of the Israeli public.

Unconditional support has led to moral hazard for both countries.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, by contrast, views the exceptional relationship as something to exploit rather than a safety net to be used in extremis. He treats the promise of "no daylight" between the United States and Israel as a one-way commitment and uses public spats to his advantage, such as when he criticized the Biden administration for withholding certain weapons and when he appeared before Congress in 2015 to attack a prospective nuclear deal with Iran. Just as important, his hostility to a two-state solution is overwhelmingly supported by an Israeli public that has shifted decisively rightward in recent decades. A June 2025 Pew poll found that just 21 percent of Israelis thought Israel could coexist peacefully with a Palestinian state. Netanyahu's inclusion in his coalition of two far-right parties led by extremists who baldly espouse racism and violence, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, reflects this change in societal attitudes. In short, the United States is now working with an Israeli government that does not espouse democratic values, shows no interest in a just resolution of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and often does not reciprocate the American commitment to preserving the health of the bilateral relationship.

EXCEPTIONAL TREATMENT

The aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack highlighted the core flaws of the exceptional relationship. U.S. President Joe Biden and his team predictably struggled to shape the Netanyahu government's conduct of the war in Gaza and its actions elsewhere in the region. The United States did not seek an understanding with Israel, formally or informally, to specify what assistance it would deliver, under what conditions, and toward what military objectives. The administration's support for Israel's military response signaled appropriate solidarity with a bereaved and beleaguered partner, but without this clarity, to Netanyahu it represented a blank check.

U.S. engagements with Israeli officials at the war's outset established a pattern of carefully calibrated pressure but ultimate deference. From the earliest Israeli operations in Gaza, it was clear that the Israel Defense Forces were placing insufficient emphasis on minimizing Palestinian civilian casualties. The Biden administration repeatedly and firmly, but privately, registered its concerns about IDF bombing practices in the first weeks of the war. Yet whatever effect those conversations could have had on Israeli actions was diminished by American officials' public comments that lamented civilian casualties but avoided condemning them or casting blame on Israel.

The administration was reluctant to withhold weapons deliveries during this initial period, and U.S. vetoes of several UN Security Council resolutions calling for a cease-fire, for reasons including the omission of Hamas's role in the conflict, were interpreted by other countries as condoning Israeli tactics. Even as public criticism mounted in the United States, Netanyahu appeared to conclude that he could ignore any displeasure within the administration, which would prioritize Israel's freedom of action over mitigating civilian harm.

The cease-fire in November 2023 that freed 105 Israeli hostages in Gaza was a significant achievement, but more than a year passed without another truce. During that time, U.S. officials delivered increasingly blunt and reproachful messages to Israeli leaders about Israeli tactics. Although they emphasized that Israel needed to do "more" to protect civilians, they rarely provided any indication that U.S. support was in jeopardy. They never used military aid as leverage to try to change

Israel's conduct. The application of the so-called Leahy laws, which prohibit U.S. assistance to military units credibly implicated in gross violations of human rights, was effectively suspended in Israel's case, even though the laws do not allow such exceptions. Only in May 2024 did Biden pause the delivery of certain weapons, in response to Israel's beginning its campaign against Hamas forces in the city of Rafah, despite U.S. appeals to postpone until the civilian population had been safely evacuated. The IDF ended up modifying its plan for Rafah, but in the grand scheme of the war the administration's pressure was too little, too late.

A marginally more successful dynamic unfolded with humanitarian aid. At first, Israel blockaded Gaza entirely, against the United States' wishes. Although the Biden administration successfully persuaded the Netanyahu government to reverse this decision, Israeli restrictions limited the number of daily truckloads of aid entering Gaza to a fraction of those required to meet basic needs. Yet it is entirely possible that no assistance would have entered the territory had it not been for persistent U.S. efforts. On this particular issue, the Biden administration occasionally used its leverage. Twice in 2024—an April phone call between Biden and Netanyahu, and a September letter from the U.S. secretaries of state and defense to their Israeli counterparts—the administration threatened to reduce U.S. military support if Israel did not take defined steps to improve humanitarian relief. Both times, Israel largely, although ephemerally, complied.

U.S. pressure was effective, but it was not sustained. The administration chose not to use other tools at its disposal, such as invoking Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibits military assistance to any country that blocks U.S. humanitarian aid. Under this provision, U.S. officials could have either declared Israel in violation and then waived the aid suspension, effectively issuing a public censure, or allowed the prohibition to come into force and ceased providing weapons. Both actions could have helped induce Israel to allow more aid into Gaza. Likewise, partly to avoid triggering 620I, the Biden administration issued a national security memorandum in February 2024 that established stricter humanitarian and human rights standards for countries that receive U.S. military aid. Its report on Israel's compliance, released that May, found Israel's assurances that it was facilitating the entry of aid into Gaza and complying with international law "credible and reliable"—a finding that persuaded few close observers of the conflict.

The Biden administration had more success in preventing the war in Gaza from expanding. Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen all became involved in one way or another, but the violence did not metastasize into a sustained, multifront war. The administration was able to mobilize a multinational defense coalition that largely neutralized Iranian attacks on Israel in April and October of 2024, preventing further escalation. And by making clear to Israel in the aftermath that the United States would not join offensive operations, it kept Israel's response limited and bought more time for diplomacy. But Biden still struggled to curtail Israeli operations that could have snowballed into regional conflict. It was Israeli attacks of dubious utility in Damascus that precipitated (but did not justify) the first round of Iranian strikes against Israel. More often than not, Israel had a free hand, and effective U.S. military protection against the Iranian attack may have given Israel greater confidence to launch riskier operations in later months.

Since President Donald Trump returned to office, his approaches to Israel have alternated among exceptional treatment, genuine pressure, and a more transactional strategy. Trump and his aides got off to a promising start, helping pressure Netanyahu into accepting the Biden administration's January 2025 cease-fire proposal. But the new administration then spent the next several months effectively outsourcing U.S. policy to Israel. After the January cease-fire began, Trump's aides made no effort to persuade Netanyahu to participate in negotiations to extend the truce beyond the first phase. And when the Israeli prime minister unilaterally decided to break the cease-fire in March with a series of airstrikes, Trump endorsed the Israeli attacks. Instead of pressing Israel to maximize aid delivery, the administration said nothing as Israel imposed a disastrous total blockade on Gaza for more than two months, a move that eventually plunged part of the territory into famine. When Israel lifted the blockade in May after belated U.S. objections, the Trump administration helped it create a new aid distribution mechanism to replace the well-established UN-led system. The new system—which even Netanyahu had to admit "did not work" in a September interview with Fox News—forced many hungry Palestinians to travel long distances to get to one of just four food distribution sites. More than a thousand Palestinians seeking aid were killed.

The freer hand the Trump administration gave Israel also emboldened its regional adventurism. Israeli operations in Lebanon and Syria throughout the spring and summer elicited only weak protests from the

White House. When Israel launched a war against Iran in June, Trump distanced himself from Israel at first but then extolled its performance once the strikes appeared successful. Soon enough, Trump was ordering U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear sites—undoubtedly Netanyahu's hope all along.

It was not until late September, and after nearly 20,000 more Palestinian deaths since the collapse of the January 2025 cease-fire, according to UN estimates, that Trump took the reins and pushed for another cease-fire. In a clear illustration of the moral hazards of the exceptional relationship, the trigger for the U.S. reversal was Israel's reckless attempted assassination that month of Hamas leaders in Qatar, a partner of the United States and the host of the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. The United States' inability to protect a partner from a country that receives billions of dollars in U.S. support threatened to render American credibility worthless.

In response, the Trump administration, together with key Arab and Muslim countries, launched a full-court press on Israel and Hamas to end the fighting. The president's team conditioned an expected Oval Office meeting on Netanyahu's acceptance of Trump's "peace plan." Trump left no room for escape. He held a press conference with Netanyahu only after essentially forcing Netanyahu to call Qatar's prime minister to apologize and agree to sign the cease-fire proposal on air. Netanyahu has "got to be fine with it," Trump told an Israeli reporter. "He has no choice."

The cease-fire that went into effect on October 10 was still in force as of November 2025, and has brought important steps toward peace, despite repeated violations by both Israel and Hamas. Getting this far required a departure from the rules of the exceptional relationship: Trump not only publicly castigated the Israeli government for the attack in Qatar but also threatened to embarrass Netanyahu if he did not accept the U.S. plan. It would be premature, however, to interpret this episode as a sign that the U.S.-Israeli relationship is normalizing. There is a high risk that upcoming, trickier steps necessary to end the war will not be taken if Trump loses interest and, as is the American pattern, reverts to enabling Netanyahu.

UNEXCEPTIONAL RESULTS

American enablement of Israel has been detrimental for all involved. This is most manifestly true for the Palestinian society in Gaza shattered

by two years of war. When the October cease-fire came into effect, according to the International Rescue Committee, at least 90 percent of the population was internally displaced. UN experts have declared that more than 600,000 Palestinians, including 132,000 children, faced famine conditions or malnutrition. And 78 percent of Gaza's buildings had been damaged or destroyed. Although the threat of another October 7–style attack by Hamas has been eliminated for the foreseeable future, the lasting defeat of the organization, an outcome many in Gaza would welcome, requires a political solution in which Palestinians—without Hamas—can govern themselves in a state of their own. Yet neither the Israeli government nor Hamas is interested in delivering that solution.

That Israel has suffered or will suffer from the exceptional relationship is less obvious but no less true. Israel's degradation of the capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah, paired with the severe blows Israel and the United States inflicted on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, bolsters Israel's short-term security. But these achievements need to be weighed against the costs incurred in the process.

Israel's international isolation as a result of the war in Gaza represents a clear and present danger for the country. Leaders of the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland have said publicly that they would arrest Netanyahu if he set foot on their territory. Germany and the United Kingdom, which have armed Israel for decades, are restricting weapons sales. Changing attitudes in the United States are particularly alarming for Israel. According to a September *New York Times*/Siena University poll, more than half of all Americans—and seven out of ten under the age of 30—oppose "providing additional economic and military support to Israel." Two-fifths of all Americans, and two-thirds of those under age 30, think Israel has been killing Palestinian civilians intentionally. And Americans under the age of 45 are more than twice as likely to sympathize primarily with the Palestinians as they are to sympathize primarily with Israel. Although these changes in public opinion have not yet translated to changes in policy, Israel cannot expect the disconnect to persist indefinitely.

Israel's military successes against its regional adversaries, moreover, may prove transitory. Iran's interest in developing a nuclear weapon has arguably increased as its conventional deterrent and sense of security diminish. Should Iran eventually build a primitive nuclear bomb—or even return to the threshold of becoming a nuclear power,

only this time without any monitoring regime in place—it will not be possible to call the June war a success. Similarly, in the absence of credible, effective Palestinian governance in Gaza, Israel may be forced to choose between a costly occupation and a failed state on its border. Hezbollah's decline in Lebanon has so far worked to Israel's advantage, but it would be premature to rule out a far less favorable outcome.

Even in the most optimistic scenarios, Israel's regional military superiority obscures other dangers. Netanyahu's continued pursuit of a domestic judicial overhaul, which in practice would reduce the courts' oversight of his government, is threatening Israeli democracy. Demographic changes in Israel, particularly the relative growth of the ultra-Orthodox population, are reducing rates of participation in the economy and the armed forces. Commitment to unrestrained settlement expansion in the West Bank across the Israeli political spectrum, together with a lack of accountability for settler violence, could trigger a new intifada and make a Palestinian state a practical impossibility. And the war in Gaza has generated strong headwinds against further normalization with Arab and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and beyond. In each of these cases, unconditional U.S. support since October 7 has empowered Netanyahu to pursue policies that ignore or exacerbate existing problems. These developments threaten the future of a secure, Jewish, and democratic Israel—the avowed goal of U.S. policy and the hope of most Israelis.

Maintaining the exceptional relationship has imposed substantial costs on the United States, too. It is not just that U.S. policy is undermining American goals vis-à-vis Israel. The relationship in its current form has also damaged U.S. interests entirely unrelated to the Middle East. Washington's international standing has plummeted over the past two years, a development that U.S. adversaries have eagerly exploited—China to bolster its standing as a supposedly responsible international actor, Russia to deflect from its crimes in Ukraine. Blanket American support for Israel has also entailed opportunity costs; every U.S. carrier strike group deployed to protect Israel from the consequences of actions enabled by the United States is one less available for duty in the Asia-Pacific. And although not the primary drivers of these trends, the exceptional relationship with Israel and perceived U.S. complicity in Israel's war in Gaza have further stoked polarization and fueled anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the United States.

BACK TO NORMAL

Continued U.S. deference to the Israeli government's preferences, unconditional political and military support, and the avoidance of public friction will only continue to enable Israeli leaders' worst tendencies, imperiling Israel's security and stability, subjecting Palestinians to further suffering, and undermining U.S. global interests. Protecting Israeli, Palestinian, and American interests therefore depends on leaving the exceptional relationship behind. Washington must normalize its policies toward Israel, bringing them into conformity with the laws, rules, and expectations that govern U.S. foreign relations everywhere else. In a more normal relationship, the United States would have the flexibility to calibrate its policies to strike a more appropriate balance between the worthy objective of protecting Israel and the risk of enabling it. And to the extent that U.S. support for Israel resembles U.S. support for other allies, it will be easier for policymakers to defend the relationship to the American public.

Not all normal U.S. foreign relationships are equal; the United States and Israel have plenty of leeway to decide how close they want their relationship to be. Normalizing the relationship could therefore appeal to both advocates and strident opponents of strong ties—a reality that could help advance this paradigm but could also derail it. Israel's fiercest advocates in the United States may caricature the end of exceptional treatment as U.S. abandonment of Israel and a reward for the perpetrators of October 7. Its fiercest critics, meanwhile, may argue that a more "normal" relationship is far too generous for a country that flagrantly violates international law, including with acts that many legal experts classify as genocide.

Yet if the assumption is correct that the relationship in its current form is unsustainable, the most responsible thing to do is to carefully and deliberately navigate this transition. The alternative, a rupture caused by the continued decline in American public support for Israel or a precipitate Israeli action, such as annexation of the West Bank, is far more likely to lead to extreme outcomes. Taking intentional steps toward normalization would enable the United States to set conditions that narrow the scope of the adjustment, such as by asking Israel to transfer governing responsibilities for more of the West Bank to Palestinians and to prosecute extremist settlers who commit acts of violence, as a prerequisite for moving forward with a normal bilateral relationship that is still a "special" relationship. This is the very point of normalization, putting the U.S. government in a position to more effectively exercise leverage.

At a minimum, the United States must fundamentally change how it conducts the relationship. The first requirement is to reach an understanding on shared and divergent goals and objectives, what each country is prepared to do to support the other's interests, and which actions would jeopardize this support—to identify both expectations and limits. The United States should reaffirm its strong support for Jewish self-determination, for example, but draw a clear line, stressing that Israelis' right to self-determination cannot prevent Palestinians from exercising the same right. Similarly, the United States should maintain its firm commitment to Israel's security but emphasize that this commitment does not extend to enabling Israel's permanent control of the West Bank or Gaza.

Next, the United States should apply U.S. and international laws, regulations, and standards to Israel in the same way it does to other countries. These would include the Leahy laws on gross violations of human rights, the Foreign Assistance Act, and the Law of Armed Conflict, which requires belligerents to discriminate between combatants and civilians in all military operations. For example, an Israeli army unit that abuses Palestinians must be held appropriately responsible by the Israeli legal system; until such punishment is exacted, the unit should not receive U.S. assistance. This is standard U.S. practice in dealings with other countries, including those with which the United States has a mutual defense treaty. Impunity only encourages further violations, even among allies.

Conditionality must also become a feature of the U.S.–Israeli relationship. Conditioning assistance or policy on another country's alignment with U.S. goals is not always effective, but it can work. Trying to coerce a partner should not be U.S. officials' first choice, either, but it should be an option if other approaches fail. Even the closest allies are not always moved by appeals to friendship, camaraderie, or past support. When that is the case, conditioning various forms of U.S. aid can impose, or threaten to impose, a tangible cost on those who act against U.S. interests, increasing the likelihood that they will change course, or at least distancing Washington from their conduct if they do not.

The United States has several ways to set conditions for Israel. The expiration of the 2016 U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding on security assistance in 2028, for example, would offer an appropriate time to reevaluate the contribution of American taxpayers' money to a wealthy country that now competes with American arms manufacturers for foreign sales. The Trump administration could, at least, extract

policy commitments in return for a follow-on agreement. Washington could also tie its voting positions in the UN Security Council to particular Israeli actions. Or, as it has done in the past, the United States could withhold assistance from Israel commensurate with the scope of a policy divergence—for example, reducing aid by the amount Israel spends on settlements.

Finally, Washington must insist that both sides refrain from intervening in each other's electoral and partisan politics. Netanyahu has repeatedly plunged into American domestic politics to advance his agenda—for example, all but endorsing the Republican candidate Mitt Romney for president in 2012 and speaking before a joint session of Congress in 2015, at the invitation of Republican members, to disparage the Iran nuclear deal. U.S. administrations have become involved in Israeli politics, too, but less frequently; the most notable example was an effort by the Clinton administration to bolster Netanyahu's prime ministerial opponent, Shimon Peres, in the 1996 elections by inviting him to the White House shortly before Israelis went to the polls.

The problem is not one government expressing its views on the actions of another or meeting with opposition politicians and officials; it is doing so with the intent to strengthen a particular party. No U.S. administration would tolerate the kind of overt intervention Israel has engaged in from any other partner. Such action is inconsistent with the spirit of cooperation that should obtain between allies. And in the U.S.-Israeli case, it has harmed both countries. Netanyahu's open favoritism toward Republicans has not only enabled him to undermine policies supported by a majority of Americans but also contributed to declining support for Israel among Democrats. A more normal diplomatic relationship cannot proceed with one country acting as a partisan political operator.

WALKING THE WALK

Normalizing the U.S.-Israeli relationship would not and should not disrupt the valuable cooperation between the two countries in the areas of intelligence, technology, and commerce, nor would it absolve Palestinian politicians of their responsibility to reform the Palestinian Authority or absolve Hamas of its blame for the horrific crimes of October 7 that precipitated the war in Gaza. It would, however, pave the way for better policy outcomes.

For one, the United States would be in a stronger position to prevent Israel from annexing the West Bank, a move that is inimical to U.S. interests

and Palestinian rights. A preemptive discussion would need to clarify the United States' definition of annexation and determine how Washington would respond should Israel proceed. A shared understanding that Washington will seriously consider stronger policy options—such as public censure or deductions from Israel's military assistance account—could help deter annexation. In the meantime, withholding military aid to Israeli army units that assist in the construction of West Bank settlements would demonstrate a U.S. commitment to upholding international law, which prohibits actions by a state to settle its civilian population in territory it occupies. All else being equal, Israel would face more costs in annexing the West Bank if its relationship with the United States were more normal, decreasing the probability it would take that step.

A normal U.S.-Israeli relationship could also allow for a more enduring joint effort to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It may be possible to resume nuclear negotiations with Iran if Washington can secure Israel's agreement to refrain from certain kinds of military action by pledging to join Israel in responding militarily if Iran crosses an agreed threshold. Conditionality could play a constructive role in this policy: Washington could suspend arms sales in the event of an Israeli strike without U.S. approval, or it could pledge additional missile defense assistance to Israel if Iran reconstitutes its nuclear or ballistic missile program. It may even be easier to build bipartisan support for aggressive action against Iran if Israel abstains from intervening in U.S. political debates on the subject.

Decades of unconditional U.S. support for Israel have undermined, rather than advanced, peace and stability in the Middle East. The Palestinians have been the primary victims of these failures, but the United States and Israel have also paid a cost. And until the core problem with the bilateral relationship is fixed, that price will only grow. The United States and Israel will need to adapt if their relationship is to survive, transitioning from exceptional but self-destructive cooperation to a more normal relationship that can still form the basis of an alliance.

As long as Trump is in the Oval Office and Netanyahu and his extremist coalition are in the driver's seat of the relationship, it is doubtful that Washington will fully commit to a coherent, institutionalized new approach. Yet it is not too soon to begin reckoning with what has gone wrong and discussing how to fix it. If the next opportunity to reset the increasingly vulnerable U.S.-Israeli relationship is missed, it will be to the detriment of Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians alike.

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The West's Last Chance

How to Build a New Global Order Before It's Too Late

ALEXANDER STUBB

The world has changed more in the past four years than in the previous 30. Our news feeds brim with strife and tragedy. Russia bombards Ukraine, the Middle East seethes, and wars rage in Africa. As conflicts are on the rise, democracies, it seems, are in demise. The post–Cold War era is over. Despite the hopes that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the globe did not unite in embracing democracy and market capitalism. Indeed, the forces that were supposed to bring the world together—trade, energy, technology, and information—are now pulling it apart.

We live in a new world of disorder. The liberal, rules-based order that arose after the end of World War II is now dying. Multilateral cooperation is giving way to multipolar competition. Opportunistic transactions seem to matter more than defending international rules. Great-power competition is back, as the rivalry between China and

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the United States sets the frame of geopolitics. But it is not the only force shaping global order. Emerging middle powers, including Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey, have become game-changers. Together, they have the economic means and geopolitical heft to tilt the global order toward stability or greater turmoil. They also have a reason to demand change: the post–World War II multilateral system did not adapt to adequately reflect their position in the world and afford them the role that they deserve. A triangular contest among what I call the global West, the global East, and the global South is taking shape. In choosing either to strengthen the multilateral system or seek multipolarity, the global South will decide whether geopolitics in the next era leans toward cooperation, fragmentation, or domination.

The next five to ten years will likely determine the world order for decades to come. Once an order settles in, it tends to stick for a while. After World War I, a new order lasted two decades. The next order, after World War II, lasted for four decades. Now, 30 years after the end of the Cold War, something new is again emerging. This is the last chance for Western countries to convince the rest of the world that they are capable of dialogue rather than monologue, consistency rather than double standards, and cooperation rather than domination. If countries eschew cooperation for competition, a world of even greater conflict looms.

Every state has agency, even small ones such as mine, Finland. The key is to try to maximize influence and, with the tools available, push for solutions. For me, this means doing everything I can to preserve the liberal world order, even if that system is not in vogue right now. International institutions and norms provide the framework for global cooperation. They need to be updated and reformed to better reflect the growing economic and political power of the global South and the global East. Western leaders have long talked about the urgency of fixing multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Now, we must get it done, starting with rebalancing the power within the UN and other international bodies such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Without such changes, the multilateral system as it exists will crumble. That system is not perfect; it has inherent flaws and can never exactly reflect the world around it. But the alternatives are much worse: spheres of influence, chaos, and disorder.

HISTORY DID NOT END

I started studying political science and international relations at Furman University in the United States in 1989. The Berlin Wall fell that autumn. Soon after, Germany reunified, central and eastern Europe escaped the shackles of communism, and what had been a bipolar world—pitting a communist and authoritarian Soviet Union against a capitalist and democratic United States—became a unipolar one. The United States was now the undisputed superpower. The liberal international order had won.

I was elated at the time. It seemed to me, and to so many others then, that we stood at the threshold of a brighter age. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama called that moment "the end of history," and I wasn't the only one to believe that the triumph of liberalism was certain. Most nation-states would invariably pivot toward democracy, market capitalism, and freedom. Globalization would lead to economic interdependence. Old divisions would melt, and the world would become one. Even at the end of the decade, as I finished my Ph.D. in European integration at the London School of Economics, this future still seemed imminent.

But that future never arrived. The unipolar moment proved short-lived. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the West turned its back on the basic values that it claimed to uphold. Its commitment to international law was questioned. U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq failed. The global financial crash of 2008 delivered a severe reputational blow to the West's economic model, rooted in global markets. The United States no longer drove global politics alone. China emerged as a superpower through its skyrocketing manufacturing, exports, and economic growth, and its rivalry with the United States has since come to dominate geopolitics. The last decade has also seen the further erosion of multilateral institutions, growing suspicion and friction regarding free trade, and intensifying competition over technology.

Russia's full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 dealt another body blow to the old order. It was one of the most blatant violations of the rules-based system since the end of World War II and certainly the worst Europe had seen. That the culprit was a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which was set up to preserve peace, was all the more damning. States that were supposed to uphold the system brought it crashing down.

MULTILATERALISM OR MULTIPOLARITY

The international order, however, has not disappeared. Amid the wreckage, it is shifting from multilateralism to multipolarity. Multilateralism is a system of global cooperation that rests on international institutions and common rules. Its key principles apply equally to all countries, irrespective of size. Multipolarity, by contrast, is an oligopoly of power. The structure of a multipolar world rests on several, often competing poles. Dealmaking and agreements among a limited number of players form the structure of such an order, invariably weakening common rules and institutions. Multipolarity can lead to ad hoc and opportunistic behavior and a fluid array of alliances based on states' real-time self-interest. A multipolar world risks leaving small and medium-sized countries out—bigger powers make deals over their heads. Whereas multilateralism leads to order, multipolarity tends toward disorder and conflict.

There is a growing tension between those who promote multilateralism and an order based on the rule of law and those who speak the language of multipolarity and transactionalism. Small states and middle powers, as well as regional organizations such as the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the EU, and the South American bloc Mercosur, promote multilateralism. China, for its part, promotes multipolarity with shades of multilateralism; it ostensibly endorses multilateral groupings such as BRICS—the non-Western coalition whose original members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that actually want to give rise to a more multipolar order. The United States has shifted its emphasis from multilateralism toward transactionalism but still has commitments to regional institutions such as NATO. Many states, both big and small, are pursuing what can be described as a multivectoral foreign policy. In essence, their aim is to diversify their relations with multiple actors rather than aligning with any one bloc.

A transactional or multivectoral foreign policy is dominated by interests. Small states, for instance, often balance between great powers: they can align with China in some areas and side with the United States in others, all while trying to avoid being dominated by any one actor. Interests drive the practical choices of states, and this is entirely legitimate. But such an approach need not eschew values, which should underpin everything a state does. Even a transactional foreign

policy should rest on a core of fundamental values. They include the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, the prohibition of the use of force, and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Countries have, overwhelmingly, a clear interest in upholding these values and ensuring that violators face real consequences.

Many countries are rejecting multilateralism in favor of more ad hoc arrangements and deals. The United States, for instance, is focused on bilateral trade and business agreements. China uses the Belt and Road Initiative, its vast global infrastructure investment program, to facilitate both bilateral diplomacy and economic transactions. The EU is forging bilateral free trade agreements that risk falling short of World Trade Organization rules. This, paradoxically, is happening when the world needs multilateralism more than ever to solve common challenges, such as climate change, development shortfalls, and the regulation of advanced technologies. Without a strong multilateral system, all diplomacy becomes transactional. A multilateral world makes the common good a self-interest. A multipolar world runs simply on self-interest.

FINLAND'S "VALUES-BASED REALISM"

Foreign policy is often based on three pillars: values, interests, and power. These three elements are key when the balance and dynamics of world order are changing. I come from a relatively small country with a population of close to six million people. Although we have one of the largest defense forces in Europe, our diplomacy is premised on values and interests. Power, both the hard and the soft kind, is mostly a luxury of the bigger players. They can project military and economic power, forcing smaller players to align with their goals. But small countries can find power in cooperating with others. Alliances, groupings, and smart diplomacy are what give a smaller player influence well beyond the size of its military and economy. Often, those alliances are based on shared values, such as a commitment to human rights and the rule of law.

As a small country bordering an imperial power, Finland has learned that sometimes a state must set aside some values to protect others, or simply to survive. Statehood is based on the principles of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. After World War II, Finland retained its independence, unlike our Baltic friends that were absorbed by the Soviet Union. But we lost ten percent of our territory to the Soviet Union, including the areas where my father

and grandparents were born. And, crucially, we had to give up some sovereignty. Finland was unable to join international institutions we felt we naturally belonged to, notably the EU and NATO.

During the Cold War, Finnish foreign policy was defined by "pragmatic realism." To keep the Soviet Union from attacking us again, as it had in 1939, we had to compromise our Western values. This era in Finnish history, which has lent the term "Finlandization" to international relations, is not one we can be particularly proud of, but we managed to keep our independence. That experience has made us wary of any possibility of its repetition. When some suggest that Finlandization might be a solution for ending the war in Ukraine, I vehemently disagree. Such a peace would come at too great a cost, what would effectively be the surrender of sovereignty and territory.

We live in a new world of disorder.

After the end of the Cold War, Finland, like so many other countries, embraced the idea that the values of the global West would become the norm—what I call "values-based idealism." This allowed Finland to join the European Union in 1995. At the same time, Finland made a serious mistake: it decided, voluntarily, to stay out of NATO. (For the record, I have been an avid advocate of Finnish NATO membership for 30 years.) Some Finns harbored an idealistic belief that Russia would eventually become a liberal democracy, so joining NATO was unnecessary. Others feared that Russia would react badly to Finland joining the alliance. Yet others thought that Finland contributed to maintaining a balance—and therefore peace—in the Baltic Sea region by staying out of the alliance. All these reasons turned out to be wrong, and Finland has adjusted accordingly; it joined NATO after Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine.

That was a decision that followed from both Finland's values and its interests. Finland has embraced what I have called "values-based realism": committing to a set of universal values based on freedom, fundamental rights, and international rules while still respecting the realities of the world's diversity of cultures and histories. The global West must stay true to its values but understand that the world's problems will not be solved only through collaboration with like-minded countries.

Values-based realism might sound like a contradiction of terms, but it is not. Two influential theories of the post–Cold War era seemed to pit universal values against a more realist assessment of political fault

lines. Fukuyama's end of history thesis saw the triumph of capitalism over communism as heralding a world that would become ever more liberal and market-oriented. The political scientist Samuel Huntington's vision of a "clash of civilizations" predicted that the fault lines of geopolitics would move from ideological differences to cultural ones. In truth, states can draw from both understandings in negotiating today's shifting order. In crafting foreign policy, governments of the global West can maintain their faith in democracy and markets without insisting they are universally applicable; in other places, different models may prevail. And even within the global West, the pursuit of security and the defense of sovereignty will occasionally make it impossible to strictly adhere to liberal ideals.

Countries should strive for a cooperative world order of values-based realism, respecting both the rule of law and cultural and political differences. For Finland, that means reaching out to the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to better understand their positions on Russia's war in Ukraine and other ongoing conflicts. It also means holding pragmatic discussions on an equal footing on important global issues, such as those to do with technology sharing, raw materials, and climate change.

THE TRIANGLE OF POWER

Three broad regions now make up the global balance of power: the global West, the global East, and the global South. The global West comprises roughly 50 countries and has traditionally been led by the United States. Its members include primarily democratic, market-oriented states in Europe and North America and their far-flung allies Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. These countries have typically aimed to uphold a rules-based multilateral order, even if they disagree on how best to preserve, reform, or reinvent it.

The global East consists of roughly 25 states led by China. It includes a network of aligned states—notably Iran, North Korea, and Russia—that seek to revise or supplant the existing rules-based international order. These countries are bound by a common interest, namely, the desire to reduce the power of the global West.

The global South, comprising many of the world's developing and middle-income states from Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (and the majority of the world's population) spans roughly 125 states. Many of them suffered under Western colonialism and then

again as theaters for the proxy wars of the Cold War era. The global South includes many middle powers or "swing states," notably Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. Demographic trends, economic development, and the extraction and export of natural resources drive the ascendance of these states.

The global West and the global East are fighting for the hearts and minds of the global South. The reason is simple: they understand that the global South will decide the direction of the new world order. As the West and the East pull in different directions, the South has the swing vote.

The global West cannot simply attract the global South by extolling the virtues of freedom and democracy; it also needs to fund development projects, make investments in economic growth, and, most important, give the South a seat at the table and share power. The global East would be equally mistaken to think that its spending on big infrastructure projects and direct investment buys it full influence in the global South. Love cannot be easily bought. As Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has noted, India and other countries in the global South are not simply sitting on the fence but rather standing on their own ground.

In other words, what both Western and Eastern leaders will need is values-based realism. Foreign policy is never binary. A policymaker

has to make daily choices that involve both values and interests. Will you buy weapons from a country that is violating international law? Will you fund a dictatorship that is fighting terrorism? Will you give aid to a country that considers homosexuality a crime? Do you trade with a country that allows the death penalty? Some values are nonnegotiable. These include upholding fundamental and human rights, protecting minorities, preserving democracy, and respecting the rule of law. These values anchor what the global West should stand for, especially in its appeals to the global South. At the same time, the global West has to understand that not everyone shares these values.

The aim of values-based realism is to find a balance between values and interests in a way that prioritizes principles but recognizes the limits of a state's power when the interests of peace, stability, and security are at stake. A rules-based world order underpinned by a set of well-functioning international institutions that enshrine fundamental values remains the best way to prevent competition leading to collision. But as these institutions have lost their salience, countries must embrace a harder sense of realism. Leaders must acknowledge the differences among countries: the realities of geography, history, culture, religion, and different stages in economic development. If they want others to better address issues such as citizens' rights, environmental practices, and good governance, they should lead by example and offer support—not lectures.

Values-based realism begins with dignified behavior, with respect for the views of others and an understanding of differences. It means collaboration based on partnerships of equals rather than some historical perception of what relations among the global West, East, and South should look like. The way for states to look forward rather than backward is to focus on important common projects such as infrastructure, trade, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Many obstacles lie before any attempt by the world's three spheres to build a global order that at once respects differences and allows states to set their national interests in a broader framework of cooperative international relations. The costs of failure, however, are immense: the first half of the twentieth century was warning enough.

Uncertainty is a part of international relations, and never more so than during the transition of one era into another. The key is to understand why the change is happening and how to react to it. If the global West reverts to its old ways of direct or indirect dominance or outright arrogance, it will lose the battle. If it realizes that the global South will

be a key part of the next world order, it just might be able to forge both values-based and interest-based partnerships that can tackle the main challenges of the globe. Values-based realism will give the West enough room to navigate this new age of international relations.

WORLDS TO COME

A set of postwar institutions helped steer the world through its most rapid era of development and sustained an extraordinary period of relative peace. Today, they are at risk of collapsing. But they must survive, because a world based on competition without cooperation will lead to conflict. To survive, however, they must change, because too many states lack agency in the existing system and, in the absence of change, will divest themselves from it. These states can't be blamed for doing so; the new world order will not wait.

At least three scenarios could emerge in the decade ahead. In the first one, the current disorder would simply persist. There would still be elements of the old order left, but respect for international rules and institutions would be à la carte and mostly based on interests—not innate values. The capacity to solve major challenges would remain limited, but the world at least would not devolve into greater chaos. Ending conflicts, however, would become especially difficult because most peace deals would be transactional and lack the authority that comes with the imprimatur of the United Nations.

Things could be worse: in a second scenario, the foundations of the liberal international order—its rules and institutions—would continue to erode, and the existing order would collapse. The world would move closer to chaos without a clear nexus of power and with states unable to solve acute crises, such as famines, pandemics, or conflicts. Strongmen, warlords, and nonstate actors would fill power vacuums left behind by receding international organizations. Local conflicts would risk triggering wider wars. Stability and predictability would be the exception, not the norm, in a dog-eat-dog world. Peace mediation would be close to impossible.

But it doesn't have to be that way. In a third scenario, a new symmetry of power among the global West, East, and South would produce a rebalanced world order in which countries could deal with the most pressing global challenges through cooperation and dialogue among equals. That balance would contain competition and nudge the world toward greater cooperation on climate, security, and technology issues—critical

challenges that no country can solve alone. In this scenario, the principles of the UN Charter would prevail, leading to just and lasting agreements. But for that to happen, international institutions must be reformed.

Reform begins at the top, namely, in the United Nations. Reform is always a long and complicated process, but there are at least three possible changes that would automatically strengthen the UN and give agency to those states that feel that they don't have enough power in New York, Geneva, Vienna, or Nairobi.

The unipolar moment proved short-lived.

First, all major continents need to be represented in the UN Security Council, at all times. It is simply unacceptable that there is no permanent representation from Africa and Latin America in the Security Council and that China alone represents Asia. The number of permanent members should be increased by at least five: two from Africa, two from Asia, and one from Latin America.

Second, no single state should have veto power in the Security Council. The veto was necessary in the aftermath of World War II, but in today's world it has incapacitated the Security Council. The UN agencies in Geneva work well precisely because no single member can prevent them from doing so.

Third, if a permanent or rotating member of the Security Council violates the UN Charter, its membership in the UN should be suspended. This would mean that the body would have suspended Russia after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Such a suspension decision could be taken in the General Assembly. There should be no room for double standards in the United Nations.

Global trade and financial institutions also need to be updated. The World Trade Organization, which has been crippled for years by the paralysis of its dispute settlement mechanism, is still essential. Despite an increase in free trade agreements outside the WTO's purview, over 70 percent of global trade is still conducted under the WTO's "most favored nation" principle. The point of the multilateral trading system is to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all its members. Tariffs and other infringements of WTO rules end up hurting everyone. The current reform process must lead to greater transparency, especially with respect to subsidies, and flexibility in the WTO decision-making processes. And these reforms must be enacted swiftly; the system will lose credibility if the WTO remains mired in its current impasse.

Reform is hard, and some of these proposals may sound unrealistic. But so did those made in San Francisco when the United Nations was founded over 80 years ago. Whether the 193 members of the United Nations embrace these changes will depend on whether they focus their foreign policy on values, interests, or power. Sharing power on the basis of values and interests was the foundation of the creation of the liberal world order after World War II. It is time to revise the system that has served us so well for almost a century.

The wildcard for the global West in all of this will be whether the United States wants to preserve the multilateral world order it has been so instrumental in building and from which it has benefited so greatly. That may not be an easy path, given Washington's withdrawal from key institutions and agreements, such as the World Health Organization and the Paris climate agreement, and its newly mercantilist approach to cross-border trade. The UN system has helped preserve peace between the great powers, enabling the United States to emerge as the leading geopolitical power. In many UN institutions, it has taken the leading role and been able to drive its policy goals very effectively. Global free trade has helped the United States establish itself as the leading economic power in the world while also bringing low-cost products to American consumers. Alliances such as NATO have given the United States military and political advantages outside its own region. It remains the task of the rest of the West to convince the Trump administration of the value of both the postwar institutions and the United States' active role in them.

The wildcard for the global East will be how China plays its hand on the world stage. It could take more steps to fill the power vacuums left by the United States in areas such as free trade, climate change cooperation, and development. It could try to shape the international institutions it now has a much stronger foothold in. It might seek to further project power in its own region. And it might abandon its long-held hide-your-strength and bide-your-time strategy and decide that the time has come for more aggressive actions in, for instance, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

YALTA OR HELSINKI?

An international order, such as that forged by the Roman Empire, can sometimes survive for centuries. Most of the time, however, it lasts for just a few decades. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine marks the

beginning of yet another change in the world order. For young people today, it is their 1918, 1945, or 1989 moment. The world can take a wrong turn at these junctures, as happened after World War I, when the League of Nations was unable to contain great-power competition, resulting in another bloody world war.

Countries can also get it more or less right, as happened after World War II with the establishment of the United Nations. That postwar order did, after all, preserve peace between the two superpowers of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States. To be sure, that relative stability came at a high cost for those states that were forced into submission or suffered during proxy conflicts. And even as the end of World War II laid the groundwork for an order that survived for decades, it also planted the seeds of the current imbalance.

In 1945, the war's winners met in Yalta, in Crimea. There, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin crafted a postwar order based on spheres of influence. The UN Security Council would emerge as the stage where the superpowers could address their differences, but it offered little space for others. At Yalta, the big states made a deal over the small ones. That historical wrong must now be made right.

The 1975 convening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe offers a stark contrast to Yalta. Thirty-two European countries, plus Canada, the Soviet Union, and the United States, met in Helsinki to create a European security structure based on rules and norms applicable to all. They agreed to fundamental principles governing states' behavior toward their citizens and one another. It was a remarkable feat of multilateralism at a time of major tensions, and it became instrumental in precipitating the end of the Cold War.

Yalta was multipolar in its outcomes, and Helsinki was multilateral. Now the world faces a choice, and I believe Helsinki offers the right way forward. The choices we all make in the next decade will define the world order for the twenty-first century.

Small states such as mine are not bystanders in the story. The new order will be determined by decisions taken by political leaders in both big and small states, whether democrats, autocrats, or something in between. And here a particular responsibility falls on the global West, as the architect of the passing order and still, economically and militarily, the most powerful global coalition. The way we carry that mantle matters. This is our last chance.

How to Survive in a Multialigned World

The Indian Way of Strategic Diversification

TANVI MADAN

As the United States reevaluates its global commitments and questions the existing international order, longtime American allies and partners are seeking alternatives to foreign policy strategies that rely heavily on Washington. Canada, South Korea, and the European Union have all talked about building ties with a wider range of countries. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are hedging against U.S. unpredictability by cementing other partnerships; the Saudis, for instance, recently concluded a security deal with Pakistan. Such efforts aim to make countries less vulnerable to sudden changes in any single bilateral relationship and give them more options and greater autonomy in foreign policy decision-making.

Although many of these countries are only now pursuing diversification in their external relations, India has long adhered to this

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strategy. Balancing a variety of partners without committing fully to any one country or bloc has been the core of Indian foreign policy since the country achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Over the years, this policy has been given different labels—nonalignment, bi-alignment, multialignment, even omnidirectional engagement—but the approach has been the same. When successful, a diversified strategy has enabled New Delhi to avoid acquiescing to any one partner's decisions and to play countries off one another to strengthen its own position.

Throughout the Cold War, India sought to strike a balance in its relations with the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as with several smaller powers and nonaligned countries, because it feared that one or both superpowers might be unreliable or coercive when New Delhi found itself in need. In the post–Cold War period, India has maintained its overall approach of avoiding full reliance on any one partner. Like an investor managing a complex portfolio, India has constantly rebalanced its set of relationships as new opportunities and risks have arisen. At times, this has meant significantly increasing its exposure to some partners—as it has arguably done in recent years by aligning itself with the United States on several security, economic, and technology issues.

But pressure from the second Trump administration is now leading India to adjust the relative weight of the United States in its portfolio of partners. President Donald Trump's tariffs of up to 50 percent, calls to parley with Pakistan, and demands to reduce India's oil imports from Russia have increased doubts about American reliability. These actions have also raised questions about whether New Delhi has aligned itself too closely with Washington. For many Indian policymakers, the uncertainty caused by Washington's actions has reinforced the importance of diversification and bolstering other partnerships—not only with U.S. allies, such as France and Japan, but also with U.S. adversaries, including Russia.

With diversified foreign policies becoming the new global norm, India's experience offers lessons for a world no longer shaped by American unipolarity. New Delhi's pursuit of multiple partnerships helped India maximize its autonomy amid the superpower politics of the Cold War and has continued to do so in the U.S.-led order that has dominated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But policymakers around the world considering diversifying their own foreign ties must

also understand the challenges of such a strategy. India has learned that it requires constantly cultivating, assessing, and rebalancing different relationships. Maintaining a diversified portfolio of partners also provides less of a safeguard against aggression than formal alliances do, so India has had to spend more on its own defense, develop a nuclear deterrent, and sometimes pull its punches against rivals. Without learning from India's experiences, countries that now find themselves looking to adopt a similar strategy may end up merely exchanging overreliance on one country for overreliance on many.

DEPENDENCE AFTER INDEPENDENCE

India's foreign policy orientation was forged when, like today, transformative technologies and great-power competition were upending existing global dynamics. The country emerged out of the partition of British India in 1947, at the dawn of the nuclear age and the advent of fierce competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The leaders of independent India, wary of inviting new forms of colonial domination, wanted to be self-reliant. But they quickly realized that sourcing military supplies, economic aid, and technical assistance required partnering with or depending on other countries. They feared, however, that an alliance with either the Soviet or the American bloc would be a straitjacket rather than a security blanket. Instead, New Delhi hoped that multiple partnerships would preserve Indian autonomy by preventing any one country or bloc from being able to force India to submit to its preferences.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, welcomed help from the United States, which hoped that a democratic India might counterbalance communism in Asia. In the early 1950s, New Delhi used American concern about the "loss" of China to the communist bloc to solicit economic and food assistance. Nehru also reached out to Moscow, but he initially found that the Soviet Union had little interest in India—Soviet leader Joseph Stalin believed India was too close to the West.

The downsides of having no partner with which to balance the United States were soon evident. Aiming to establish a peaceful periphery, New Delhi tried to engage rather than contain China, which angered American policymakers. They criticized India's recognition of the Chinese communist regime and New Delhi's unwillingness to fully support the United States and its United Nations allies

during the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953. U.S. legislators saw India's nonalignment as immoral and akin to siding with the Sino-Soviet bloc. They tried to make any assistance contingent on India curbing its engagement with the communist bloc or giving the United States access to Indian raw materials and critical minerals such as manganese. Congress eventually passed a food assistance bill for India, in 1951, without requiring New Delhi to change its foreign policy or give resources to the United States, but it came with the expectation that India would not offer strategic materials to the communist bloc.

Geopolitical changes in the mid-1950s gave New Delhi more room to maneuver. Seeking influence among countries that were not aligned with the United States or the Soviet Union, Moscow offered India diplomatic, economic, and military assistance—on terms that India found attractive, including support for India's state-owned industrial sector—and tolerated New Delhi's insistence on refusing to side with any one bloc. Nehru felt that if India had better ties with the Soviet Union, the United States would take India more seriously. Indeed, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations chose to strengthen ties with India. The United States became invested in ensuring that democratic India wouldn't fail while communist China succeeded. With both Moscow and Washington now interested in working with New Delhi, Indian policymakers believed that their gambit had succeeded. They had played the two powers against each other and garnered economic assistance, military supplies, and technical knowledge—which not only helped New Delhi's nation-building efforts but also bolstered its autonomy by allowing India to diversify its dependence.

STRINGS ATTACHED

But diversification did not bring deterrence. In 1962, India suffered a humiliating defeat after China attacked as part of a dispute over the two countries' shared border. During the war, Moscow sided with China, its ally, over India, merely its friend. The United States and its allies aided India militarily, but New Delhi found that the help came with strings attached: Washington subsequently tried to pressure India to reach a settlement with Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir, to limit its defense budget and spend more on development, and to cease its military acquisitions from Moscow. If the United States had remained its only option, India might have had no choice but to accede to these demands after the war, but the

growing Sino-Soviet split ensured that Moscow again wanted to work with India. Instead of making Indian leaders reconsider their aversion to alliances, this entire experience made it even clearer that any single partner could be unreliable, as the Soviet Union had been, or coercive, as the United States had been.

India's 1965 war with Pakistan further reinforced the wisdom of its diversified strategy. New Delhi again turned to the United States when China threatened to intervene on behalf of Pakistan. Washington warned Beijing against getting involved, but it also suspended military and economic aid to both South Asian belligerents to pressure them to reach a cease-fire. Yet India still had access to Soviet military supplies, which policymakers in New Delhi saw as a vindication of an approach based on securing multiple partnerships.

India's foreign policy approach does not exempt it fully from picking sides.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who came to power in 1966, sought to further expand India's portfolio of partners. She reached out to countries that shared India's concerns about China, including Australia, Japan, and Singapore. Worried about waning U.S. interest in India and Soviet overtures to Pakistan, Gandhi also tried to reduce India's need for either superpower by going so far as to try to normalize relations with rival Beijing in the late 1960s, albeit unsuccessfully. Moscow offered India a formal treaty to establish closer relations and provide more assistance, but Gandhi declined because of concern about overdependence on any single partner. Only when India needed to deter China from intervening in another war with Pakistan, in 1971, did New Delhi sign this treaty, tilting India's overall balance toward the Soviet Union after Washington switched from containing to engaging Beijing.

The Soviet Union provided military supplies and diplomatic support to India in its war with Pakistan, but Soviet help, too, came with limits—Moscow pressed Gandhi to meet with the Pakistani leader to avoid a war and later declined an Indian request to publicly warn the United States against intervening. To offset potential overreliance on the Soviet Union, Indian policymakers wanted to repair ties with Washington, in the 1970s. But the United States no longer needed a counterweight to China—which after rapprochement in 1971–72 was now working with the U.S.-led bloc against

the Soviet Union—and wasn't interested in India economically. So India looked for other partners, including in the developing world, and redoubled its efforts to build a nuclear program, which could provide an independent deterrent and help hedge against overreliance on the Soviet Union.

Such an approach weathered domestic convulsions. When the Indian National Congress lost power in 1977 to the opposition Janata coalition, Indian leaders still pursued a diversified foreign policy. Prime Minister Morarji Desai criticized Gandhi, his predecessor, for making India too dependent on the Soviet Union. He proposed a program of genuine nonalignment in which India would simultaneously maintain ties with the Soviet Union, repair relations with the United States, normalize ties with rival China, and strengthen domestic economic and military capabilities. When Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she also followed this policy.

But Indian governments faced a problem as they tried to diversify: many potential partners, especially those in the West, did not see India as important to their objectives and thus had limited interest in engaging New Delhi. As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s, India continued to depend heavily on the Soviet bloc. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, India had no backup plan. Facing foreign policy and financial crises, New Delhi had to once more rebalance its portfolio of partners.

TILTING TOWARD WASHINGTON

In the post–Cold War period, recalibrating has meant investing in new partnerships and reviving old ones. In 1992, India established full diplomatic ties with Israel, which New Delhi had previously not done because of its ties with the Arab world and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. And India renewed partnerships in East and Southeast Asia, including with countries such as Japan and Singapore, whose strong economies could help India grow. India's liberalizing reforms and, subsequently, its 1998 nuclear tests, bolstered its economic outlook and defensive capabilities. These moves also increased global interest in India, widening New Delhi's options for partners—including, once again, the United States.

As in the twentieth century, India's foreign policy approach in the twenty-first century has remained consistent no matter which parties have held power in New Delhi. In 2003, the foreign minister

in the coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party noted a "desire for balance, for noninterference, and for independence of action" as the motivation for India's strategy. That government and the subsequent coalition led by the Congress party strengthened ties with the United States while also exploring economic and multilateral cooperation with China. India also joined issue-based groups, including the Quad, with Australia, Japan, and the United States, and BRICS, alongside Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa.

The current BJP-led coalition government has continued to pursue diversification. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in power since 2014, has looked to several different partners for diplomatic support, defense equipment, markets for Indian goods and services, commodities (including energy and critical minerals), investment, jobs, and technology. Like its predecessors, the current government has also actively tried to reduce overreliance on any one partner in key sectors. For instance, Russia has gone from being the source of 76 percent of Indian defense imports in terms of value between 2000 and 2004 to 36 percent between 2020 and 2024.

Even as India's broader approach has been consistent, the depth and breadth of its partnerships have changed as the country's interests—and available collaborators—have evolved. In the early 2000s, India saw promise in a closer partnership with China, but New Delhi has adopted a warier posture after military standoffs in 2013, 2014, 2017, and especially 2020, when the first fatal military clash in 45 years occurred along the disputed Chinese-Indian border. India has shifted from looking to China to offset its growing ties with the United States and Europe to finding ways to balance against Beijing as tensions have risen. Russia, which has itself deepened its dependence on China, has become a less relevant strategic partner than in the past. Although New Delhi will not break its ties with Moscow, the benefits of close relations with Russia have diminished as India prioritizes accessing and developing advanced technologies.

In contrast, in the last decade, Modi's government has continued to expand India's defense and security, economic, and technological cooperation with the United States based on a shared desire to counter China's growing assertiveness. This U.S.-Indian strategic alignment has resulted, for instance, in increasingly sophisticated military exercises, including a recent antisubmarine drill off the coast of Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean, and technology

collaboration, such as Google's plans to build a $15 billion artificial intelligence hub in India.

Tilting toward Washington has not meant abandoning diversification, however. Even as India has moved closer to the United States, its leaders have pursued balance by deepening other partnerships. The Modi government has invested in ties with Indo-Pacific partners, such as Australia and Japan, which share India's concerns about China. It has renewed relations with traditional European partners, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, and made new efforts to build ties across other parts of Europe. To balance the increasing weight of the West in its portfolio of partners, New Delhi has also explored opportunities across the developing world. India, for instance, sold antiship missiles to the Philippines, signed an economic agreement to boost trade with the United Arab Emirates, and is working to obtain critical minerals such as lithium from Argentina.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

India believes this diversification has paid off. Being able to pick from a menu of countries has helped it counter rivals and extract benefits from partners. It has also allowed India to hedge against the risk of overreliance when a partner's foreign policy priorities change. When Moscow abandoned India during its 1962 war with China, when Washington did the same during India's 1971 crisis with Pakistan, or when Moscow stayed neutral in the 2020 border clashes between China and India in the Himalayas, New Delhi could turn to other options for support.

More significantly, drawing support from multiple sources has been crucial to building India's domestic capabilities, which, in turn, have made it a more attractive partner. India's domestic space sector, for instance, benefited from partnerships with multiple powers. France and the United States enabled India's access to expertise and technology in the 1960s; then, after Washington imposed export controls, the Soviet Union stepped in to support India's space ambitions. Today, India is a strong player in the space domain in its own right. It sent a Mars orbiter into space, helps other countries launch satellites, and has collaborated with NASA on an observation satellite and the U.S. Space Force on a proposed semiconductor fabrication facility.

Policymakers have learned that this approach requires being pragmatic rather than perfectionistic about autonomy. Although leaders

want full control over their own choices, achieving India's objectives often requires them to exercise restraint or make tradeoffs. For instance, India refrained from condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or publicly criticizing Trump when he imposed tariffs on India, prioritizing the need to maintain advantageous partnerships over the desire to express opposition. India's foreign policy approach also does not exempt it fully from picking sides. In critical and emerging technologies, for instance, when India must choose between Chinese or Western infrastructure, it has opted for the West. This is not to curry favor with the United States but because India does not want to increase its vulnerability to its rival China.

Diversification is a high-maintenance strategy.

India has also discovered diversification's downsides. When it has managed diversified relationships poorly, India has pleased none of its partners and annoyed all of them. Early in the Vietnam War, for instance, Washington wanted India to criticize U.S. actions less, while Moscow was unhappy it would not criticize the United States more. In addition, in sectors in which India has not developed its own capabilities, a diversified strategy may make it reliant on multiple counterparts. Then, with each partner navigating its own constantly shifting priorities, India's dependencies can leave it exposed not only to a single country but also to a wider range of rivalries and geopolitical risks. This has been the case in the Middle East, where multiple countries—often fighting one another—are key diplomatic partners for India and provide oil, natural gas, investment, military equipment, and jobs to India and its citizens.

Diversification can also lead to suboptimal choices. Unwilling to be fully dependent on one country, the Indian military looks to several countries to procure defense platforms, some of which are incompatible. Buying defense products from Russia can limit India's ability to acquire more advanced technology from the United States. Although these practices might not maximize military effectiveness, India has persisted with them in part to preserve its autonomy.

An even bigger disadvantage is the questionable deterrent effect of diversification compared with formal alliances. It is debatable, for instance, whether China would have attacked in 1962 had India been under the security umbrella of either the Soviet Union or the

United States. Recognizing this shortcoming in its diversification strategy, New Delhi subsequently signed an air defense agreement with Washington in 1963 and pursued the treaty with Moscow in 1971, both of which called for consultations in the event of a Chinese attack. These agreements sent a signal to Beijing and offered India insurance in exchange for ceding some autonomy. In recent years, India has drawn closer to the United States to counter a rising China, but New Delhi would likely still refuse any offer of an alliance with Washington because it believes its conventional and nuclear weapons can help offset diversification's deterrence disadvantage without tying its hands.

Ultimately, diversification is a high-maintenance strategy. India's leaders must constantly assess how each of the country's relationships affect its other partnerships. For instance, India has had to limit its connections with Iran to stay in the good graces of Israel, the United States, and the Gulf states. Sometimes India's balancing act falters. In September 2025, for example, the Indian military participated in a Russian military exercise that simulated a nuclear attack against Europe, upsetting EU member states at a time when Brussels was attempting to convince them to approve a trade deal with India. At least two of those states—Poland and Romania—have since set up diplomatic and defense meetings with India's rival Pakistan.

READY TO RECALIBRATE

Many countries besides India are now trying to craft foreign policies that allow them to hedge without fencing themselves in. They would do well to study India's successes in playing partners off one another to improve its national security, accelerate its domestic development, and deal with partners' unreliability. But they should also analyze diversification's potential weaknesses, including how it can leave a country exposed to multiple partners' shifting priorities, miss out on cooperation opportunities to prioritize autonomy, and limit deterrence compared with a strong and secure alliance.

Despite these shortcomings, India's experience continues to reinforce its desire to establish multiple partnerships over a great-power alliance. In the face of unexpected pressure from the United States in Trump's second term, New Delhi is now seeking to diversify even further. This strategy will look different than it did during

the Cold War, when India could balance the Soviet Union and the United States. Such clear options are not available today given India's comprehensive rivalry with China. Instead, New Delhi has made significant overtures to Europe, including accelerating efforts to conclude trade agreements with the United Kingdom and the European Union. It is also deepening defense and economic security partnerships with Australia and Japan; exploring new areas of cooperation with South Korea, including on shipbuilding; and repairing relations with Canada. And it is maintaining its partnership with Russia while trying to stabilize ties with China, which was on display when Modi met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a regional forum in China, in August 2025.

But even as India persists with diversification, it does not want to fully replace its partnership with the United States. India will continue to try to maintain and, in certain areas, even reinforce its connection to Washington. New Delhi understands that ties with the United States still enable India to enhance its own capabilities and give it leverage with its rivals and partners. For instance, U.S. investments have been indispensable in India's efforts to boost its semiconductor manufacturing industry. What India gains from working with the United States is crucial for India to make itself a desirable partner—to Washington and to the growing number of countries looking to diversify their own partnership portfolios.

Countries that want to diversify their foreign policy strategies will likely find themselves in a situation like India's. Rather than decoupling from the United States, whose power and influence remain significant, these countries can reduce risk and improve their resilience by developing closer relations with a variety of partners and speeding up efforts to build their own economic and security capabilities. But countries that adopt this strategy not only face the promises and downsides of a diversified approach; they also make the whole web of international relationships exponentially more intertwined. Any geopolitical change could set off a chain reaction of consequences as countries simultaneously rebalance their own carefully calibrated portfolios of partners. When these countries move beyond alliances to multialignment, how effectively they manage their multiple relationships will determine whether a diversified world will tend toward safety and stability or be thrown into bouts of upheaval.

Latin America's Revolution of the Right

The Forces Remaking the Region in the Age of Trump

BRIAN WINTER

From virtually the moment he and his band of bearded rebels rode into Havana in 1959 until his death from natural causes in 2016, the most iconic leader in Latin America was Fidel Castro. With his trademark military fatigues, slender Cohiba cigars, and marathon speeches vilifying Uncle Sam, Castro captured the imaginations of aspiring revolutionaries and millions of others around the world. Never content to merely govern Cuba, Castro worked tirelessly to export his ideas. His global network of allies and admirers grew over the decades to include leaders as diverse as Salvador Allende in Chile, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and Yasser Arafat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

El comandante would roll over in his grave if he learned that, today, the two Latin American figures who come closest to matching his global profile both hail from the ideological right. Javier Milei, the

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Illustration by Matt Rota

self-described "anarcho-capitalist" president of Argentina who has wielded a chainsaw to symbolize his zeal for slashing the size of government, and Nayib Bukele, the bearded millennial leader of El Salvador, have built fervent followings at home and abroad. Instead of the ubiquitous Cuban revolutionary cry, *¡Hasta la victoria, siempre!* ("Ever onward to victory!"), Milei's libertarian catchphrase, *¡Viva la libertad, carajo!* ("Long live freedom, damn it!"), is now showing up on T-shirts on some college campuses in the United States and being quoted by politicians as far away as Israel.

The idea that the right is inherently or uniquely authoritarian has lost traction.

Like Castro in his day, both leaders are punching well above their countries' weight in the global arena. Milei was the first head of state to meet U.S. President Donald Trump after his election in 2024, receiving a lavish welcome at his Mar-a-Lago resort. Trump has called Milei "my favorite president," and in October he extended a $20 billion rescue package to Argentina—the largest such bailout by the United States for any country in 30 years. Milei's success in cutting government bureaucracy and red tape, which helped bring inflation in Argentina from above 200 percent when he took office in 2023 to about 30 percent by late 2025, has been hailed as a model by the United Kingdom's conservative opposition leader Kemi Badenoch, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and many others on the European right. It has also made him a guru of sorts for libertarian Silicon Valley titans such as Elon Musk, who wielded Milei's chainsaw onstage at a conference of conservatives in the United States in February. Meanwhile, Bukele's crackdown on gangs has made him a wildly popular figure across much of Latin America and beyond, even as he unapologetically casts aside concerns about due process and human rights. (Some 81 percent of Chileans in a 2024 poll gave Bukele a positive rating, higher than that of any other global leader and more than double that of their own president.) Bukele has over 11 million followers on TikTok, more than any other head of state except Trump.

The true revolutionary fervor in today's Latin America, with leaders determined to transform not just their countries but the region itself, is primarily evident on the ideological right. With conservative leaders recently winning several elections and favored in others over the next year, Latin America seems primed for a once-in-a-generation shift

that would fundamentally change how countries deal with organized crime, economic policy, their strategic relationships with the United States and China, and more. In 2025, the conservative president of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, was reelected, while Milei's party won an unexpectedly large victory in Argentina's critical midterm legislative elections, adding even greater momentum to his agenda. Bolivia saw an end to almost 20 years of socialist rule with the election of Rodrigo Paz Pereira, a centrist reformer. Conservative presidential hopefuls are leading polls in Costa Rica and Peru, and are within striking distance in Brazil and Colombia, in elections due before the end of 2026.

Latin America is composed of some 20 countries with distinct histories and political dynamics, and the right may not ultimately prevail in every case. But there have been other moments in history when the region moved more or less in sync: the reactionary dictatorships that swept much of the region in the 1960s and 1970s following the Cuban Revolution, the great re-democratizing wave of the 1980s, the pro-market "Washington consensus" reforms of the 1990s, and the so-called pink tide that brought Chávez and other leftists to power in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, another such regional realignment appears to be taking shape, challenging some of the most basic assumptions the outside world makes about Latin America. The result would be a region that in the coming years pursues a more aggressive policy on drug trafficking and other crimes, is friendlier to domestic and foreign investment, worries less about climate change and deforestation, and is broadly aligned with the Trump administration on priorities such as security and migration and limiting China's presence in the Western Hemisphere. Given the history of U.S. interventionism in Latin America, one might have expected the rise of a heavy-handed, nationalist, right-wing U.S. president to propel a left-wing resistance in the region. Instead, at least for now, the Latin American leaders benefiting most from Trump's return are not the ones who denounce and defy him but the ones who admire, flatter, and even emulate him.

RIGHTWARD BOUND

This rightward shift does not appear to be just another relatively minor cyclical or short-lived pendular swing in the region's politics. A careful look at polling and other underlying trends suggests that conservative ideas and policy priorities do seem to be gaining ground in Latin America. A closely watched annual survey of more than 19,000

respondents in 18 countries by Latinobarómetro, a Chilean-based regional poll, reported that in 2024, the degree to which Latin Americans identified as right-wing was at its highest level in more than two decades. The same poll showed Bukele as by far the most popular politician throughout the region, with an average rating of 7.7 on a ten-point scale; the least popular, also by a wide margin, was Nicolás Maduro, the socialist dictator of Venezuela, with a score of just 1.3.

Most of the reasons for the right's ascendancy stem not from factors abroad but from changing realities within Latin America. At the top of the list is the public's growing frustration with crime, which is hardly a new challenge for the region but has grown substantially worse in recent years. According to estimates by the United Nations, the amount of cocaine produced in Latin America has tripled over the last decade, providing the region's gangs and cartels with unprecedented wealth and power and fueling drug-related violence. Latin America accounts for eight percent of the world's population but about 30 percent of its homicides. In several countries holding elections over the next year, including Brazil and Peru, crime—an election issue that has traditionally strongly favored the right—appears in surveys as voters' top concern.

Other key factors in the right's rise include the spread of evangelical Christianity in traditionally Catholic Latin America, which has transformed politics in several countries, most notably Brazil, by putting culture war issues such as abortion and "gender ideology" front and center. The dramatic, years-long economic and social collapses of Venezuela and Cuba have discredited socialist policies in the minds of a generation of voters throughout Latin America, dragging down the popularity of even some moderate leftist candidates who are nonetheless perceived as part of the same ideological tribe. An exodus of people from those two countries, and from other nations in crisis, such as Haiti and Nicaragua, has led to unprecedented migration within Latin America itself, prompting a backlash in receiving countries such as Chile, Colombia, and Peru that some right-wing candidates have sought to exploit.

Meanwhile, the global fame of Milei and Bukele has also played a key role. Even if most voters across Latin America don't wish to elect their own exact copies of Milei and Bukele, whose policies many consider extreme, viral videos of the two presidents receiving rock-star receptions at the White House and prestigious gatherings such

as the World Economic Forum's annual meeting at Davos have stirred curiosity, feeding the sense that right-wing leaders are on the march not just at home but beyond.

THE NEW CONSERVATISM

For decades, politicians on the Latin American right were weighed down by their association with dictatorships of the Cold War era. From the 1960s through the 1980s, dictators such as Augusto Pinochet of Chile, Hugo Bánzer of Bolivia, and Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala oversaw widespread state-sponsored repression and murder, often carried out in the name of fighting communism. After a great democratizing wave swept Latin America in the 1980s, most political leaders, including those on the right, sought to avoid any association with those regimes and were usually hesitant to put law-and-order issues at the center of their campaigns for fear of sounding fascist.

But the idea that the right is inherently or uniquely authoritarian has lost traction in today's Latin America, where all three cases of clear-cut dictatorship are on the ideological left: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. (Some other countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, are hybrid regimes, neither fully democratic nor authoritarian, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual global survey of democratic health.) A succession of right-of-center presidents who respected democratic institutions, including Mauricio Macri of Argentina (2015–19) and Sebastián Piñera of Chile (2010–14 and 2018–22), helped dilute the lingering distrust of conservative leaders. It's also true that, as memories of the Cold War fade and frustration with crime rises, warnings about authoritarian rule have lost some of their punch. In the Latinobarómetro poll, about 40 percent of respondents either preferred an authoritarian government or did not care whether it was democratic, up about ten percentage points from a decade ago. Polling in other parts of the Western world has shown a similar erosion of support for democracy.

Over the last decade, the Latin American right has also worked to undo the long-standing perception that it is indifferent to the fate of the poor. The neoliberal, small-state dogma that guided generations of conservative leaders has not been discarded, but it has been amended, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Right-wing governments in power at the peak of the pandemic oversaw some of Latin America's most ambitious expansions in social spending and have since

maintained many of those benefits. For example, in Chile—a country that for decades was the poster child for small-state, market-friendly neoliberalism—Piñera's conservative government spent proportionally more on pandemic-related relief than any other country in the region. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro oversaw a massive expansion of *Bolsa Família* ("Family Grant"), an internationally renowned program of cash transfers to the poor that he had previously attacked as misguided socialism. Bolsonaro even increased the program's payout by 50 percent in the months before his failed reelection campaign in 2022. More recently, in Argentina, even as Milei gleefully took his chainsaw to other government programs, he doubled the size of cash transfers for the country's poor, which helped his government maintain the support of many in the working class and avoid the mass social unrest that doomed previous Argentine austerity drives.

Although throughout Latin America the left is still regarded as more generous in its social spending, its advantage is no longer as big as it once was. By partly neutralizing criticism that its leaders are elitist or antidemocratic, the right has been able to focus on issues that play to its strengths. None has been more salient than security. Cartels and other organized crime groups have grown vastly more powerful over the last decade, thanks in part to a staggering increase in their income from drug smuggling. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the amount of cocaine produced globally reached an estimated 3,700 tons in 2023, compared with 902 tons in 2013. Almost all the world's coca, the raw material for the drug, is produced in three Latin American countries—Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru—and virtually every other country in the region is a staging ground for smuggling and, increasingly, is a consumer market in its own right.

Indeed, much of the growing anger over crime in Latin America stems from changes in how and where cocaine is consumed. The notion that cocaine flows only north, to wealthy partygoers in Berlin, London, and New York, is less true today than it ever was: the drug increasingly moves east, west, and south, as well. Although North America remains the leading market, accounting for about 27 percent of global cocaine consumption, with Europe second at 24 percent, Latin America and the Caribbean are now close behind, accounting for about 20 percent of global consumption, according to UN estimates. Asia (about 14 percent of global consumption) and Africa (about 13 percent) are also home to rapidly expanding markets for the drug.

The evolving geography of cocaine consumption has in turn brought about important changes in smuggling routes, especially those leading to the Pacific coast, turning once relatively peaceful Latin American countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, and Ecuador into battlegrounds as cartels fight over control of seaports and other key transit hubs. Flush with unprecedented amounts of cash, cartels have diversified into other activities, including extortion, cargo theft, kidnapping, illegal mining, logging in the Amazon, and trafficking migrants bound for the United States.

The consequences have been shocking even for a region long troubled by drug trafficking and violence. Images of rifle-toting gang members taking journalists hostage at a television station in Ecuador in 2024 circulated worldwide. The coastal Ecuadorean city of Durán, the site of a turf war among Albanian, Colombian, and Mexican cartels, is now the world's most dangerous city according to some indices, with an annual homicide rate of about 150 per 100,000 people—approaching that of Medellín, Colombia, in the early 1990s, the era of the notorious drug kingpin Pablo Escobar. The recent assassination of Miguel Uribe, a right-wing presidential candidate in Colombia, has stoked fears that two decades of progress on security in that country is unraveling. A 2023 poll showed that over 85 percent of Chileans now sometimes avoid going out at night and just eight percent feel safe. In Costa Rica, long known as a tourist paradise so secure that it had no need for a standing army, homicides have soared by more than 50 percent since 2020 as the country has become one of the world's leading transshipment points for cocaine. Even in the handful of countries where homicides have fallen in recent years, such as Brazil, rates of other crimes, such as robbery, remain high.

Under such circumstances, it's clear why Bukele and other politicians who promise an iron-fisted approach to crime have made gains. Since Bukele took office in 2019, homicides have fallen in El Salvador by more than 90 percent, and by some measures the country is now one of the safest in the Americas, with a murder rate comparable to that of Canada. Many observers in Latin America do not regard Bukele's approach—suspending constitutional rights such as due process and freedom of assembly, and jailing about two percent of the country's adult population—as particularly problematic. Even in Chile, which is home to some of the region's strongest democratic institutions, 80 percent of respondents in a recent poll agreed that they would support

a "state of exception," suspending certain civil liberties in order to combat crime. After a police operation in Rio de Janeiro in October degenerated into a chaotic shootout, leading to more than 120 deaths, Brazilian civil society groups reacted in horror. But a poll taken days later showed that a majority of city residents believed the raid was a success. Support for the harsh crackdown was just as strong among respondents in the city's favelas, or slums, as it was in wealthier parts of the city. Across the region, even some leaders who reject extreme measures are heeding the call for a tougher approach to crime by building new high-security prisons and ramping up arrests of gang leaders.

Meanwhile, politicians who fail to get security under control increasingly risk losing their seats. In Brazil, polls suggest President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's perceived weakness on crime is a significant obstacle to his reelection bid in 2026. In Mexico, the assassination of a vocal anti-crime mayor in November caused a wave of street protests and intense criticism of President Claudia Sheinbaum, who, although tougher on cartels than her predecessor, gets lower marks from voters on security than in any other area. In Peru in October, men on motorcycles opened fire at a concert, wounding four; the attack was the final straw for Peruvian President Dina Boluarte, who already had an approval rating in the low single digits because of alleged corruption in her government and other challenges. Days after the attack, Peru's congress voted 122–0 to remove her from office, citing "permanent moral incapacity."

SEA CHANGES

To be sure, the left remains alive and well and electorally competitive throughout much of the region. Its message, centered on economic inequality, will probably always resonate among voters in a region with the world's largest gap between rich and poor. The left also has its share of relatively popular, democratically elected leaders, such as Lula, who will run for his fourth (nonconsecutive) term as Brazil's president in 2026, and Sheinbaum, who has earned admirers abroad for her calm but firm handling of difficult negotiations with Trump on trade and immigration. In some instances, the right may be leading in polls in part because the left is currently in power, and incumbents have been struggling to win elections in Latin America and throughout much of the democratic world. Similarly, some observers have argued that the current shift has little to do with traditional ideological considerations of left versus right and that populists and political outsiders of all stripes are on the rise.

There are other reasons to be skeptical that a right-wing wave in Latin America will fully materialize. In Colombia and Chile, leftist governments have approval ratings in the 30 to 40 percent range—not high, but not so low as to preclude the possibility of future electoral success for their parties. Moreover, in Colombia and Brazil, a proliferation of candidates on the right could split the vote, potentially resulting in a runoff election in which the public sees the conservative candidate as too extreme, and a candidate from the left or center comes out on top. Noboa, Ecuador's president, failed in November to secure passage of a referendum that would have allowed foreign military bases in his country, among other reforms, suggesting that there will be some limits to how much power right-wing leaders can accumulate.

Perhaps ironically, one of the biggest risks to a conservative shift in Latin America may be Trump. The U.S. president has paid intense attention to the region in his second term, evidence that some of his top domestic priorities—combating drug trafficking and illegal immigration—require strong engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean. But polls suggest that Trump is not particularly popular in the region. He fared relatively poorly in the Latinobarómetro survey, with an average rating of just 4.2 on its ten-point scale, and some of his policies have sparked a backlash that risks pulling down his conservative allies in the region. For example, Trump's decision to slap some of the world's highest tariffs on Brazil and his demand that criminal charges be dropped against Bolsonaro in relation to a 2023 coup attempt led to a surge in Brazilian nationalism, a drop in support for Bolsonaro, and a rise in approval ratings for Lula. Likewise, Trump's vow to "take back" the Panama Canal for the United States damaged the popularity of Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino, one of the most pro-U.S. politicians in Latin America.

But Washington's role in the hemisphere is yet another area in which the political ground seems to be shifting in unpredictable ways. Trump's bailout of Argentina was widely seen as instrumental in ensuring the much larger than expected victory of Milei's party in midterm elections. Many were surprised when polls showed considerable support throughout Latin America for Trump's military strikes against alleged drug smuggling boats and other targets in Venezuela. The apparent message was that, once again, a broader anger against drug cartels in the region, and widespread public rejection of Maduro, outweighed other public concerns.

If a right-wing shift does materialize as current trends suggest, the consequences could be sweeping. The last time Latin America's politics moved in a kind of unison, during the leftist wave of the first decade of the twenty-first century, serves as a guide for what might be possible. Back then, a group of broadly aligned leaders, including Chávez, Argentine President Néstor Kirchner, and Lula, managed to sink a hemispheric trade deal that had been promoted by U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, fundamentally altering the region's economic trajectory for years afterward. Leftist Latin American presidents implemented stronger social policies to ensure the fruits of that decade's commodities boom were equitably distributed, helping bring tens of millions of Latin Americans out of poverty and ensuring greater resources for education and health care. The relative ideological consensus also gave rise to renewed efforts at regional collaboration, with the creation, in 2008, of the Union of South American Nations, a group that sought to promote intraregional trade and social cooperation and to provide a forum for regional decision-making that excluded the United States; it was effectively dismantled in the late 2010s as leftist governments lost power and their successors deemed the bloc too ideological.

A more right-wing Latin America may take a more skeptical stance on China.

Today, many observers are betting that a similarly transformative shift, but this time to the right, would result in a wave of more business-friendly policies throughout Latin America. After a so-called lost decade that saw the region's economies grow only about one percent per year on average from 2014 until 2023, the slowest pace among any major bloc of emerging markets, many politicians are vowing to follow Milei's example by cutting regulations and the size of government. Rafael López Aliaga, the mayor of Lima and a leading candidate in Peru's election, has called Milei a "savior." In Colombia, the right-wing journalist Vicky Dávila, who is running in the 2026 presidential election, has hired Axel Kaiser, a former adviser to Milei, to work on her campaign. (Kaiser's brother, Johannes, was himself a right-wing candidate in Chile's 2025 election.) José Antonio Kast, the conservative candidate in Chile's December runoff election, vowed to slash government expenditures by $21 billion while also cutting red tape, a plan he said would help Chile achieve four percent annual economic growth, double the pace of recent years.

Modern Latin American history is littered with austerity measures and pro-investment plans that failed because of social unrest or a lack of political support. Investors also risk overestimating the degree to which any politician can overcome the region's long-standing structural challenges, such as low educational levels and productivity. Nevertheless, financial markets have reacted to the potential for change with considerable enthusiasm, with one closely watched index that tracks stock prices in Latin America rising more than 30 percent in 2025—a sign of high expectations for faster economic growth and better corporate profits under right-leaning leaders. Many believe that with more pro-market leaders at the helm, the region can better realize its potential as a provider of critical minerals, including lithium and rare-earth minerals, as well as of oil and gas. In October, Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, announced plans to invest in artificial-intelligence-related data centers and other projects in Argentina that could eventually be worth up to $25 billion, reflecting broad enthusiasm in Silicon Valley for Milei and his brand of economic policy more generally.

A more right-wing Latin America may also take a more skeptical stance on China and lean more toward the United States. A previous generation of conservative leaders was hesitant to choose between the two superpowers. China is the largest trading partner for several Latin American countries, including Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, while the United States remains by far the biggest investor in the region. But the Trump administration has ramped up pressure on allies to turn away from Beijing, especially when it comes to Chinese investment in potentially sensitive areas such as telecommunications and port infrastructure. U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent described the recent rescue package for Argentina as an explicit bid to counter Beijing's rising influence, calling it part of a new "economic Monroe Doctrine," in reference to the nineteenth-century idea that outside powers are unwelcome in the Western Hemisphere. Some observers have speculated that Washington may have attached conditions to the aid, such as requiring Buenos Aires to possibly curtail or terminate Beijing's lease on a space station in southern Argentina that the United States believes could eventually have military uses. More broadly, Trump seems determined to send a message that he will reward allies in Latin America with aid and other benefits while punishing antagonistic governments with tariffs and sanctions. It remains to be seen whether a new wave of leaders will respond to such incentives or continue to maintain a posture of nonalignment.

Beginning in the 1990s, a generation of leftist leaders got to know each other personally at events such as the São Paulo Forum, a conference of left-wing groups founded by Brazil's Workers' Party, aiding their regional coordination in later years. Today, many on Latin America's new right are also forming close ties, including at events such as the Conservative Political Action Conference, which began in the United States in the 1970s and has spread to the region in recent years. Guests have included Milei, Bukele, members of the Bolsonaro family, as well as Chile's Kast. Some in the region are optimistic that those social bonds will lead to greater coordination on issues such as trade, infrastructure, and the fight against organized crime.

Finally, the shift may result in sea changes on a variety of other issues, as well. A more conservative Latin America will likely be less concerned with climate change or deforestation in the Amazon, especially if the right returns to power in Brazil. Some right-wing leaders may also try to close their countries' borders to further immigration; Kast proposed building a U.S.-style border barrier and deporting unauthorized migrants from Haiti, Venezuela, and elsewhere. Social issues such as abortion may also gain importance in national politics, given the rising percentage of evangelical Christian voters in Brazil and several other countries in the region. In a possible sign of things to come, in July, Milei helped inaugurate Argentina's largest evangelical church, which can fit 10,000 people. In his speech to the faithful, he quoted the Bible, Max Weber, and the conservative economist Thomas Sowell in explaining how "Judeo-Christian values" have informed his government's policies.

Indeed, today's Latin America is a region where the tone and substance of some political events would not seem out of place in Texas or Nebraska; where mainstream political leaders speak glowingly of fiscal discipline and police crackdowns; and where demands for social justice seem to have been superseded, at least for now, by invective against narcoterrorists and socialist dictators. If today's generation of right-wing leaders can gain and then maintain power, they believe they can create a Latin America that sheds its global reputation for crime and stagnant economic growth, collaborates more closely with like-minded governments in the United States and Europe, and is ultimately safe and prosperous—so its citizens will to want to stay instead of look for better lives elsewhere. That would not be a revolution in the way that Castro once used the term. But it would be a dramatic change nonetheless.

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The Allies After America

In Search of Plan B

PHILIP H. GORDON AND MARA KARLIN

The first year of the second Trump administration has demonstrated—if any more proof were needed—that the days when allies could rely on the United States to uphold world order are over. For the 80 years since the end of World War II, every American president, with the partial exception of Donald Trump during his first term, has been at least somewhat committed to defending a set of close allies, deterring aggression, supporting freedom of navigation and commerce, and upholding international institutions, rules, and laws. U.S. presidents were far from consistent in pursuing these goals, but they all accepted a basic premise that the world was a safer and

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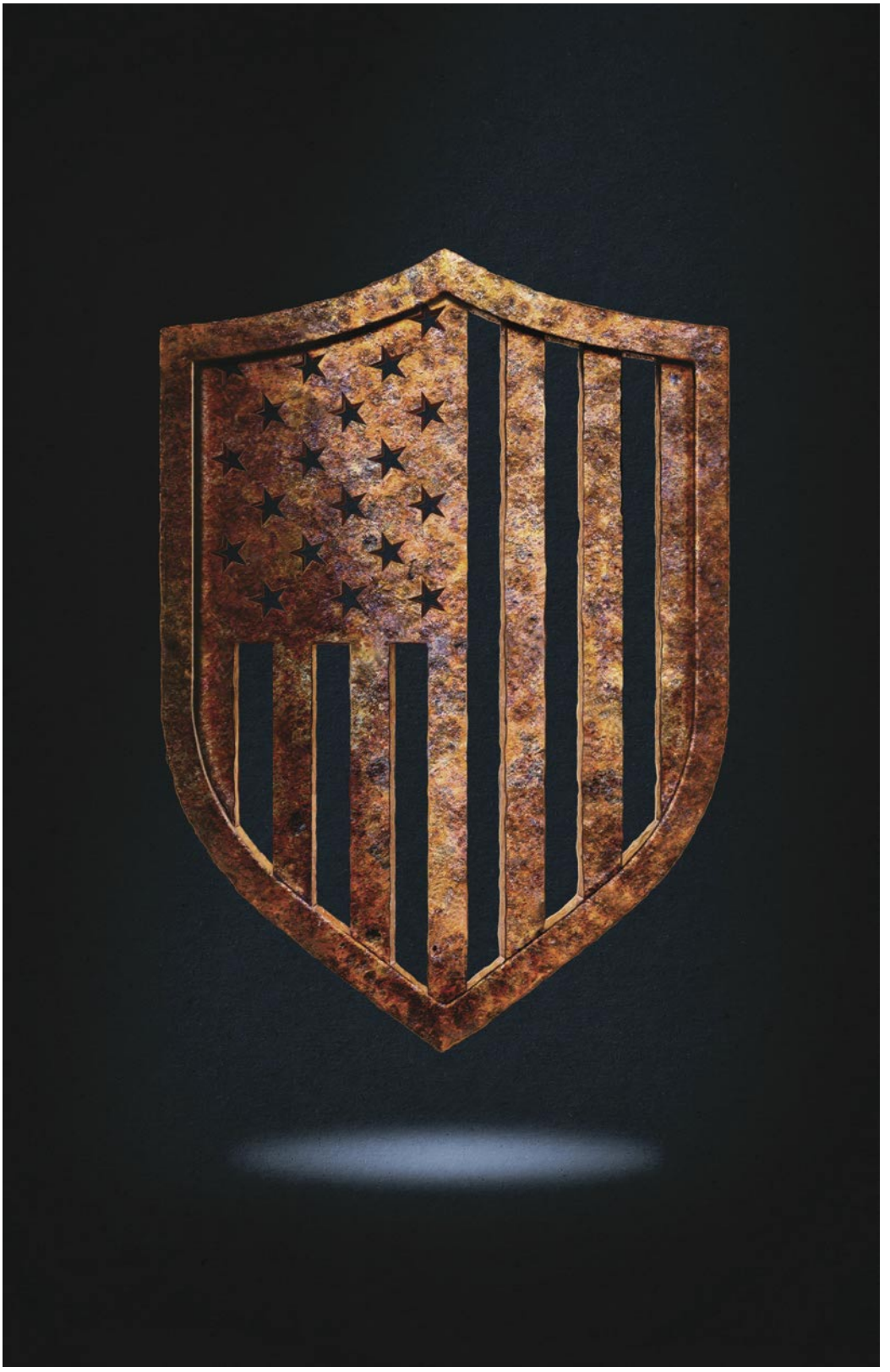

Illustration by Mona Eing and Michael Meissner

better place, including for Americans, if the United States devoted significant resources to advancing these aims. Under the second Trump presidency, that is no longer the case.

Trump's abandonment of traditional American foreign policy has profound implications for the evolving world order and for all countries that have relied so heavily on the United States for decades. Because the reality is that they have no obvious Plan B. Many of Washington's closest friends are unprepared to deal with a world in which they can no longer count on the United States to help protect them, let alone one in which it becomes an adversary. They are reluctantly starting to recognize the degree to which the world is changing, and they know they need to prepare. But years of dependence, deep internal and regional divisions, and a preference for spending money on social needs over defense have left them without viable near-term options.

For now, most U.S. allies are simply playing for time, trying to preserve as much support from Washington as possible while they contemplate what comes next. They flatter Trump with obsequious praise, give him gifts, host him at lavish events, promise to spend more on defense, accept unbalanced trade deals, pledge (but do not necessarily make) massive investments in the United States, and insist that their alliances with the United States remain viable. And they do so in the hopes that, as after Trump's first term, he may again be replaced by a president more committed to maintaining Washington's traditional global role.

Their thinking, however, is wishful. Trump will be in office for three more years, which is more than enough time for the alliance system to degrade further or for adversaries to take advantage of the vacuum the United States has left. Those who believe in alliances, global rules, norms and institutions, and American self-interest in keeping up partnerships can hope that Trump's approach will not be a lasting one and proceed accordingly. But that may be unwise. Trump represents American attitudes toward foreign policy as much as he shapes them. A generation of failed interventions abroad, growing budget deficits, accumulating debt, and a desire to focus on domestic affairs have left Americans across the political spectrum more reluctant to bear the burdens of global leadership than they have been since before World War II. U.S. allies may not have a Plan B now—but they had better start developing one fast.

PLAYING FOR TIME

In Trump's first term, the United States' commitment to supporting its network of global alliances bent but did not break. This was partly because Trump was new to the job, more cautious (in his actions, at least), and not quite ready to revolutionize U.S. foreign policy—but also because he staffed his administration mostly with proponents of traditional foreign and defense policy. His top foreign policy advisers all shared the belief that the United States should be active globally and that it benefits substantially from the political, security, and economic system that had been in place since the 1940s. Notwithstanding his "America first" platform and his own more radical instincts, Trump hesitated throughout most of his first term to take steps that would threaten U.S. global leadership. For example, he considered withdrawing American troops from Germany, Iraq, Japan, South Korea, and Syria but never did so—often because of pushback from his top advisers.

The second Trump administration is different. This time, the so-called globalists are out, and the president is surrounded by people who see most U.S. commitments abroad as a net burden. Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard all served in the U.S. military in Iraq and emerged from that experience with deep resentments of U.S. foreign policy elites and the United States' overseas undertakings. When he was in the Senate, Marco Rubio, who is now serving as both national security adviser and secretary of state, was a strong proponent of standing up to Russia, defending human rights, and providing foreign assistance. Today, however, he appears to have suppressed those convictions to remain relevant and trusted by Trump and the MAGA base. Simply put, the current administration's worldview appears to be far more influenced by Trump's long-held beliefs: alliances are an unnecessary burden, autocracies are easier to deal with than democracies, an open trading system is unfair, the United States can sufficiently defend itself without help from other countries, and great powers should have the right to dominate their smaller neighbors—and even to acquire new territory when it is in their interest to do so. The postwar world, built around mostly democratic allies that rely on the United States for security and defense, is gone.

This line of thinking is most evident in the administration's approach to Europe and NATO. Whereas past presidents expressed an ironclad

commitment to NATO's Article 5, which says that an armed attack on any one member will be considered an attack on all, Trump has suggested that the guarantee applies only if allies "pay their bills"—that is, contribute more to collective defense. And early in his second term, Trump expressed his intention to take control of Greenland, which is a territory of Denmark, a NATO ally. He even suggested the United States could do so by force, raising the prospect of the United States using its military not to protect a member of NATO but to attack one.

Vance is, if anything, even more skeptical about the traditional U.S. role in European security. In 2022, he said he didn't "really care what happens to Ukraine one way or the other." In February 2025, Vance told the audience at the Munich Security Conference that he worried more about threats "from within" Europe than those posed by China or Russia. Later that month, he said that Denmark was "not being a good ally" and suggested Trump might "take more territorial interest in Greenland" because he "doesn't care about what the Europeans scream at us." And in a Signal chat with top administration officials in March, Vance complained about "bailing Europe out again."

U.S. policy in the first year of the administration has reflected these views. Trump has embraced Russian narratives about the causes of the war in Ukraine, provided no direct U.S. military assistance to Kyiv beyond what was already in the pipeline, and refused to offer Ukraine a meaningful security guarantee. When Russia launched drones into Poland in September 2025, Trump downplayed it as a possible mistake, and when Russia violated Romanian and Estonian airspace that same month, the United States largely sat out NATO's military response. The Trump administration also announced that it would stop providing military assistance to countries on Russia's border. In October, it began withdrawing some of the additional troops the Biden administration sent to help defend Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. partners in Asia also have plenty to worry about. For over a decade, Washington touted its intention to "pivot to Asia," but now it appears that the United States' priority is its homeland and the rest of the Western Hemisphere. Trump's first National Defense Strategy, published in 2018, focused on countering Russia and China. The Biden administration's strategy considered China to be the United States' "pacing challenge"—the primary threat against which the U.S. military should be scaled and shaped. But officials in Trump's

second administration seem to be questioning that priority and focusing instead on border security, counternarcotics, and national missile defense, along with greater burden sharing by U.S. allies.

Trump has broadly maintained the United States' network of military partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, but allies there worry that he could subordinate support for their security interests to his desire for an improved relationship—and, possibly, a big trade deal—with China. In his first term, Trump conditioned U.S. security commitments to Japan and South Korea on their willingness to pay more for their own defense, even though the United States maintained defense treaties with both countries. Trump has also halted U.S. arms deliveries to and limited diplomatic interaction with Taiwan, declined Taiwan's president permission to transit the United States en route to Latin America, and begun allowing China to buy more advanced semiconductors, apparently to create conditions for a successful relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Americans are now more reluctant to bear the burdens of global leadership.

Whereas U.S. President Joe Biden repeatedly said the United States would help defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, Trump has remained noncommittal. And Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has gone so far as to suggest that the United States would protect Taiwan only if Taipei agreed to move half of its advanced chip-building capacity to the United States. It is not difficult to imagine Trump refusing to defend U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific in the event of conflict.

Trump also seems disinclined to expend American resources to maintain the U.S.-led order in the Middle East. To be sure, he has staunchly supported Israel, and in September issued an executive order granting Qatar a formal defense commitment. But Trump worries more about getting dragged into war than about defending U.S. partners, countering terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and protecting national security interests. He clearly values his relationships with Gulf leaders, but that doesn't mean he would defend them any more than he did in 2019, when he did nothing after Iran struck a major Saudi oil refinery and tankers off the coasts of Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Trump has historically been willing to support allies with military force only when the risk of escalation, especially with great powers, was low. During the 12-day war between Israel and Iran in June,

for example, Trump launched strikes against Iranian military and nuclear sites only after Israel had destroyed Iran's air defenses and capacity to strike back. He also authorized airstrikes against Yemen but then backed off when costs began to escalate and it became clear to him that Europeans were the main beneficiaries of the operation. In September, the U.S. military began destroying boats it says were carrying narcotics from Venezuela, a country with no ability to meaningfully retaliate against the United States. And Trump's appetite for risking confrontation with bigger powers is extremely limited, as demonstrated by his reluctance to confront Russia over Ukraine.

HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE

Even though the risk of U.S. disengagement—foreshadowed by the first Trump administration—has been growing for years, most U.S. allies have never truly prepared for it. European defense spending rose modestly after the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, but there has been little progress on developing a "European pillar" within NATO, which would enable European militaries to operate more independently from the United States. While France has long called for European "strategic autonomy," other countries on the continent have waved off the idea as either unnecessary or too expensive.

U.S. partners in Asia and the Middle East also spent the past decade focused far more on maintaining their alliances with the United States than on supplementing or replacing them—a reasonable choice, given the substantial resources and political will necessary to develop alternatives to U.S. leadership. But now, faced with the risk that the United States will abdicate its leadership role or refuse to defend U.S. partners, they are short of good options.

So far, during the second Trump administration, most U.S. allies and partners have continued to cling to U.S. support, sometimes desperately. NATO members, for example, have bent over backward to satisfy Trump by agreeing to increase their defense spending to five percent of GDP by 2035—a major achievement, even if reached with financial sleight of hand. (Spending on infrastructure counts toward the five percent.) Many leaders have tried flattery to keep Trump on board. This approach is best exemplified by NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who in June sent Trump an obsequious message praising his Middle Eastern diplomacy and lauding him for getting European countries to spend more on defense. "Europe is going to pay in a BIG way, as they

should, and it will be your win," Rutte wrote. Similarly, in their first meetings with Trump, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said she would nominate him for a Nobel Peace Prize, and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung told Trump that he was "the only person who can make progress" toward peace between North and South Korea.

Allies have also used economic deals to try to keep the United States committed to their security. Japan, South Korea, and the European Union have all agreed to unfavorable trade agreements with Washington, in which they have accepted big increases in U.S. tariffs and pledged massive investment in the U.S. economy and purchases of American energy exports or military goods. These deals were designed, in part, to avoid a trade war but were also motivated by concerns that a major trade dispute with the United States could undermine the close security partnership with Washington on which all these allies depend. As EU Council President António Costa acknowledged in September, "Escalating tensions with a key ally over tariffs, while our Eastern border is under threat, would have been an imprudent risk." Any prospect that the EU would stand up to U.S. tariffs—as China did—was undermined by "fears that Trump would cut off weapons supplies to Ukraine, pull troops out of Europe, or even quit NATO," as the *Financial Times* put it.

Likewise in the Middle East, Gulf countries have tried to keep Trump interested in their security with fawning and pledges to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in the United States. Qatar even gifted Trump an airplane for his personal use, signed up to a vague "economic exchange" of $1.2 trillion, and assisted Trump in pursuing a cease-fire in Gaza, for which it was rewarded in September 2025 with a U.S. promise to treat an attack on Qatar as a threat to the security of the United States. Other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have agreed to real estate and cryptocurrency deals with members of the Trump family and the families of other senior Trump officials, presumably hoping that it will help keep the administration on their side.

FLATTERY GETS YOU NOWHERE

U.S. allies cannot be faulted for seeking to placate Trump. They have few good alternatives to relying on the United States for their security and prosperity. But they should have no illusions: Trump is transactional, defines national interests narrowly, and is loyal only to himself. Flattery and headline-grabbing investment pledges can perhaps help

promote positive meetings or notional agreements, but they can hardly ensure enduring support.

It is, in fact, no longer far-fetched to imagine a world in which former allies see the United States as not just unreliable but also unpopular and even adversarial. Trust in the United States has collapsed. According to a survey of people in 24 countries published by the Pew Research Center last June, large majorities in most of the surveyed countries reported they have "no confidence" in Trump to "do the right thing regarding world affairs." Early in Trump's second term, Germany's incoming chancellor, Friedrich Merz, said it was clear that Washington is "largely indifferent to the fate of Europe." It is not difficult to picture other world leaders reaching similar conclusions about how the United States views their regions.

For now, many U.S. allies feel threatened by China and Russia, making it unlikely that they would go so far as to team up with Beijing or Moscow to balance against the United States. And most Asian and European partners probably won't join alternative geopolitical groupings such as the BRICS—a ten-country bloc named for its first five members, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—given their differences with those countries and their desire to avoid a major crisis with Washington. But an "America first" strategy taken to its logical extreme could force U.S. allies to distance themselves from the United States to a degree that would have been virtually unthinkable during the past 80 years.

Alternatives to relying on the United States each present major challenges, but U.S. partners may have little choice but to pursue them. Many are already developing more independent and capable militaries, increasing defense spending, and beginning to integrate with other partners. The EU, for example, has a number of initiatives in place that will increase defense spending and military integration by 2030, and Japan has pledged to raise its defense spending to two percent of GDP by March 2026.

If managed well, such efforts could lead to more balanced and equal partnerships with the United States. But they are unlikely to leave Asia and Europe more secure. There is nothing that U.S. allies can realistically do in the short term to compensate for the loss of a reliable defense commitment from the United States. And if the United States is less willing to protect allies, those allies may be less likely to help the United States. Not long ago, numerous Asian, European, and

Middle Eastern partners were ready to send their troops to fight and die alongside those of the United States out of allegiance to Washington. But those days may be over.

Greater self-reliance will also likely lead allies to develop defense industries less dependent on the United States. As they spend more scarce resources on defense, EU members have agreed that major categories of funding can be spent only within the EU (or in certain partner states, such as Norway, but not the United States). Germany plans to spend the vast bulk of some $95 billion in arms purchases in Europe, with only eight percent going to U.S. suppliers. And it was no coincidence that Denmark, resentful of Trump's threats against Greenland, decided in September 2025 to make its largest ever military purchase—over $9 billion in air defense systems—from European ventures, not American ones.

More than 70 percent of South Koreans want their government to get nuclear weapons.

Some allies may also seek to develop their own nuclear weapons. More than 70 percent of South Koreans want their government to get the bomb, according to polling published in 2024 by Gallup Korea. Although a majority of people in Japan oppose nuclear weapons, more are becoming open to the idea of their country developing its own. In Europe, doubts about U.S. extended deterrence prompted Merz to raise the possibility that France and the United Kingdom might supplement the American nuclear shield. In March, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that "Poland must pursue the most advanced capabilities, including nuclear and modern unconventional weapons." And in September, just after Israel launched airstrikes on Qatar—an attack the United States did not prevent—Saudi Arabia signed a defense agreement with Pakistan. Pakistan has said that, under the deal, it could make its nuclear deterrent available to Saudi Arabia if needed.

Replacing the U.S. nuclear umbrella will be politically difficult, technologically challenging, and exceedingly expensive. It might not even prove effective at deterring adversaries, because the small non-U.S. nuclear forces would be overwhelmed by the much larger arsenals belonging to China and Russia, the most likely aggressors. But over time, U.S. partners will have to take seriously the possibility that they will need their own nuclear forces because the United States will refuse to defend them.

The erosion of U.S. leadership and reliability will have major implications for the world economic order, as well. For the most part, the United States' allies in Asia and Europe have decided to accept one-sided trade deals rather than join forces against the United States, but their calculus might change. When Trump, during his first term, pulled the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership—a major U.S.-led trading bloc designed in part to counterbalance China—Australia, Canada, and Japan stuck with the pact. A few years later, many of the same countries joined China in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, now the largest free-trade agreement in the world—and one that does not include the United States. The less U.S. partners rely on the United States for security, the easier it is for them to work with one another, or with other great powers, to balance what they see as hostile economic policies coming out of Washington.

As the old order collapses, the world could become a scarier place. And even if allies come up with a Plan B, they might not be able to handle increased aggression on their own. This is not the first "America first" policy inflicted on them. During the early decades of the twentieth century, many in Washington took a similar approach, based on high tariffs, an aversion to alliance commitments and foreign wars, and a desire to appease rather than stand up to autocratic powers. The results paved the way for global aggression in the 1930s. Without Washington's support, American allies were unable to do anything about it.

No one should wish to see the end of a U.S.-led alliance system that, for all its weaknesses, costs, and imbalances, has served Washington and its partners well for several generations. But no one should count on it to endure, either. The second Trump administration is not committed to defending that system, and there is no guarantee that the next president will be.

None of this means that cooperation with Washington will be impossible. The United States will remain an important, if perhaps much more transactional, partner for years to come. But it does mean that allies can no longer count on the United States to devote significant resources to defending them or the world order. Allies' Plan A should be to do everything in their power to preserve as much practical cooperation as possible. But it would be dangerous and irresponsible not to have a Plan B.

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How Europe Lost

Can the Continent Escape Its Trump Trap?

MATTHIAS MATTHIJS AND NATHALIE TOCCI

When U.S. President Donald Trump returned to office in January 2025, Europe faced a choice. As Trump made draconian demands for greater European defense spending, threatened European exports with sweeping new tariffs, and challenged long-held European values on democracy and the rule of law, European leaders could either assume a confrontational stance and push back collectively or choose the path of least resistance and give in to Trump. From Warsaw to Westminster, from Riga to Rome, they chose the latter. Instead of insisting on bargaining with the United States as an equal partner or asserting their self-declared strategic autonomy, the EU and its member states, as well as nonmembers such

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as the United Kingdom, have reflexively and consistently adopted a posture of submission.

To many in Europe, this was a rational choice. Centrist proponents of appeasement argue that the alternatives—resisting Trump's demands on defense, resorting to Chinese-style tit-for-tat escalation in trade negotiations, or calling out his autocratic tendencies—would have been bad for European interests. The United States might have abandoned Ukraine, for example. Trump could have proclaimed the end of U.S. support for NATO and announced a significant withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the European continent. There could have been a full-scale transatlantic trade war. In this view, it is thanks only to Europe's cautious attempts at placation that none of those things came to pass.

This, of course, could well be true. But the perspective ignores the role that Europe's domestic politics played in pushing for accommodation in the first place, as well as the domestic political consequences that appeasement could have. The rise of the populist far right is not just an American political phenomenon, after all. In a growing number of EU states, the far right is either in government or the largest opposition party, and those in favor of appeasing Trump do not readily admit how hamstrung they are by these nationalist, populist forces. Moreover, they often ignore how this strategy in turn serves to further strengthen the far right. By giving in to Trump on defense, trade, and democratic values, Europe has effectively bolstered those far-right forces that want to see a weaker EU. Europe's Trump strategy, in other words, is a self-defeating trap.

There is only one way out of this cycle. Europe must take steps to restore agency where it still can. Rather than wait it out until January 2029, when magical thinking assumes the current transatlantic nightmare will come to an end, the EU needs to stop groveling and build greater sovereignty. Only then will it neuter the political forces that are hollowing it out from within.

AMBITION DEFICIT DISORDER

Europe's acquiescence to Trump on defense spending makes the most sense. The war in Ukraine is a European war, with Europe's security at stake. The catastrophic Oval Office meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in February 2025, in which the latter was berated and humiliated, was an ominous sign that the United States could abandon Ukraine entirely, immediately threatening the security of Europe's eastern flank. As a result, at the NATO summit in

June 2025, European allies acknowledged Washington's concerns about burden sharing in Ukraine and in general promised to drastically increase their defense spending to five percent of GDP while also buying a lot more American-made weapons in support of Kyiv's war effort.

Then, after Trump rolled out the red carpet for Russian President Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, Alaska, in mid-August, a group of European leaders, including Zelensky, flocked to Washington in a collective effort to sweet-talk Trump. They managed to box in the U.S. president by backing his mediation ambitions and by developing plans for a European "reassurance force" to be deployed to Ukraine in the (unlikely) event that Trump succeeded in brokering a cease-fire. These careful placation efforts, one can argue, have worked: Trump today appears to have much higher regard for European leaders; he seems to have settled on allowing Europeans to buy weapons for Ukraine; he has extended sanctions to the Russian oil companies Lukoil and Rosneft; and he has not actually pulled out of NATO.

Europe has reflexively and consistently adopted a posture of submission.

But this outcome is more the product of Putin's intransigence than European diplomacy. It is also a success only when compared with the worst possible alternative. So far, Europeans have failed to secure further American support for Ukraine. They have also failed to nudge the U.S. president into endorsing a package of comprehensive new sanctions on Russia, with a bipartisan bill of crippling active measures on hold in Congress. And by focusing on scoring political wins with Trump, they still have not developed a robust and coherent European strategy for their long-term defense that does not in essence rely on the United States.

The new five percent target for military spending, for example, was not driven by a European assessment of what is feasible but rather by what would please Trump. This cynical ploy was made plain when NATO's secretary-general, Mark Rutte, sent text messages to Trump hailing his "BIG" win in The Hague—texts that Trump later gleefully reposted on social media. Meanwhile, many European allies, including large countries such as France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, agreed to the five percent target knowing full well that they are not in the fiscal position to reach it any time soon. European commitments to "buy American" were also made enthusiastically without any concrete plans to significantly reduce those structural military dependencies in the future.

Europe's failure to organize its own defense can best be understood as a lack of ambition—one that is directly tied to the nationalist fervor that has swept the continent over the past five years. As far-right political parties have gained momentum, their agenda has dampened the European integration project. In the past, these parties pushed for exiting the EU altogether, but since the United Kingdom's withdrawal in 2020—now widely recognized as a policy failure—they have opted for a different, and more dangerous, agenda of gradually undermining the European Union from within and stifling any European supranational effort. To see the effect of far-right populism on European ambition and integration, one need only compare the significant response to the COVID-19 pandemic, when the EU collectively mobilized over $900 billion in grants and loans, and the underwhelming defense initiatives today. For collectively defending Europe against external aggression, which is arguably a much larger threat, the EU has mustered only about $170 billion in loans.

The irony, of course, is that precisely because far-right forces made a strong EU defense initiative impossible, European leaders felt they had no choice but to rely on a strongman from America. Yet the far right itself is unlikely to pay the political price for this submission. On the contrary, the five percent NATO defense and security spending target risks becoming further grist for the populist mill, especially in countries that are far from the Russian border, such as Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. European leaders may have to compromise public spending on health, education, and public pensions to meet the target, which fuels the "guns versus butter" narrative on the far right.

A HOUSE DIVIDED

European capitulation to Trump's trade demands is even more self-destructive. At least in the defense realm, the transatlantic relationship was never one of equals. But if Europeans are military lightweights, they pride themselves on being economic giants. The sheer size of the European Union's single market and the centralization of international trade policy in the European Commission meant that when Trump unleashed a trade war on the world, the EU was almost as well positioned as China to drive a hard bargain. When the United Kingdom rapidly agreed to a new ten percent tariff rate with the United States, for example, the general assumption outside the United States was that the EU's much greater market power would enable it to extract a much better deal.

Trade was also the area in which, ahead of the 2024 U.S. election, a fair amount of "Trump proofing" had already taken place, with European countries wielding carrots, such as the acquisition of more American weaponry and liquefied natural gas, as well as sticks, such as a new Anti-Coercion Instrument, which gives the European Commission significant power to retaliate in the event of economic intimidation or outright bullying by unfriendly states.

For example, in response to the U.S. president's announcement of 25 percent tariffs on steel and aluminum in February 2025, European Commission officials could have immediately activated a prepared package of roughly $23 billion in new tariffs on politically sensitive U.S. goods, such as soybeans from Iowa, motorcycles from Wisconsin, and orange juice from Florida. Then, in response to Trump's reciprocal "Liberation Day" tariffs in April 2025, they could have chosen to trigger their economic "bazooka," as the Anti-Coercion Instrument is often referred to. Since the United States continues to have a significant surplus in so-called invisible trade, EU officials could have targeted exports of U.S. services to Europe, such as streaming platforms and cloud computing or certain kinds of financial, legal, and advisory work.

But instead of taking (or even threatening to take) such collective action, European leaders spent months debating and undermining one another. This is yet another example of how increasingly strong far-right actors have been weakening the EU. Historically, trade negotiations have been led by the European Commission, with national governments taking a back seat. When the first Trump administration sought to increase trade pressure on the EU, for instance, Jean-Claude Juncker, who was then president of the European Commission, defused tensions by flying to Washington and presenting Trump with a simple deal framed around joint gains.

In the second Trump administration, however, the situation could not be more different. This time, the commission's bargaining position was undercut from the start by a cacophonous chorus, with key member states preemptively voicing their opposition to retaliation. Notably, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a far-right favorite of Trump's, called for pragmatism and warned the EU against setting off a tariff war. Germany also urged caution; the new government, led by the Christian Democrat Friedrich Merz, was concerned about recession, which would have further emboldened the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), the main opposition party. France and Spain, by contrast, have centrist or

center-left governments and favored a harder line and more biting retaliatory tariffs. (Spain, it is worth noting, is also the only NATO country that flatly refused to raise its defense spending to the new five percent norm.)

The level of European disunity was so profound that in late spring and early summer, companies even concluded they might do better negotiating on their own: the German car makers Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, and BMW conducted their own parallel negotiations with the Trump administration on auto tariffs. It wasn't until late July 2025, after months of paralysis, that Brussels accepted U.S. tariffs of 15 percent on most EU exports—five percentage points higher than what the United Kingdom had negotiated.

Faced with mounting internal criticism for the deal, European leaders have again claimed that the EU had no choice: since Trump was bent on imposing tariffs no matter what, they argue, retaliatory tariffs would have only ended up hurting European importers and consumers. Retaliation, in this view, would have amounted to shooting oneself in the foot. Worse, it could have risked triggering Trump's ire and seeing him lash out against Ukraine or abandon NATO.

But again, this is Catch-22 logic. A Europe that accepts transatlantic economic extortion as a fact of life is a Europe that allows its market power to erode while further emboldening the far right. According to a leading survey conducted late last summer in the five largest EU countries, 77 percent of respondents believed the EU-U.S. trade deal "mostly favors the American economy," with 52 percent agreeing that it is "a humiliation." Not only does Europe's submission make Trump look strong, increasing the appeal of imitating his nationalistic policies at home, but it also takes away the original rationale for European integration: that a united Europe can more effectively represent its interests. If a post-Brexit United Kingdom can extract a better trade deal from Trump than the EU can, many will rightly wonder why it is worth sticking with Brussels.

DIPLOMACY OVER DEMOCRACY

The starkest European accommodation has been on democratic values. Over the course of 2025, Trump has escalated his attacks on the free press, declared war on independent government institutions, and undercut the rule of law by putting political pressure on judges to take his side. And he has taken this fight to Europe: U.S. Vice President JD Vance and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem have openly meddled or taken sides in elections in Germany, Poland, and Romania.

Vance, for instance, did not meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 but did meet with the AfD leader Alice Weidel and publicly criticized the German firewall policy that keeps the party excluded from mainstream coalition talks. In Munich, Vance also lashed out against the annulment of the first round of presidential elections in Romania by that country's Constitutional Court in light of significant evidence of Russian influence through TikTok. He said in his speech that the greatest threat to Europe came from "within" and that EU governments were "running in fear of their own voters." Noem, meanwhile, took the extraordinary step of openly urging an audience in Jasionka, Poland, to vote for the far-right candidate Karol Nawrocki, calling his centrist opponent "an absolute train wreck of a leader."

Instead of rejecting such hostile election interference, however, the EU leadership has largely stayed silent on the matter, likely hoping that cooperation elsewhere might survive. This transactional approach is most clearly seen in the European Commission's investigation into disinformation on X, the social media platform primarily owned by the former Trump ally Elon Musk. Initially, Brussels had robust accusations against X, including that the platform was amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives and dismantling its election-integrity teams ahead of the EU elections. But the investigation has since slowed and been downplayed: X has been granted repeated extensions for compliance, and Brussels has signaled a preference for "dialogue" over sanctions.

This strategy is not only failing to produce deals in the European interest but also comes at a political cost: it normalizes illiberal moves in the United States while narrowing Europe's own space to defend liberal standards at home and abroad. Right-wing leaders have already embraced the political messages coming from Washington. After Vance's comments in Munich, for instance, Hungarian officials praised the vice president's "realism." And after the murder of the American right-wing personality Charlie Kirk, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban condemned the "hatemongering left" in the United States and warned that "Europe must not fall into the same trap." Across the continent, far-right parties have seized on such moments to portray themselves as part of a broader Western counter-elite, while mainstream European leaders, wary of inflaming tensions with the United States, have refrained from denouncing the rhetoric as forcefully as they once would have.

As with defense spending and with trade, many in Europe argued that it wasn't worth it to poke the bear on U.S. democratic backsliding.

European pushback was not likely to influence American domestic politics, after all. And some proponents of a more passive European response theorize that Trump's followers' abrasive support for the far right in Europe could sow the seeds of its own demise. In both Australia and Canada, the pro-Trump front-runner candidates ended up losing in the spring 2025 elections.

Some early results showed that this strategy could work in Europe, too. Vance and Musk, for instance, offered full-throated support for the AfD, but it had no discernible effect on the outcome in Germany. And in Romania, the pro-Russian and pro-Trump front-runner in the presidential election lost, while in the Netherlands, the liberals made an impressive comeback. But in Poland, the Noem-endorsed candidate ended up winning the presidential elections. And in the Czech Republic, the populist pro-Trump billionaire also won. While the evidence is not yet conclusive, what is clear is that appeasement has yielded little protection against Europe's own illiberal drift. By soft-pedaling its defense of democratic values abroad, the EU has made it harder to address their erosion at home.

ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE?

Europeans already know what they need to do to stop this vicious cycle. The road map for a stronger EU was laid out in 2024 with two comprehensive reports by two former Italian prime ministers that aimed to build on the successes of the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund. Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi proposed deepening the EU's single market in areas such as finance, energy, and technology and establishing a new major investment initiative through joint borrowing.

But despite the positive attention these proposals initially received, most of them remain dead letters just one year later. European leaders face electorates that are anxious about the cost of living, skeptical of further integration, and sensitive to any large joint debt initiative that might appear to transfer sovereignty or raise fiscal risks. What is required, therefore, is not another maximalist blueprint but a focused effort on what is still politically achievable. Although there is no single remedy, the union can take smaller steps on defense and trade that would reduce its dependence on the United States, and it can make changes regarding its relations with China and its energy policy that would restore its agency and bolster its autonomy.

The EU has tried in recent years to address the problem of its security architecture. It has, for instance, launched the European Defense

Fund, created a framework to coordinate joint projects, and established the European Peace Facility, which was used to finance arms deliveries to Ukraine (until Hungary blocked it). It has also developed a defense industrial policy and proposed a 2030 defense readiness plan featuring initiatives on drones, land, space, and air and missile defense. But these instruments are still mostly aspirational, and when they do deliver, the results are narrow and slow, focused mainly on defense-industrial coordination and small-scale missions.

They have also exposed the EU's Achilles' heel: its requirement for unanimity on foreign and security policy. An organization in which all 27 members have an equal say can easily be hijacked. Orban of Hungary, for instance, has vetoed aid to and accession talks with Ukraine and sanctions on Russia at least ten times. Beyond the veto, the Hungarian member of the European Commission, Oliver Varhelyi, was recently accused of being part of an alleged spy network in Brussels. While this is so far only an allegation, it raises the broader question of whether sufficient political trust still exists to discuss vital security questions.

The EU's members also have divergent sensitivities toward the United States: eastern and Nordic countries continue to see Washington as their ultimate security guarantor, while France, Germany, and parts of southern Europe favor greater autonomy. Meanwhile, EU members that are not in NATO, such as Austria, Ireland, and Malta, are hampered by constitutional neutrality laws that restrict participation in collective defense. And several members have unresolved bilateral conflicts, such as Turkey and Greece's dispute over Cyprus and the eastern Mediterranean.

Instead of devising an EU answer to Europe's defense problem, a more realistic path lies in a European "coalition of the willing." The group that has coalesced around military support for Ukraine provides a good foundation for such an alliance. Although still informal, this group—led by France and the United Kingdom and including Germany, Poland, and the Nordic and Baltic states—has begun to take shape through regular coordination meetings among defense ministers and bilateral security compacts, most notably the European-led security agreements with Kyiv signed in Berlin, London, Paris, and Warsaw last year. It has shown a commitment to Kyiv irrespective of political shifts in the United States or at home, backed by sustained arms deliveries, long-term bilateral aid pledges, and joint training and procurement programs designed to keep Ukraine's war effort viable even if U.S. support falters. Its rationale is both normative and strategic: these states

understand that European security ultimately depends on Ukraine's military defense and national survival.

The coalition has not been perfect, of course. Its focus thus far has been too abstract, centered on the hypothetical reassurance force, and it has only recently shifted its attention to sustaining Ukraine's defenses without U.S. support. As it evolves, it should focus on boosting, coordinating, and integrating conventional forces. And ultimately it should tackle the hardest question facing European defense: nuclear deterrence.

Nuclear deterrence is almost a taboo subject in Europe, since there is no good alternative to the American umbrella: the French and British nuclear deterrents are ill equipped to counter Russia's vast nuclear arsenal. But Europeanizing such a deterrent opens countless dilemmas, such as financing an expanded French-British nuclear capability, determining how decisions would be reached on its use, and providing the conventional military support needed to enable a nuclear deterrent and strike force.

The five percent NATO spending target is grist for the populist mill.

The question of how to ensure nuclear deterrence in Europe, however, is so vital that Europeans cannot continue ignoring it. Poland and France took a first step when they signed a bilateral defense treaty in May, and Polish leaders have welcomed French President Emmanuel Macron's idea to extend France's nuclear umbrella to European allies. This is a promising start, but these conversations should not take place bilaterally; ideally, they would extend to the coalition of the willing. The goal is not to replace NATO but to ensure that if Washington steps back abruptly, Europe can still stand on its feet as it faces external threats.

MAIN CHARACTER ENERGY

This same logic applies to trade. Europe's prosperity has always relied on openness, but the EU's uneven deal with Trump exposed how easily the bloc's commitment to free transatlantic trade and commerce can be exploited. Yet the EU has like-minded partners. It has already begun diversification efforts, signing and implementing trade deals with Canada, Japan, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It should deepen these trade ties but also press ahead by signing and ratifying other agreements with India, Indonesia, and the Mercosur countries in Latin America, while accelerating negotiations and reaching deals with Australia, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, and others.

Beyond bilateral deals, the EU should invest in a broader strategy to sustain the global trading system itself. The World Trade Organization has been completely paralyzed since 2019, when its Appellate Body ceased to function because the United States had blocked the appointment of new judges. The EU, however, could develop an alternative mechanism for dispute settlement and rule-making by working with members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. With more than 20 countries collectively representing over 40 percent of global GDP involved in trade with the EU, such an effort would effectively create a complement to the WTO. It would offer an outlet for cooperation between middle powers that share Europe's interest in maintaining an open, rules-based order. And it would show that Europe remains capable of shaping global economic governance rather than merely reacting to U.S. or Chinese moves on the geopolitical chessboard.

To further demonstrate this agency, Europe needs to finally develop an autonomous policy toward China. As competition between the United States and China has grown, Europe's policy toward China has become a function of Washington's. During the Biden administration, this was not considered a problem: Europe was strategically dependent on U.S. intelligence and at the mercy of U.S. export-control frameworks, but it had a reliable and predictable partner across the Atlantic. Now though, as Trump's China policy oscillates between escalation and deal-making, Europe has lost its bearings. Brussels continues to enforce tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and to complain about Beijing's backchannel support for Russia's war efforts in Ukraine. But it is unclear how the EU can stand up to China while Washington strikes bilateral deals with Beijing behind its back.

To reclaim its credibility as a global actor, the EU should pursue a dual track with China: firm and clearheaded where its members' security is at stake, but pragmatic and economically engaged elsewhere. On security, Europe won't be able to convince China to stop trading with and buying oil and gas from Russia. But Europeans could persuade Beijing to stop exporting dual-use goods—those valuable to both military and civilian purposes—to Russia. China would expect something in return, of course, including concessions that some in Europe may consider distasteful, such as a pledge by NATO to no longer formally cooperate with East Asian partners.

Europe must also confront its energy predicament. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Europeans have replaced one vulnerability—

reliance on Russian gas—with another, heavy dependence on U.S. liquefied natural gas. Although this shift was inescapable in the short term, it cannot be the basis for long-term energy security, especially given the volatile state of transatlantic relations. As a fossil-fuel-poor continent, the EU must forge a more sustainable path. At a minimum, this means broadening its network of energy partners and cultivating suppliers in the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions. But it also means doubling down on the European Green Deal, which is currently being diluted through omnibus laws backed by the center right and the far right.

The politics of the Green Deal are difficult, particularly amid a cost-of-living crisis and slow growth. But the alternative, continued fossil fuel exposure and geopolitical vulnerability, is much worse. The message should be clear: energy diversification is not just about climate change but also about sovereignty. Moreover, a credible green-industrial strategy would help create the high-technology jobs that nationalist parties claim to want to defend. It would show that decarbonization and economic strength can be mutually reinforcing in practice.

THE POWER OF NO

Taken together, these steps would not transform Europe overnight. They would, however, begin to alter the political dynamic that has trapped the continent in a cycle of deference and division. Each initiative—defense preparedness, trade diversification, a home-grown China policy, and energy transition and autonomy—would demonstrate that Europe can still act collectively and strategically in adverse conditions. Success on any one front would bolster confidence on the others and create political support for bolder steps.

The broader goal is to restore the sense that Europe's fate is still in its own hands. Strategic autonomy does not require confrontation with Washington or the abandonment of the Atlantic alliance. It requires the capacity to say no when necessary, to act independently when interests diverge, and to sustain a coherent project at home. Appeasement has been Europe's default posture for too long. It has been understandable, even rational in some cases, but ultimately it has been self-defeating and fanned the flames of a nationalist backlash.

The alternative is not grandstanding or isolation but steady, deliberate agency. If Europe can muster that, it may yet emerge from this period of transatlantic turbulence a more self-reliant, more united, and more respected actor in the world than it was before.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Fog of McNamara

An Anatomy of Failure in Vietnam

FREDRIK LOGEVALL

McNamara at War: A New History
BY PHILIP TAUBMAN AND WILLIAM TAUBMAN. Norton, 2025, 512 pp.

One morning in November 1966, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara arrived at Harvard University for what he imagined would be a day of spirited but harmonious dialogue with students and a group of professors. Voluble discontent with the Vietnam War had been growing on college campuses over the previous months, and McNamara, a principal architect of the "Americanization" of the struggle in 1965, which saw the introduction of large-scale U.S. forces, was often the target of student protests. Still, he traveled to Harvard without a security detail.

As he stepped out of Quincy House after eating lunch with undergraduates, a mob of students surrounded McNamara, blocking his exit. As the crowd grew to several hundred, he managed to get to his car. He stepped onto the hood; someone handed him a microphone, and he agreed to answer questions. But he was overwhelmed by the jeering chorus of students. His temper rising, the defense secretary declared: "I spent four of the happiest years at the Berkeley campus doing some of the same things you are doing here. But there was one important difference: I was both tougher and more courteous. . . . I was tougher then, and I'm tougher now." Protesters called him a "fascist" and a "murderer."

Despite his defiant posture, McNamara was privately troubled by the state of the war, as he made clear in a closed-door session with professors later that day. "I don't know of a single square mile of Vietnam that has been pacified," he told them. "Many military men disagree with

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me on this, but no one has yet identified that square mile. When they try, I tell them that I'm going to get in a jeep—without a battalion escort—and ride through that area. Though some of them might like to see me try, none of them will let me. They wouldn't ride through the area unescorted either."

In the months thereafter, McNamara's gloom deepened. His analysis of the situation convinced him that North Vietnam, a mostly rural society, could not be pummeled into submission by an air campaign. The ever-rising body counts, including mounting civilian deaths, distressed him. By the start of 1967, he felt sure that the enemy's morale had not broken and that political stability remained far out of reach for the U.S.-backed regime in South Vietnam. Meanwhile, the war was undermining the United States' domestic and international credibility, as allies and adversaries alike questioned Washington's judgment.

"There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go," McNamara wrote to President Lyndon Johnson in May 1967. "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

Even then, McNamara kept the faith publicly, voicing confidence that victory could be achieved. But his days in the administration were numbered. In November, Johnson, fed up with McNamara's disenchantment and his pleadings for a policy shift toward negotiations, announced that the defense secretary would depart the administration to lead the World Bank—in effect, firing him. By late February 1968, McNamara was gone. He was soon replaced by the Democratic Party insider Clark Clifford, who in short order reached the same grim perspective on the war's prospects.

The drama of the Harvard visit and the developments in the months thereafter are deftly recounted in *McNamara at War*, Philip and William Taubman's judicious and mostly convincing account of what is often called—understandably, if not altogether correctly—"McNamara's War." In the vast and growing literature on the war, in-depth studies of McNamara's role in shaping the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam are surprisingly few despite McNamara's dominance in the cabinet under Johnson and President John F. Kennedy and his seven-year tenure at the Pentagon. (He remains the nation's longest-serving secretary of defense.) For years, historians have wondered when a big book on McNamara and Vietnam would arrive. Now it has.

It's an extraordinary story in some ways—and in some ways deeply familiar. Other senior U.S. officials before McNamara and after him have felt pressure to stay on board, to keep quiet, to swallow their doubts in the hope that things will get better or that they can at least keep them from getting worse. To quit, meanwhile, would be to open themselves to charges of disloyalty or weakness or both. They could lose both their case and their honor. So they carry on, often to their later regret, not to mention the detriment of the country. If McNamara's experience offers a core lesson, it is one that is simple to grasp but has too often gone unheeded: if more high-level officials were prepared

to resign for their convictions, citizens would be assured that those who remain truly believe in what they're doing.

BEST AND BRIGHTEST

The Taubmans are excellent on their subject's formative years. Born in San Francisco in 1916 to a cold and aloof father and a striving, intense mother, McNamara demonstrated from an early age his intellectual prowess and his endless capacity for hard work. He excelled at every level of education, showing a keen analytical mind, a knack for numbers, and a singular talent for concision—classmates at Piedmont High marveled as he received A grades on papers far shorter than theirs. At the University of California, Berkeley, McNamara made Phi Beta Kappa in his sophomore year and became a member of the Order of the Golden Bear, a quasi-secret society dedicated to promoting leadership within the student body.

Following graduation in 1937, McNamara went on to Harvard Business School, blazing a path of such distinction that he was invited to join the faculty as an assistant professor of business administration soon after receiving his master's degree. During World War II, he and several other management specialists were recruited by Robert Lovett, then assistant secretary of war for air, to bring precision and efficiency to the study of air force effectiveness in bombing operations. McNamara again stood out as indefatigable and disciplined, with superior analytical intelligence and a ravenous appetite for information.

After the war, McNamara joined the Ford Motor Company. Named company controller in 1949, he had risen to group vice president in charge of all car and truck divisions by 1957. On November 9, 1960, the same day Kennedy claimed victory in a closely contested presidential election, McNamara was named president of the company, becoming the first person from outside the Ford family to hold that position since 1906.

Within weeks of his win, Kennedy tapped McNamara to head the Department of Defense. In short order, McNamara became first among equals in Kennedy's cabinet, winning plaudits for his use of systems analysis to make the Pentagon function more economically by reducing weapons redundancies among the services and better allocating resources. Appearing before congressional committees, he dazzled lawmakers with his intellect, his command of detail, and his crisp, authoritative style of presentation. Among aides, he inspired admiration and devotion, not least for his work ethic: subordinates who made a point of getting to work early would invariably find McNamara's car already in the Pentagon garage.

Senior military officers, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were less enthused. To them, the hard-hitting style of McNamara and his "whiz kid" civilian aides, many of them plucked from the Rand Corporation or Ivy League schools, smacked of arrogance, as they presumed to lecture the services on how the Pentagon should operate. "He's one of the most egotistical persons I know," a top general complained to *Time*. The result, predictably, was frequent altercations with the chiefs, who clamored for more of everything and had grown accustomed to allying with lawmakers eager to procure defense contracts for their districts or states.

Yet McNamara triumphed in many of these power struggles, and in doing so put his stamp on the office to a greater extent than any secretary of defense before him or since. In addition to his efforts to reorganize the Pentagon, he was deeply involved in high-level national security and foreign policy matters. Alongside Kennedy, McNamara determined soon after taking office that nuclear weapons were essentially useless, and he expressed horror at the apocalyptic overkill of the new Single Integrated Operational Plan for waging nuclear war, which called for the president to launch thousands of nuclear weapons in the event of an armed conflict with the Soviet Union. He pressed for a more flexible doctrine, including the adoption of a "counterforce" strategy that would target Soviet missile sites rather than cities.

At the outset of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, McNamara shocked colleagues by asserting that the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba did not appreciably shift the nuclear balance. During the harrowing days that followed, he was not always consistent in his advocacy, but he remained a reasoned and prudent voice and an early proponent of the blockade that would ultimately defuse the crisis.

MILITARY CHARADE

It was Vietnam, however, that would forever define McNamara's legacy in government. From the administration's first days in 1961, he took a leading role in shaping U.S. support for South Vietnam. That fall, with the insurgency against the Saigon government gaining strength, General Maxwell Taylor and Deputy National Security Adviser Walt

Rostow returned from a fact-finding mission to Saigon to recommend sending more U.S. military advisers and a limited number of combat troops. McNamara initially endorsed the recommendation, but when Kennedy ruled out sending ground forces, the secretary quickly adopted that position as his own—not the last time, the Taubmans tartly note, that "he seemed to tailor his views about Vietnam to align them with his president's."

This would indeed become McNamara's pattern in the years to come. And it raises a key question: How did McNamara perceive the conflict in the lead-up to the Americanization of the war in 1965? The authors depict McNamara and his fellow planners as true believers for the most part, "practically prisoners of a Cold War ideology that they felt required them to 'defend freedom' as well as American security in Vietnam." *McNamara at War* refers to policymakers' "misplaced confidence" through mid-1965 and their endorsement of the domino theory, the belief that the fall of even one Southeast Asian country to communism would cause neighboring states to follow suit. At home in the United States, meanwhile, the so-called Cold War consensus dictated that any leader deemed insufficiently vigilant regarding the global Soviet threat would pay a steep political price.

It's a common enough interpretation of official thinking from 1961 to 1965, and it is in its way exculpatory: however problematic American officials' assessment of the stakes in Vietnam might appear in hindsight, it was fully understandable, indeed overdetermined, in the context of the time. McNamara pushed back against the idea later in his life, but only to a degree. He wrote in 1999 that "leaders are supposed to lead, to resist pressures or 'forces' of this sort, to understand more fully than others the range of options and the implications of choosing such options." He and his senior colleagues, beholden to their ideology, their hubris, and their ignorance of the motivations of both North and South Vietnam, failed to do this, he lamented.

What to make of this? *McNamara at War*, which draws on a rather limited selection of secondary and documentary sources, never fully interrogates high-level thinking in the key period of decision-making from the late summer of 1963 to March 1965, which I have elsewhere called "the long 1964." (Like many authors, the Taubmans make much of the administration's high-level discussions in July 1965; by then, however, the Americanization train had already left the station. By July, when Johnson gave the appearance of agonizing over whether to escalate, the decision to launch an air war and a surge in ground troops had already been made.)

Decades later, McNamara himself singled out the importance of this 18-month stretch. In his 1995 memoir *In Retrospect*, he wrote: "We could and should have withdrawn from South Vietnam either in late 1963 . . . or in late 1964 or early 1965."

What a close analysis of the vast internal record for the period reveals is that senior American planners were reasonably aware of the dynamics of the conflict and the obstacles to U.S. military success. They were, for the most part, somber realists. Late in life, McNamara would come to adopt the mantra "If only we had known," but at the start of 1965, he in fact already

had a solid grasp of the strength of the insurgency, of the chronic political instability in South Vietnam, and of the shallow support for the war at home and abroad. He and his colleagues knew that Democratic leaders in the U.S. Senate opposed expanding the American military commitment and that key allied powers such as Canada, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom questioned the conflict's importance to Western security. Senior American officials themselves expressed private doubts on this score, suggesting that the domino theory had lost much of its grip, at least behind closed doors. Overall, the documentation gives little evidence of the hubris so often attributed to these men, first by David Halberstam in his classic work, *The Best and the Brightest*.

As early as 1962, McNamara had begun to doubt South Vietnam's prospects in combating the insurgency, even with U.S. aid. Recordings of top-level meetings from October 1963 capture him telling colleagues, "We need a way to get out of Vietnam." In early 1964, following Kennedy's assassination, he voiced broad concerns to a recalcitrant Johnson. By 1965, he was more direct. In late June, as more American ground troops arrived in South Vietnam, McNamara confessed to a senior British official that "none of us at the center of things talk about winning a victory."

Yet this same McNamara fully backed the U.S. ground-force commitment and was an architect of Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing campaign aimed at breaking Hanoi's resolve—and bucking up Saigon's—that began in March 1965 and would run for more than three years. To lawmakers and journalists that spring, he expressed full faith that the new measures were necessary and would yield success.

RESIGNED TO CONTINUE

The authors understand that one of their principal tasks is explaining the disconnect between McNamara's private skepticism and his "baldly deceptive public reports on the conflict." Looking back in his memoir, he wondered why he "did not force a probing debate about whether it would ever be possible to forge a winning military effort on a foundation of political quicksand." Why indeed? Failing that, why did he not resign? Sheer personal ambition was surely part of it—McNamara treasured his position at the pinnacle of power, and keeping it required unstinting fealty to his boss, who vowed from his first days in office that he would not lose Vietnam. This was loyalty, but of a particular and misplaced kind, the Taubmans make clear: to the commander in chief rather than to principle or to the Constitution. McNamara's rejoinder, that presidents deserve faithfulness from their aides, who are unelected and serve at the pleasure of the chief executive, was not so much wrong as it was insufficient.

Beyond loyalty, McNamara convinced himself that he could do more to restrain the Joint Chiefs and Johnson from within government than from without. As the war escalated, he pushed successfully for pauses in American bombing and for limits on the aerial assault on North Vietnam. His analysis of the data, together with his findings on his trips to the war zone, led him to a conclusion that many in the military disliked but today seems irrefutable: heavier bombing of the North would

not result in anything approximating true "victory."

Harder to credit is McNamara's belief that the window for a political settlement remained open even as the U.S. military campaign escalated. He never fully acknowledged that from Hanoi's viewpoint, any negotiated agreement would require an American withdrawal, leading in all probability to a takeover of the South by Hanoi. Nor did he reconcile his desire for compromise with Johnson's lack of interest in exploring imaginative diplomatic ways out of the war. Undersecretary of State George Ball told colleagues that McNamara was "following the traditional pattern for negotiating with a mule; just keep hitting him on the head with a two-by-four until he does what you want him to do."

MCNAMARA'S GHOST

As the Taubmans suggest, McNamara's fundamental problem was that he could never absolve himself of his role in getting the United States mired in a large-scale, stalemated war of questionable merits. More than anyone other than Johnson, he was responsible. The result was that McNamara "could never honestly establish that he had, from the beginning, doubted the chances for victory," Ball later observed. "Thus, to resign and go public could leave him with the sense that he had deceived the President and those colleagues with whom he had been working in an atmosphere of high confidence." Moreover, he would be betraying the American soldiers risking life and limb in the jungle. So he hung on, month after bloody month, in the face of his own despondency and the disenchantment among those dear to him, including his teenage son, Craig, and Jacqueline Kennedy, with whom McNamara had developed a close friendship.

Ultimately, the final judgment of Robert McNamara's role in the Vietnam War must be severe, less because he oversaw the early phases of American military intervention than because he didn't act more forthrightly on his subsequent misgivings. Quite the contrary: in the crucial months spanning 1964 and 1965, he presented to the public and Congress the image of a man resolutely confident in the mission and the likelihood of victory.

In old age, McNamara despaired that his successors seemed disinclined to heed his hard-earned advice—about the need to empathize with one's opponent and to question one's assumptions; about the limits of military technology and U.S. geopolitical power; about the dangers of nuclear escalation. The Taubmans, too, feel this regret. "The lessons he derived from Vietnam," they write sympathetically, "produced insights that, had they been taken into account by his successors, could have helped the United States avoid disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan. The danger that unwavering loyalty to presidents on national security matters can lead to calamity should prove instructive to current and future commanders in chief."

No doubt McNamara was, as the authors put it, a "fatally flawed figure" to deliver this message. But it matters that he delivered it. However belatedly and imperfectly, he did something that few public figures ever bring themselves to do: grapple with their misdeeds and try to atone for them. McNamara made the effort, reaching, ultimately, the only judgment he could: "We were wrong, terribly wrong."

REVIEW ESSAY

The Depopulation Panic

What Demographic Decline Really Means for the World

JENNIFER D. SCIUBBA

After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People
BY DEAN SPEARS AND MICHAEL GERUSO. Simon & Schuster, 2025, 320 pp.

In 1980, the economist Julian Simon took to the pages of *Social Science Quarterly* to place a bet against his intellectual rival, the biologist Paul Ehrlich. *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller, had argued that the staggering growth of the human species threatened to jeopardize life on Earth. Simon insisted that, contrary to Ehrlich's predictions, humanity would not self-destruct by overusing the planet's resources. Instead, Simon believed that humans would innovate their way out of scarcity. Human ingenuity, Simon wrote, was "the ultimate resource."

Their wager was specifically about the changes in the prices of a suite of commodities over a ten-year period, but it represented much more. The infamous bet was a battle between two larger camps: the catastrophists, who thought that humans were breeding themselves into extinction, and the cornucopians, who believed markets and new technologies would work together to lower prices no matter how big the population became. Ehrlich ultimately lost that bet at a time when global economic conditions favored Simon's optimistic view of the functioning of markets. Countries also avoided catastrophe as the soaring growth of the world's population in the twentieth century did not lead to mass famine but to growing prosperity and rising standards of living.

Nearly half a century later, this debate persists in a new form. Many environmentalists still share Ehrlich's original concern and worry that population growth and consumption continue to vastly outpace the planet's ability to cope with unrelenting extraction and pollution.

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The challenge to that view, however, comes from a different place today. The problem, a new kind of catastrophist insists, is not too many people but too few. Although the last century saw an astounding six billion people added to the total world population, today two out of three people live in countries that have fertility rates below the replacement level—the rate of births per woman required to sustain natural population growth. The average number of children born per woman has been falling so rapidly that the UN Population Division estimates that 63 countries or territories have already hit their peak population size. Although the overall human population may eventually rise to around ten billion by about 2060 or 2080 (according to various estimates), it will fall thereafter—and precipitously, with each generation smaller than the last.

Simon's cornucopian vision, with all its faith in ingenuity, was fueled by a seemingly endless supply of new people, bringing fresh minds and innovative ideas. Although they share much of Simon's worldview, the economists Dean Spears and Michael Geruso have seen their faith eroded by steep plunges in fertility rates around the world. In *After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People*, they show that the world is at a critical juncture: down one path, humanity could experience a stunning and stunting depopulation; alternatively, societies could find a way to stabilize population levels by encouraging people to have more children. Only this latter route will allow societies to maintain and strengthen the sources of their flourishing.

At a time when much pronatalist rhetoric veers into xenophobia and misogyny, Spears and Geruso offer a welcome intervention. They acknowledge the reality of climate change and the centrality of individual rights even as they stress that depopulation is a real problem and a threat to human well-being. They hold these seemingly opposed thoughts side by side. As they write: "It would be *better* if the world did not depopulate. Nobody should be *forced* or *required* to have a baby (or not to have a baby)." (italics in the original)

The authors privilege a moral argument over an economic one, insisting that a world with more people is in and of itself a better one. But that emphasis provides only a weak guide for action. Simon argued decades ago for continued population growth because he thought such growth meant that more human beings could lead productive and meaningful lives. Spears and Geruso concur. But instead of rehashing that utilitarian reasoning, they could have provided a map to guide societies down what they consider the better path of population stabilization, which would require people to have more babies than they are having now.

That inability to offer a more concrete way forward may stem from the broad scale of the authors' vision. They choose to meet environmentalists at the planetary level, worrying about the carrying capacity of Earth. Spears and Geruso insist that depopulation is an issue relevant not just to particular countries or cultures but to all. That focus on humanity as a whole, however, ends up erasing borders, differences, nuances, and contexts, and leaves readers who are convinced by their argument that depopulation is bad without an actionable research and policy agenda.

But these issues are not productively discussed at the planetary level because there's no planetary policymaking. People may be persuaded that a stable world population is in their rational self-interest. But it is an altogether different proposition for people to decide that it is in their rational self-interest to produce children themselves. That tension is hard to resolve, but resolving it is essential. Spears and Geruso are wrong when they write, "The question of *what to do*, *together* about worldwide depopulation is not the question of choosing *your* family size." (italics in the original) That can't be, because such individual choices—in the aggregate—inevitably drive global population trends. In fact, the authors contradict themselves when they say that "we cannot agree that whatever each individual chooses, given the world as it is, must be the first and last word on what would make for a better future."

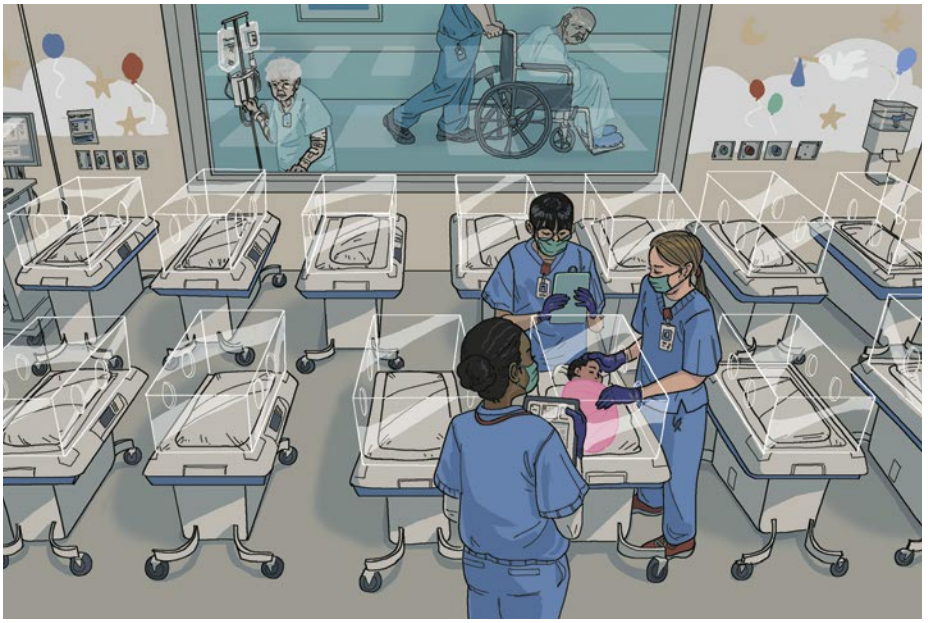
Today's highly charged conversations about low fertility need to be clearer about how to move from the aggregate and conceptual to the individual and practical, particularly when it comes to how countries make it easier for people to choose larger families. The authors' struggle mirrors a broader challenge that leaders now face. Policymakers who want to avoid freedom-limiting measures in boosting fertility rates must develop a framework that affirms both individual autonomy and the societal value of family life. Otherwise, they will leave natalist, "pro-family" agendas to be defined disproportionately by those who are willing to subordinate the rights of individuals to the imperative of producing more babies.

THE CASE FOR PEOPLE

When it comes to depopulation, the alarm bells are ringing around the world. In the United States, the tech tycoon Elon Musk and U.S. Vice President JD Vance, among other high-profile figures, have warned that declining birthrates could spell catastrophe. Such concerns tend to be either economic in focus (forecasting stark drops in growth and productivity as populations age and shrink) or nativist (fearing that national identities will erode as populations dwindle and countries seek immigrants to make up for shrinking workforces).

Although they are economists, Spears and Geruso strike a more philosophical chord. They place ethics at the center of the book: "Does it matter, is it better," they ask, "if more good lives get to be lived, rather than fewer?" They fear the impending depopulation and want societies to push toward the stabilization of human populations. A stable population, they argue, would give humanity the best possible chance at a thriving future.

The authors have clearly considered most of the arguments against their natalist positions, and much of the book is devoted to debunking common objections to the call for more babies. For example, unlike catastrophists on the political right, Spears and Geruso recognize the urgency of climate change and are willing to engage with the argument made by some environmentalists that a declining population may be a boon to the planet. They show how past environmental crises, such as ozone layer depletion and acid rain, have dissipated even as populations have risen. Since 2013, for instance, China has addressed its



awful air pollution problem even as its population has grown.

Climate change is a larger systemic crisis than narrower problems such as acid rain and unhealthy air, but the authors argue that the choices of individuals and the policies of governments and businesses can help reduce emissions even as people around the world seek higher material living standards. Moreover, they insist, depopulation would hardly be a panacea for the environment; in fact, it might make things worse by slashing the human resources—the sharp minds—societies need for the cleanup. They acknowledge that, hypothetically, halving the human population would result in an immediate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, but they rightly dismiss that notion as unproductive because it is neither feasible nor preferable. In fact, with fertility rates already below replacement level in so many places, simply reducing the number of future babies is not going to solve climate change. Depopulation is coming, but it won't arrive in time to heal the environment.

More important, a future with fewer people would be fundamentally poorer in the broadest sense. In making the case for more people, Spears and Geruso, as Simon before them, draw on the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) to argue that if the ultimate good is the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, then the more humans there are, the more happiness there will be in the world. In their view, population growth—and with it more people, minds, and ideas—fuels progress, innovation, and ultimately well-being, propelling inventions from the plow to ChatGPT. According to their logic, depopulation would be inimical to human flourishing and progress in part because it makes innovation less likely.

The book promises that an abundant future is possible—a savvy framing, because some environmentalists often

JOHN LEE

claim that the path to well-being runs through abstemiousness, a message that does not tend to resonate with broad swaths of society. Larger populations lead to prosperity because fixed costs go down when they can be spread across more people, the economic consequence of greater scale. Recognizing the human drive to consume, Spears and Geruso show that when people want what others also want—whether ramen or a better bicycle—those shared desires help incentivize the faster and cheaper production of such goods. So, they say, if people want nice things now and even nicer ones in the future, they should have children to ensure the future advantages of scale.

A MAP TO NOWHERE

Spears and Geruso effectively describe the problem of depopulation, but they do not offer a grand theory of why people are having fewer children—a state of affairs attributed variously to rising education levels, the ubiquity of smartphones, the decline of religion, and other social and material causes. Instead, they admit that nobody knows how to reverse the crash in fertility rates. But for populations to stabilize, they acknowledge, people will have to produce more children than current trends suggest they are willing to.

Some depopulation alarmists, especially on the right, blame the fertility crash on the social changes brought on by feminism and the liberal emphasis on individual fulfillment. In this view, the only way to boost birth rates is to return to patriarchal structures, in which women focus on child-rearing and homemaking while men act as their families' sole breadwinners. That is anathema to

Spears and Geruso. Unlike many participants in this conversation, they believe in the importance of ensuring individual rights as well as the need to boost fertility rates. Their intervention marks a refreshing break from the vitriol and negativity permeating natalist discourse today. They recognize the complexity of the problem, that having children is at once a profoundly personal choice and one with larger societal consequences.

But Spears and Geruso miss the opportunity to guide those they convince toward solutions that would preserve rights while supporting families. With perhaps too much humility and too little curiosity, they insist that nobody yet knows how to stabilize the world population but that it would be worth trying to reach that goal. That's fine, but scholars can ask better questions and set a solid research agenda that would help push societies toward stabilization.

Here are just a few examples of what such an agenda could include. Researchers know that the expense of raising a family is a downward pressure on fertility rates, so they should ask why housing costs have skyrocketed as a proportion of income in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Regulations for childcare, particularly in the United States, could be responsible for an undersupply of daycare facilities. The adoption of new norms for both maternity and paternity leave remains fitful, so researchers could probe how work cultures disincentivize taking leave—and therefore having children. The policies that may help raise birthrates should not, in the short term at least, be evaluated purely in terms of their effect on fertility levels but in the ways they, for instance, ease financial burdens for families, improve educational and health outcomes, and make it easier for people to reconcile the demands of work and family.

Spears and Geruso concede that dismal attitudes about the present and the future deter some people from wanting to have children. Modern life, with its ceaseless churn and relentless pace, may make people less likely to pursue parenthood. If that's the case, then it's conceivable that what needs to be addressed is actually the societal imperative for constant growth and innovation, which can lead to atomization, competition, and exhaustion.

At the core of the fertility debate is a set of fundamental questions: Does the state have the right to interfere in the bedroom? Do citizens have an obligation to reproduce for the greater good? And is it ever ethical to incentivize or discourage births in the pursuit of an "ideal population"? *After the Spike* skirts these questions, even as the authors clearly recognize that their logic could be weaponized to justify all sorts of practices, including those that roll back individual rights by restricting access to contraception or by limiting education about reproduction and childbirth.

There's a cautionary tale in the book, one that is personal to Geruso. As he tells it, the restrictive abortion laws in Texas discouraged him and his wife from continuing to try for a baby after a miscarriage because they were not confident that she could get the health care she would need if something went wrong. This jarring anecdote encodes the dilemma the authors can't quite overcome.

Dissecting private reproductive choices through a collective lens, as the authors do, comes with a high risk of

moralizing fertility. Rather than treating fertility as a demographic fact or reproduction as a private choice, it becomes a virtuous act, with "good" citizens being those who exercise their responsibility to reproduce in a manner beneficial for the state. Spears and Geruso do not take seriously enough how their argument may be weaponized by those who seek policy change, but they should. Unless societies can chart a path between recognizing human freedom and acknowledging the peril of depopulation, the conversation about low fertility will be, at best, unproductive and, at worst, actively dangerous for individual rights.

These are not just theoretical exercises; they are the subject of policies such as China's drive to encourage women to marry and have children after decades of the imposition of its one-child policy and, similarly in the United States, the proposals that U.S. lawmakers are entertaining about "birth bonuses," or direct cash payments to parents who have children. At the state level in the United States, policies regarding reproduction are indeed shaping people's lives; around 121 million Americans—about 35 percent of the population—reside in states where access to contraceptives is actively restricted, according to research by the Population Reference Bureau.

THE COSTS OF PANIC

The physicist John Holdren, one of Ehrlich's close friends and collaborators, at one point joined the bet against Simon, insisting that human societies were pushing dangerously close to their natural bounds. But even he acknowledged, "If I'm wrong, people will still be better fed, better housed, and happier." In other words, fervor about population control and the fear of ecological limits, however misplaced, can spur worthwhile action. For the most part, in the wake of the ferocious overpopulation panic in the 1960s and 1970s, the world has become better off in a number of ways. In the interest of lowering fertility rates, policymakers and funders rallied to provide better access to reproductive health and family planning, which empowered women around the world to pursue education and employment.

And yet many policies aimed at curbing population growth were destructive. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went a good deal further in the 1970s, forcibly sterilizing some women and men. In Peru, under President Alberto Fujimori, some 300,000 women were forcibly sterilized in the 1990s. The combination of the preference for sons in Chinese culture and the one-child mandate has produced severe distortions in the country's ratio of men to women that will be evident even decades from now.

Just like its twentieth-century inverse, the depopulation panic could produce decidedly regressive outcomes. Of course, some leaders could try to create incentives for child-rearing that make housing more affordable, encourage greater gender equality, and better support families. But some governments could work to undo access to contraception, dismantle what little care infrastructure exists, and push women out of the workforce and into the home. Alarmism could breed alarming policies. As a result, it matters intensely how policymakers and researchers frame questions about low fertility rates and depopulation. They are not witnesses to history, but participants in it. How they proceed is crucial.

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

On Liberalism: In Defense of Freedom
BY CASS R. SUNSTEIN. MIT Press, 2025, 208 pp.

The Collapse of Global Liberalism: And the Emergence of the Post Liberal World Order
BY PHILIP PILKINGTON. Polity, 2025, 240 pp.

Two books offer starkly different views of the future of liberalism. Sunstein provides a full-throated defense of liberalism, which he defines broadly as the Enlightenment commitments to human freedom, pluralism, fairness, representative government, and the rule of law. In Sunstein's telling, the liberal tradition is a "big tent" in which a wide array of thinkers and movements have sought to imagine and build political institutions that secure human rights and protections in an age of capitalism, popular sovereignty, and industrial modernity. The contrasting ideas of the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, a progressive social reformer, and the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, an advocate of traditional institutions and market society, illuminate the breadth of and tensions within the liberal tradition. Sunstein finds U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms—freedom from fear and want and freedom of speech and religion—the most eloquent and powerful ideas in the modern liberal imagination. What liberals of all varieties share is a commitment to political innovation and experimentation. In the ongoing ideological debates between liberalism and its critics, Sunstein masterfully stakes out and defends the tradition's high ground, a vision of liberal society equipped with a living constitution that protects the rights and dignity of individuals and the free play of ideas.

By contrast, Pilkington, a fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, relentlessly attacks liberalism on all fronts. His book joins a chorus of critics who argue that late-twentieth-century neoliberalism unleashed the forces of market globalization and hypercapitalism that in turn undermined stable societies anchored in family, religion, and national solidarity. In Pilkington's conjuring, liberalism was a potent ideology that arose against monarchy and aristocracy and sought to rationalize social and political rela-

tionships. In the process, it cut people loose from social and religious hierarchies that had long provided stability and meaning. Pilkington insists that individuals are simply not constituted to cope in the world produced by liberal modernity. The world is now witnessing the collapse of "global liberalism," which he claims has a "quasi-imperial structure" and seeks the liquidation of traditional society through the pursuit of individual freedom. He blames this collapse on liberal society itself, which, by undermining the traditional social fabric of pre-liberal society, sowed the seeds of its own destruction. Most of the book is a provocative and fast-paced chronicle of the damage that liberalism has supposedly wreaked on countries' economic, social, political, and psychological foundations. What comes after the liberal era remains unclear.

Peacemaker: U Thant and the Forgotten Quest for a Just World
BY THANT MYINT-U. Norton, 2025, 384 pp.

U Thant, a Burmese diplomat, was the first non-European UN secretary-general, leading the body during the tumultuous 1960s. Written by his grandson, this inspiring and beautifully crafted book follows Thant's determined efforts across the decade to defuse crises and seek common ground in a world increasingly torn apart by Cold War conflicts, civil wars and military interventions, and postcolonial struggles for independence. Among many other achievements, Thant played a critical but underappreciated role in ending the Cuban missile crisis, working directly as an intermediary between Havana, Moscow, and Washington, finding diplomatic space for compromise, and even going to Cuba to confirm that missile launchpads were being disassembled. His gravitas as a peacemaker owed much to his background as a Buddhist from a small town in Burma and an organizer of the groundbreaking 1955 Bandung Conference, which brought the countries of Africa and Asia together to speak for the often marginalized bulk of humanity. Thant's accomplishments are all the more impressive because the position of secretary-general carries no real power—except for the moral authority to speak for the world as a whole.

Kenneth Waltz: An Intellectual Biography
BY PAUL R. VIOTTI. Columbia University Press, 2024, 280 pp.

In this warmly engaging intellectual biography, Viotti traces the life and ideas

We are pleased to announce that ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY is starting in this issue as our new regular reviewer of books on Africa. Mampilly is the Marxe Endowed Chair of International Affairs at the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College and is an affiliate faculty member at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. He is a co-author of *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change.* We look forward to the contributions he will make to the magazine.

of Kenneth Waltz, a preeminent figure in post–World War II international relations scholarship. Waltz's landmark 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics*, recast realist ideas about world politics in modern theoretical terms, launching decades of research and vibrant debates that continue today. Waltz's central claim is that the "anarchic" structure of interstate relations shapes the terms of war and peace, placing radical limits on global cooperation. Viotti draws on extensive interviews with Waltz and many of his students to tell the story of Waltz's journey from modest Midwestern roots to graduate study at Columbia University and decades of teaching at Berkeley. In explaining why Waltz has been so influential, Viotti argues that he inspired both disciples and critics: his tough-minded structuralism captured the imagination of several generations of graduate students, but he also forced scholars who saw the world differently to offer more precise critiques and theories of their own. Whether one is persuaded by his ideas or not, Waltz will long be admired for encouraging scholars to ask the big questions.

Polarization and International Politics: How Extreme Partisanship Threatens Global Stability
BY RACHEL MYRICK. Princeton University Press, 2025, 376 pp.

Democracies have long enjoyed what scholars call a "cooperation advantage" over nondemocracies. Liberal states tend to be more stable and dependable partners, better able to convey credible information and keep commitments. But as Myrick reports in this important new study, the rise of extreme polarization in many contemporary Western democracies, most notably in the United States, has eroded this advantage. In highly polarized democracies, partisan conflicts become sharply ideological, spill across policy domains, and turn party and elite competition into zero-sum contests for survival. In such political systems, democracies lose their advantages in foreign affairs. Democracies no longer appear stable as their policies become more volatile and unpredictable; they no longer seem credible as voters and policy elites struggle to discipline leaders; and they are no longer reliable as allies and adversaries suspect that policies could soon change after the next election cycle. Myrick marshals an impressive array of empirical data to document patterns of extreme polarization within democracies and its impact on international relations. She makes clear that as long as deep divisions persist in the United States, the country's foreign policy will suffer.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

China: Quo Vadis? Economic Transformation and Future Challenges
BY HELMUT WAGNER. Springer, 2025, 219 pp.

Wagner provides a compact overview of the development of the Chinese economy since the inauguration of reforms in 1978. Central to his anal-

ysis is the proposition that Chinese policymakers face a "trilemma." They have three goals—promoting economic growth, maintaining public order and social stability, and preserving one-party rule—but can achieve only two simultaneously. The author argues that Chinese leaders will not choose to sacrifice either public order or one-party control, which means that they may undercut economic growth when they clamp down on entrepreneurship and competition for political reasons. As positive routes forward, Wagner points to the country's "dual circulation" strategy, which seeks to boost domestic consumption alongside exports, and state-directed industrial policy geared toward promoting high-tech innovation and self-sufficiency. He concludes, somewhat hopefully, that these efforts may allow China to solve its trilemma.

The Four Talent Giants: National Strategies for Human Resource Development Across Japan, Australia, China, and India
BY GI-WOOK SHIN. Stanford University Press, 2025, 344 pp.

Scholars have offered multiple hypotheses, mostly emphasizing culture, history, and institutions, to explain the economic rise of countries in Asia. Shin focuses on human capital, analyzing the different ways Asian economies have developed their workforces. The four countries whose economies he focuses on—Australia, China, India, and Japan—have taken distinctive approaches to acquiring what he calls "talent portfolios." Japan nurtured homegrown talent, while Australia attracted skilled immigrants. China sent students abroad, while India relied on its foreign diaspora and its advanced institutes of technology to train workers and impart needed skills. Although the approaches differ, each country successfully developed scientific, technical, and managerial talent in the quest for economic growth. Shin's focus on talent competition is especially timely given the rapid increase in the number of students in China studying STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and math—and political attacks on higher education in the United States. Together, these trends raise questions about the ability of the United States to keep pace with China.

Bankers' Trust: How Social Relations Avert Global Financial Collapse
BY ADITI SAHASRABUDDHE. Cornell University Press, 2025, 246 pp.

Cooperation among central banks has been critical for stemming global financial instability. In the global financial crisis in 2007–8 and the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the U.S. Federal Reserve extended international credits, known as dollar swap lines, to foreign central banks that needed them for stabilizing intervention in financial markets. Most accounts ascribe these episodes of central bank cooperation to geopolitical and national self-interest, but Sahasrabuddhe emphasizes the social relations of central bankers themselves. Central bankers often have common social and educational backgrounds, and they attend the same international meetings. In the 1920s, the governors of the Bank of England

and the New York Federal Reserve even vacationed together. Ben Bernanke and Mervyn King, who headed the U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of England, respectively, during the global financial crisis, had shared adjacent offices as visiting professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Sahasrabuddhe argues that these social relations explain the successes and failures of central bank cooperation not only in recent crises but also after World War I, during the Great Depression, and under the Bretton Woods monetary system of the 1950s and 1960s.

Money in Crisis: The Return of Instability and the Myth of Digital Cash
BY IGNAZIO ANGELONI AND DANIEL GROS. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 380 pp.

This book is a deeply scholarly, policy-relevant history of money, from the advent of coinage, paper currency, and bank money in ancient, medieval, and early modern times to the stablecoins and central bank digital currencies of today and tomorrow. The authors show how the use of money has responded to changing economic, political, and technological circumstances. They emphasize the intrinsic fragility of monetary systems, which rest on collective confidence and require careful management. The authors are therefore skeptical that digital currencies will transform the global monetary landscape. Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin are too volatile to serve as money, stablecoins pegged to the U.S. dollar are dangerously fragile, and central bank digital currencies have few advantages over prevailing monetary instruments. The authors conclude that governments should invest in improving existing payment mechanisms and clearly demarcating the responsibilities of private payment providers, regulators, and central banks rather than pursuing new digital products.

The Great Curse: Land Concentration in History and in Development
BY ALBERT BERRY. Oxford University Press, 2024, 504 pp.

Berry gathers in one place a lifetime of work on land reform and economic development. The concentration of land holdings in the hands of the few, he argues, depresses agricultural productivity, aggravates income inequality, and heightens precarity and political instability. The paradox is why, if reform that breaks up large estates and redistributes land to small farmers has pronounced advantages for the economy as a whole, it has so rarely been achieved. Only Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and, depending on the period, China, have managed to succeed in land reform. Berry argues that this failure owes to the poor implementation of reform policies, political resistance by large landowners, and the corruption and incompetence of officials. In the future, a pressing challenge will be how to raise agricultural productivity in sub-Saharan Africa to feed its growing population. Land distribution is relatively egalitarian there compared with other regions—South Africa notwithstanding—which is a result of unique postcolonial circumstances.

The challenge is to prevent land concentration from rising. The continent should draw lessons from countries that have successfully used land reform, alongside new technology and sustainable farming methods, to raise agricultural productivity.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

Military Theory and the Conduct of War
BY AZAR GAT. Oxford University Press, 2025, 176 pp.

In this short, stimulating, and at times provocative book, Gat, a political scientist, addresses some of the biggest themes in military theory with both authority and elegance. He probes an important set of questions that make up the core of military theory, including whether there are truly timeless definitions of war, strategy, and tactics; what the proper relationship is between military means and political ends; what counts as a victory; and how offense can be distinguished from defense. He looks at how military doctrine puts theories about war into practice. Gat finds a variety of answers to these questions, but his overarching thesis is that there are no permanent answers, especially as the boundaries between war and peace blur and as new ways of fighting emerge. Concepts must adapt to the times. In fact, Gat is sometimes skeptical of military theory altogether. In his conclusion, Gat reminds readers that his doubt was shared by celebrated commanders, including U.S. president and army general Ulysses S. Grant. "The art of war is simple enough," Grant once declared. "Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on."

Sword Beach: D-Day Baptism by Fire
BY MAX HASTINGS. Norton, 2025, 400 pp.

Wolfpack: Inside Hitler's U-Boat War
BY ROGER MOORHOUSE. Basic Books, 2025, 480 pp.

Running Deep: Bravery, Survival, and the True Story of the Deadliest Submarine in World War II
BY TOM CLAVIN. St. Martin's Press, 2025, 352 pp.

The Maginot Line: A New History
BY KEVIN PASSMORE. Yale University Press, 2025, 512 pp.

Eighty years after the end of World War II, scholars and writers are still finding ways to shed new light on the conflict. Four recent books uncover fresh insights.

Telling the story of the battle for Sword Beach, one of five landing sites the Allied powers used to invade Normandy in 1944, Hastings explains that his interest is with "relatively little people" rather than with "command personalities." After describing the preparations for the attack, when boredom was soldiers' main complaint,

Hastings puts the day's fighting under a microscope. He examines the experiences of troops who arrived by glider early in the morning and of the seasick soldiers who directly stormed the beach. Many of these fighters were killed before they even had a chance to fire a shot. Those who landed were soon caught up in the excitement and chaos of battle. Fear gave way to relief among the survivors, although the heaviest fighting was yet to come. To tell their stories, Hastings combines vignettes and quotes. This style can make it harder to follow the battle's overall trajectory, but it admirably captures the tumult of war.

Moorhouse follows a similar approach in his enthralling and illuminating history of German U-boats in the battle for the Atlantic. Operating in packs, Germany's submarines successfully sank countless Allied merchant vessels, nearly crippling the supply chains that sustained the United Kingdom. Eventually, the battle tipped against the Nazis. That was, in part, thanks to the Allies' development of better intelligence and tactics. But as Moorhouse shows, it was also because of problems with Germany's U-boat fleet. The Germans never had the capacity to build enough submarines. The vessels themselves were cramped, humid, smelly, and, worst of all, prone to malfunction: their torpedoes were often faulty. As improved Allied defenses led to more frequent sinkings of U-boats, talented crews gave way to overwhelmed rookies. By the end of the war, a staggering 75 percent of all German submariners had been killed.

Life for American submariners in World War II was not quite so bleak. But their casualty rate was still six times higher than that of crews on U.S. surface ships. In his gripping book, Clavin uses the career of the most successful American submarine, the USS *Tang*, and the experiences of its captain, Richard O'Kane, to explore the challenges these sailors faced. Clavin's writing draws the reader into the tension and drama of life on the *Tang*, where the crew was always looking out for both potential targets and enemy depth charges. He explains the bold tactics that made the *Tang* so effective, sinking 33 Japanese ships. But at the end of a successful patrol, in which it destroyed almost a whole convoy, the submarine was sunk by one of its own torpedoes, when it malfunctioned and fired backward. O'Kane was one of nine survivors, all picked up by Japanese sailors, and his experience as a prisoner of war was harrowing. By the time of his liberation, he weighed barely 90 pounds and was close to death.

Passmore's magisterial, revisionist account of the Maginot Line—the network of French fortifications built in the 1920s and 1930s to stop a German invasion—challenges the conventional understanding of its role in World War II. He insists that the Maginot Line was not responsible for France's defeat. According to the traditional view, the line fixed the country's defenses along its border with Germany and Italy, leaving France unable to defend itself when the Germans circumvented the fortifications and invaded through Belgium. But Passmore argues that the Maginot Line was never meant to be France's only defense; the French always intended

to fight with their own maneuverable units. These were moved into the Netherlands as the Germans moved into Belgium, only to get cut off. The Maginot Line had complicated German plans, closing off obvious invasion routes. Passmore insists that the French defeat was not inevitable. Its origins lay in a series of early command mistakes from which the army was unable to recover.

East Asia

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

The Highest Exam: How the Gaokao Shapes China
BY RUIXUE JIA AND HONGBIN LI WITH CLAIRE COUSINEAU. Harvard University Press, 2025, 256 pp.

In this fascinating study, the economists Jia and Li share their personal journeys as they explore how the *gaokao*—China's infamous multiday, nationwide admissions test that determines where a student goes to college—reinforces political and economic disparities in Chinese society. Graduation from one of the top 100 Chinese universities confers lifelong financial and professional benefits. But there are only enough spots at these universities for 500,000 of the more than ten million high school students who sit for the exam each year. The test overwhelmingly privileges students from wealthier urban areas, who have disproportionate access to better-resourced high schools and outside tutoring. Moreover, top universities have higher admissions quotas for students from wealthier provinces. Fudan University, one of China's most prestigious, takes more than half of its students from Shanghai, where it is located, even though the city is home to just two percent of the country's population. Only a small number of students who have taken the exam—Jia and Li among them—are blessed with both the extraordinary talent and the drive needed to overcome the structural inequalities that the admissions system perpetuates.

Okinawa: Great Power Competition and the Keystone of the Pacific
BY RA MASON. Agenda Publishing, 2025, 176 pp.

This thought-provoking book dives deep into the complex politics of the Okinawa Islands, a Japanese possession on the frontlines of one of the world's geostrategic hotspots. Mason explores internal Japanese debates about the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, such as how to weigh the economic benefits of a military base against its environmental impacts, and about the island chain's role in larger regional security dynamics. He makes the case that the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese alliance and the presence of U.S. bases in Okinawa—which occupy almost 15 percent of the main island—endanger Okinawa's security by significantly increasing the likelihood that the islands will become a flash point in a potential conflict with China. Although Okinawa is only a Japanese prefecture, Mason concludes that Okinawa should try to leverage its antimilitarist tradition and its role as a

regional trading hub to embrace neutrality and position itself as a bridge for trade and investment between China and Japan, even potentially joining China's Belt and Road Initiative. China skeptics will question Mason's benign view of Beijing's intentions, but his arguments merit serious consideration.

China in Iraq After the War: From Underdog to Unassailable
BY SHIRZAD AZAD. Bloomsbury, 2025, 216 pp.

Azad offers a compelling analysis of how China used the turmoil that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq to become the country's dominant economic partner. Chinese leaders spent decades building personal ties with Iraqi leaders; provided infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, despite the security dangers that came with working in Iraq; structured initial deals on generous terms in the hope of securing larger deals down the road; operated outside nascent legal boundaries by going along with corrupt bureaucratic practices; and offered education and training to Iraqis and technology transfers to Iraqi firms. As U.S. involvement in Iraq foundered in the years following the invasion, China also fanned the flames of anti-Americanism, portraying the United States as an unreliable and feckless partner. By the early 2020s, China had become Iraq's top trading partner and investor. But not everything in the relationship has gone smoothly. Azad highlights the mass protests that broke out over the lack of transparency and accountability in the so-called oil-for-reconstruction deal between China and Iraq in 2019. The deal, which bartered Iraqi crude oil for Chinese companies undertaking local construction projects, stalled in 2022, raising questions about China's future role in the country.

The Vietnam People's Army: From People's Warfare to Military Modernization?
BY ZACHARY ABUZA. Lynne Rienner, 2025, 323 pp.

Abuza has produced a master class on Vietnam's military, offering important insights into the considerations that are shaping the role and readiness of the Vietnamese army. Both within the military and within Vietnamese society, there is ongoing debate as to whether the army's primary purpose is to safeguard the rule of the communist regime or to defeat outside powers. Soldiers and political commissars in the army distrust one another, and the ability of wealthy and educated urbanites to buy their way out of compulsory military service has undermined the legitimacy of the armed forces and damaged the military's public image. Abuza concludes that the increasing cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnamese militaries will remain limited: despite significant popular concern in Vietnam over China's aggression in the South China Sea and its growing presence in neighboring Cambodia and Laos, the ruling Communist Party will not directly challenge China's actions because of its close political and economic ties to Beijing. Vietnamese leaders worry that anti-Chinese protests could morph into domestic opposition, especially if the Vietnamese public

believes that its leaders have caved to Chinese demands. But ultimately, ensuring its own political viability is the Vietnamese Communist Party's number one security objective.

South Asia

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

Running Behind Lakshmi: The Search for Wealth in India's Stock Market
BY ADIL RUSTOMJEE. John Murray India, 2025, 880 pp.

India is home to one of the largest stock markets in the world: the Bombay Stock Exchange, which has a market capitalization of roughly $5 trillion. Rustomjee's monumental book is the first-ever analytical history of the Bombay exchange and India's other stock markets. Rustomjee moves from their modest nineteenth-century origins, through their spectacular rise in the 1990s, and on to their even higher valuation today. He argues that India's economic liberalization, in 1991, prompted the initial, stratospheric growth. Later reforms and new technologies expanded the market further by making it easier for ordinary people to invest. Rustomjee's book is a master class in political economy, tracing how key actors—such as the Reserve Bank of India (the country's central bank), the Securities and Exchange Board, corporations, foreign institutional investors, and regular traders—created a stock market whose growth is now independent of the wider Indian economy. Indian investment behavior, Rustomjee argues, is a living refutation of the efficient market hypothesis, or the idea that stock prices faithfully reflect all available information about the underlying asset. He shows, for example, how periodic scams have not dented the markets' reach and resilience. In fact, they have increased their valuations.

Waning Crescent: The Rise and Fall of Global Islam
BY FAISAL DEVJI. Yale University Press, 2025, 280 pp.

In this brilliant book, Devji argues that in the late nineteenth century, Islam ceased to be primarily a religious movement concerned with scripture or the divine. Instead, it transformed into an ideological system—like capitalism or communism. Questions about God were sidelined. The Prophet Muhammad was refashioned not as the bearer of revelation but as an agent of history. But at the same time, Muslims came to see their faith as a victim, under permanent siege. This meant adherents turned away from theology and instead focused on disparate ideological and political threats. Devji argues that Islam's transformation explains the decisions of many Muslim states and political movements. He argues, for example, that this transformation is why some Islamic governments punish blasphemy and why militants such as al-Qaeda wage violent jihad. He concludes that the project of imagining Islam as an ideological actor has become internally incoherent and lost popular support. But alternative political movements—such as those based on nationalism, class, or populism—

do not yet command widespread backing. The result is a profound vacuum in the politics of the Islamic world.

The Cell and the Soul: A Prison Memoir
BY ANAND TELTUMBDE. Bloomsbury India, 2025, 256 pp.

Teltumbde is one of India's most important intellectuals. He has done pioneering work on how caste is shaped by class and on the social movements of the Dalits, the lowest caste. Teltumbde is himself a Dalit, and his own research and activism are so important that in 2019, the government arrested him after baselessly alleging that he had helped incite a riot. This book is a poignant memoir of the 31 months Teltumbde spent in prison (he is now out on bail), and it offers a rare glimpse into how India uses the law to silence dissent or police the poor rather than to protect rights. He insightfully portrays prison as a microcosm of India's social contradictions, where the politics of caste, class, and corruption continue to play out—and where state oppression is tempered with individual acts of humanity. But the book is also a deeply personal tale, an honest if tragic account of what happens when an intellectual is forced to confront injustice firsthand. Above all, it stands as a moving reminder of what quiet dignity, courage, and intellectual clarity look like under authoritarian rule.

Assembling India's Constitution: A New Democratic History
BY ROHIT DE AND ORNIT SHANI. Penguin, 2025, 400 pp.

This remarkable book should transform the common understanding of India's constitution. De and Shani, both historians, upend the narrative that the country's foundational document was an elite, lawyerly project devised by an aloof Constituent Assembly. Drawing on an unused but extraordinary archive of petitions, resolutions, and records from civic associations, they show that the constitution was instead shaped by debates in all kinds of milieus, such as in associations of marginalized groups, universities, and religious institutions. In a way, the authors argue, India's leaders were actually running to catch up with their own people. De and Shani also demonstrate that many of the subcontinent's princely states adopted progressive, constitutional thinking before they were integrated into the Indian state—and in some cases, even before New Delhi did. Finally, the authors illustrate that India's constitutional revolution was used by the government to promote India's global moral leadership, shaping international human rights discourse to make it more progressive.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Parting Gifts of Empire: Palestine and India at the Dawn of Decolonization
BY ESMAT ELHALABY. University of California Press, 2025, 268 pp.

Elhalaby, a historian, explores the many ways Arab intellectuals engaged with India during the twentieth century, when peoples across Asia struggled under European colonization and then threw it off. The book is organized into five long chapters. The first is about the Arab poet Wadi al-Bustani, who integrated India into his work by translating the Mahabharata and the writings of Rabindranath Tagore into Arabic. The second chapter is about a group of Azharite Muslims—intellectuals associated with the Al-Azhar seminary in Cairo—who traveled to the country to gain converts. The third explores attempts by thinkers to use the concept of Asia to forge solidarities, which unraveled at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947, when regional powers could not resolve their contradictions. The fourth is dedicated to nonalignment—the Indian-pioneered practice of refusing to take sides in the Cold War—which led many Arab intellectuals to see New Delhi as an exemplar of anticolonial resistance. The final chapter argues that Arab intellectuals considered India a source of knowledge untainted by Western supremacy. But the book has a tragic tone. According to Elhalaby, the question of Palestine was central to Arab thinkers who sought solidarity with India, and the future of the Palestinians remains extremely precarious.

Israel Under Netanyahu: Populism and Democratic Decline
BY NETA OREN. Lynne Rienner, 2025, 169 pp.

Puzzled by the neglect of Israel in the burgeoning comparative literature on populism and democratic backsliding, Oren, a political scientist, examines the record of the rule of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since 2009, when he returned to office after a previous stint in the 1990s. In sober prose and exacting detail, she makes the case that Israel under Netanyahu provides a textbook example of populist, illiberal, and personalistic rule. The country deserves a prominent place beside the more often cited regimes in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela; political scientists have erred by tending to leave Israel out of this group, Oren convincingly argues. There are differences, of course: until recently, Netanyahu had been less successful at handcuffing the judiciary and muzzling the media than his counterparts elsewhere but more effective at curtailing minority rights, particularly those of Arab citizens of Israel. The war in Gaza slowed some of the government's legal maneuvering to subvert the judiciary, but it simultaneously accelerated limits on civil and political rights. Restrictions on free expression grew dramatically as crackdowns on the media and universities were justified in the name of wartime security.

Libya Since Qaddafi: Chaos and the Search for Peace
BY STEPHANIE T. WILLIAMS.
Oxford University Press, 2025, 320 pp.

Williams, an American diplomat, served in various UN roles in Libya between 2018 and 2022. In this well-reported and thoroughly dispiriting volume, she recounts the repeated ill-fated efforts of her well-intentioned UN colleagues to wrangle the various regional, tribal, economic, political, and religious factions of Libya into a stable national political framework after the fall of Muammar al-Qaddafi. It was an exercise in frustration, and Williams's diplomatic restraint occasionally falters, as when she describes one short-lived government as "too big, too scary, and too stupid" to succeed. But the story she tells is also an indictment of the UN and its presumption that, somehow, one more highly orchestrated and carefully prepared meeting of self-appointed principals might produce a breakthrough. Williams calls out a few bad actors but might have been more emphatic in pointing to the most unhelpful figures, particularly among the international spoilers. The final thematic chapters on security sector reform, economic reorganization, and human rights constitute an excellent short primer for anyone contemplating venturing into this quagmire.

King of Kings: The Iranian Revolution—A Story of Hubris, Delusion, and Catastrophic Miscalculation
BY SCOTT ANDERSON. Doubleday, 2025, 512 pp.

The outlines of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 are already seared into the American psyche, but this spellbinding book adds fascinating texture and provides a salutary warning for policymakers today. Drawing on the accounts of major players—both American and Iranian—Anderson, a prize-winning journalist and novelist, reconstructs the missteps that contributed to the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the transformation of a major American ally into an apparently implacable enemy. In absorbing detail, he recounts the blinkers and blunders of the shah's obsequious retinue and, more tellingly, U.S. policymakers as they repeatedly miscalculated the consequences of Washington's reliance on the shah for the monarch's domestic support and for American standing in the region. The shah and his spending on U.S. weaponry—when he fell, Iran had the fifth largest military in the world—were so important to the United States that its policymakers grew complacent, blinded to the fragility of the shah's rule. Anderson writes that the fall of the shah required "determined incompetence or cowardice" in Iran as well as the United States, but he is particularly and persuasively critical of U.S. policymakers who "happily bought into [the shah's] fictions, both of himself and his nation."

Twilight of the Saints: The History and Politics of Salafism in Contemporary Egypt
BY STÉPHANE LACROIX. TRANSLATED BY JEREMY SORKIN. Columbia University Press, 2025, 344 pp.

The political prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt over the last century has obscured other important religious trends in the country, not least the developments that produced a major Salafi political party, Hizb al-Nur, in the contested legislative and presidential elections after the fall of the longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Lacroix, a French political scientist, draws on a vast store of archives and interviews to provide an exhaustive genealogy of the party and its members, as well as its religious and political competitors, admirers, and detractors. He addresses the most puzzling question first: What, exactly, is a Salafi? He argues that the term describes both an apolitical quest for religious purity and a religiously inspired desire for political revival. Many of the best-known Salafis have been politically quietist—hence the surprise that attended the appearance of a political party—but as Lacroix shows, these strains waxed and waned over the last century. A valuable complement to existing work on the politics of religion in the Middle East, this book is likely to be the definitive reference on Egyptian Salafism for many years.

Edward Said: The Politics of an Oppositional Intellectual
BY NUBAR HOVSEPIAN. American University in Cairo Press, 2025, 316 pp.

Edward Said, the well-known Palestinian American intellectual, did not set out to be a partisan provocateur; if, more than two decades after his death, his work is treated as though he had been merely an ideologue or simply a shill for the Palestine Liberation Organization, it is a testament to the deeply debased quality of today's debate about the Middle East rather than a reflection of his scholarship and public writing. Hovsepian, a U.S.-based academic, was Said's friend, admirer, confidant, and sometime sparring partner. Drawing on his own diaries and Said's unpublished letters and manuscripts, Hovsepian sketches both the portrait of a friendship and an intellectual biography. From Said's early focus on music and English literature to his political awakening in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, Hovsepian traces Said's evolving arguments about the relationship between culture and politics, best exemplified in *Orientalism*, Said's most influential work, and his shifting conceptions of humanism and nationalism. As Said turned his skills as a literary critic to political analysis, he understood it as the responsibility of an intellectual to test conventional wisdom and challenge the complacency of the powerful, including the PLO, the U.S. government, and those he considered their apologists. This book is a useful reminder of the value of such critical perspectives.

Africa

ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY

Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State
BY MAHMOOD MAMDANI. Belknap Press, 2025, 352 pp.

Idi Amin, who was Uganda's president from 1971 until 1979, gained notoriety for his outlandish and often cruel actions, including the expulsion in 1972 of Ugandans of Asian descent. Yoweri Museveni, who became president in 1986, was initially hailed as an exemplar African statesman, but his refusal to relinquish power after nearly four decades at the helm has cost him much goodwill. Ostensibly a double biography of the two Ugandan leaders, this idiosyncratic book is in fact a triple biography, focusing a great deal on the author himself. An Indian Ugandan academic, Mamdani has led an almost Forrest Gumpian life, witnessing major events, such as Indian and Ugandan independence, the U.S. civil rights movement, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the 9/11 attacks, and encountering important political figures, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and numerous African political leaders. (He also happens to be the father of Zohran Mamdani, who was recently elected mayor of New York City.) Mamdani's love for his home country is unwavering even as he delivers blistering critiques of both Amin and Museveni. He minces few words describing what caused Uganda's unraveling: tribalized politics, the corrupt privatization of state assets, and mass political violence. The book is at its most compelling when Mamdani tells his own story, mixing pathos and humor in equal parts.

Shifting Sands: A Human History of the Sahara
BY JUDITH SCHEELE. Basic Books, 2025, 368 pp.

This masterful introduction to the Sahara emphasizes connectivity, exchange, and survival amid difficult conditions. Scheele, an anthropologist, draws on historical archives, including numerous Arabic-language accounts, as well as her own decades-long study of Saharan societies. She blends different disciplines and sources, interviews with Saharans themselves (including many remarkable women), and her own personal narrative to produce an accessible and revelatory exploration of the great desert. The Sahara has long been associated with a number of fraught topics, including the so-called Arab slave trade, racism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and desertification. She delves into each, reframing conventional historical and cultural narratives by showing how they often derive from the misconceived fantasies of outsiders who view the Sahara as an inhospitable and impermeable barrier. Rather than a barrier between north and south, Arab and African, civilized and uncivilized, the Sahara emerges as a varied landscape deeply enmeshed in trading, religious, and other networks that stretch beyond its vast expanse.

The Overthrow of Robert Mugabe: Gender, Coups, and Diplomats
BY BLESSING-MILES TENDI.
Oxford University Press, 2025, 304 pp.

Coup d'états, in which the usurpers are almost always men, don't often get a reading by feminist scholars. But Tendi contends that gender is always a factor in how coups are orchestrated and that coups disproportionately affect women. He delves deeply into the overthrow of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe in 2017, providing perhaps the most detailed account yet of the toppling of this long-term leader. Analysts have often framed Mugabe's ouster as exceptional because of its lack of violence, but Tendi shows how the coup has much in common with those elsewhere in Africa. Filled with quotes from senior military, political, and diplomatic figures, as well as fascinating anecdotes on the internal struggles within the regime, the book refreshingly analyzes the role of Grace Mugabe, the dictator's wife—a figure her husband's opponents dismissed as an African Marie Antoinette. Grace Mugabe became the embodiment of all the woes of the Mugabe era, accused of financial mismanagement, nepotism, and corruption. Tendi reveals how coup leaders used patriarchal tropes and language to rally support for their actions from both domestic and international audiences. By attacking the first lady, they masked the real motivations for the coup, which Tendi argues had far more to do with personal ambitions and fear of losing status in a post-Mugabe dispensation. Tendi's account of the crucial role of gender in the overthrow of Mugabe is convincing; the claim that gender is always central to coups everywhere, less so.

We Are Not Able to Live in the Sky: The Seductive Promise of Microfinance
BY MARA KARDAS-NELSON.
Metropolitan Books, 2024, 400 pp.

Few ideas in the history of development have drawn as much attention from policymakers, academics, and the general public as microfinance. During the 1990s and the first decade of this century, microfinance enterprises such as Grameen Bank offered small loans of less than $100 primarily to poor women with the hope of unleashing their entrepreneurial energy. Microfinance was hailed as a panacea, a low-cost solution to ineptitude, corruption, and limited state capacity that could both help the poor and benefit socially conscious investors. As the journalist Kardas-Nelson shows in this impressive book, the true picture of microfinance was not nearly so rosy. With onerous interest rates averaging 35 percent and in some cases over 100 percent, borrowers regularly needed to take additional loans just to make payments. Unable to pay, some borrowers committed suicide. Kardas-Nelson provides an accessible and critical account of the dashed promises and ruined lives that microfinance left in its wake. She sketches, for instance, the lives of several women in Sierra Leone for whom microfinance entailed endless cycles of unpayable debts and the threat of imprisonment. This is a devastating story of mostly good intentions gone bad.

The African Revolution: A History of the Long Nineteenth Century
BY RICHARD REID. Princeton University Press, 2025, 432 pp.

The nineteenth-century "scramble" for Africa saw much of the continent carved up by various European powers. That period has long been understood as one of immense rupture, with Africa violently dragged out of the past into the modern world. In the 1970s, the Nigerian historian J. F. Ajayi broke with this view, arguing that the scramble was just an episode in a longer history. Reid, a historian, follows in Ajayi's footsteps with this authoritative survey. He focuses on the role of African leaders in the events that led up to the Berlin Conference of 1885, when European powers divided the continent among themselves. Traditional accounts often see African elites as merely victims of external meddling. But Reid looks at processes of African state building and how they produced the dynamics that enabled European domination. He argues that Africa's incorporation into global trade networks enabled the violent expansion of volatile yet significant states, including the Dahomey, Ethiopian, Fulani, Oyo, Zanzibari, and Zulu empires, at the dawn of the nineteenth century—nearly half a century before the scramble truly got underway. The infiltration of European powers restructured incentives for would-be African state builders, exacerbating the perennial challenge of forging durable orders spanning difficult terrain and sparse populations. Violence provided a solution but also birthed the recurring dilemma that afflicts African states today.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

Perfect Storm: Russia's Failed Economic Opening, the Hurricane of War and Sanctions, and the Uncertain Future
BY THANE GUSTAFSON. Oxford University Press, 2025, 328 pp.

In this illuminating book, Gustafson, a preeminent political scientist and longtime Russia observer, traces Russia's opening to the West after the Soviet collapse and its subsequent reclosing, a process that began in the mid-2010s and was sharply accelerated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ensuing Western sanctions. As Gustafson points out, the opening was flawed from the start, in part because of the dominance of large state-owned companies, as well as economic imbalances between major urban centers and the provinces. The mutual resentment that Westernizing reforms produced has only deepened with the West's imposition of sanctions, whose efficacy Gustafson questions. The unprecedented scope of the sanctions regime, and the contradictory policy priorities of the states involved, make it complex, inconsistent, and unpredictable. Gustafson gives credit to the competence of Russia's financial team and the Russians' resourcefulness in outmaneuvering the sanctions through "gray imports" (Western goods that made their way to Russia via friendly

countries) and "shadow fleets" of oil tankers. But he insists that if sanctions are sustained and vigorously enforced, they will have a long-term debilitating effect on the Russian economy.

Securing Peace in Europe: Strobe Talbott, NATO, and Russia After the Cold War
BY STEPHAN KIENINGER. Columbia University Press, 2025, 376 pp.

Thanks to the generosity of former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Kieninger's book presents a unique window on the amply covered period of U.S. foreign policy following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and especially on the enlargement of NATO. Talbott, President Bill Clinton's Russia hand, shared his diaries with Kieninger and sat in numerous interviews with him. Initially cautious about the expansion of NATO, Talbott became one of its strongest advocates. For the former Soviet satellites in Europe, NATO membership implied protection against Russia. Although Talbott saw NATO as a hedge against a resurgence of Russian imperialism, he would not admit this to his Russian counterparts, who regarded NATO enlargement as a direct threat. Kieninger describes Talbott's mission as "squaring the circle": persuade Russia to accept NATO's expansion toward its borders, but without antagonizing Moscow or undermining the American vision of a "Europe whole and free." Talbott managed to succeed at this task in the 1990s, when Russia was economically and militarily weak and reliant on Western assistance. Yet in the long run, squaring that circle proved impossible.

Distant Friends and Intimate Enemies: A History of American-Russian Relations
BY DAVID S. FOGLESONG, IVAN KURILLA, AND VICTORIA I. ZHURAVLEVA. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 640 pp.

This substantial work, richly illustrated with art, photographs, political cartoons, and much else, traces over 200 years of U.S.-Russian relations. Despite the confrontation between the two countries today and the many episodes of hostility in the past, the three authors argue that Russia and the United States are not doomed to permanent conflict. They highlight peaceful periods; for instance, much of the nineteenth century was marked by mutually beneficial military and technological cooperation. Russians were fascinated with U.S. technology, and Americans were infatuated with Russian classical music and literature. And of course, there was the anti-Hitler alliance of World War II. The book contends that recurring clashes between the two countries stem largely from misperceptions and miscalculations by "flawed human beings." The Cold War was thus "not an objective reality but a subjective creation," and the unraveling of the 1970s détente owed much to exaggerated threat assessments. Some leaders presided over periods of animosity as well as rapprochement, as did Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and U.S. President Ronald Reagan. The current Russian leadership, waging a brutal war in Ukraine, however, makes it difficult to envision any renewed cooperation.

Russia Starts Here: Real Lives in the Ruins of Empire
BY HOWARD AMOS. Bloomsbury Continuum, 2025, 320 pp.

Amos, a British journalist, first came to the Russian city of Pskov in 2007 to volunteer at an orphanage for disabled children. In later years, as a reporter covering Russia for various publications, he retained an emotional attachment to both the orphanage and Pskov—a region with a rich medieval history now marked by poverty and depopulation. For the people of Pskov, the 1990s, when the Soviet system was collapsing and Russia was ostensibly building a democracy, were a time of immense suffering that made democratic politics "profoundly unattractive." Amos sketches Pskov's residents with deep interest and sympathy, yet without condescension or sentimentality. Among them are an elderly couple living in a village without running water or indoor plumbing. Avid viewers of Russian state television, they support Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war in Ukraine. Another, a local politician, is a staunch critic of the Kremlin and the war; mobsters attacked him, the Russian government branded him a "foreign agent," and the local court placed him under house arrest. In Amos's telling, the Pskov region appears as a haunting landscape of decay and despair.

Borders in Red: Managing Diversity in the Early Soviet Union
BY STEPHAN RINDLISBACHER. Cornell University Press, 2025, 294 pp.

Rindlisbacher, a historian, reconstructs how the Bolshevik government of the early 1920s delimited the boundaries of the Soviet republics in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as the border between the Russian and the Ukrainian republics within the newly formed Soviet Union. He highlights the inherent contradictions involved in this process. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks' anticolonial rhetoric promoted the "independence" and "self-determination" of nationalities that had been oppressed in the Russian Empire. On the other, the Communist Party asserted ultimate authority; all territorial units were required to subordinate regional interests to Moscow and to the mission of "constructing socialism." By the end of the 1920s, Joseph Stalin had terminated all official debate over borders. In 1991, the administrative lines set almost seven decades earlier largely determined how the Soviet Union disintegrated into independent states. Yet some unresolved border conflicts, suppressed in the 1920s, have reemerged. A striking example is the 1924 territorial disagreement between the authorities of the Russian and the Ukrainian Soviet republics over parts of Kursk oblast—the same territory that changed hands twice during the current war.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular
BY ALEXANDER KUSTOV. Columbia University Press, 2025, 344 pp.

Fear of immigration has polarized politics and fueled the rise of the far right across the globe. A majority of voters in wealthy democracies strongly oppose uncontrolled inflows, leaving leaders no alternative but to close borders, even at high economic cost. A minority defend mass migration, often appealing to humanitarian ideals and accusing opponents of racism and xenophobia. Kustov's carefully argued and data-rich book promises a way out of this deadlock. Using cross-national surveys and case studies, he argues that most opponents of migration are in fact altruists who privilege the fate of their co-nationals over foreigners. To rebuild a consensus, politicians must thus appeal to these swing voters by eschewing moralistic and globalist rhetoric. Instead, they must adopt a tightly controlled and highly selective immigration policy clearly tailored to serve the national economic interest—a tough-minded approach that, the author claims, has helped maintain relatively high public support for immigration in countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This cautiously optimistic book offers a welcome respite from futile, endless debates over migration.

Good Change: The Rise and Fall of Poland's Illiberal Revolution
BY STANLEY BILL AND BEN STANLEY. Stanford University Press, 2025, 360 pp.

Right-wing parties are growing in number and strength across Europe and North America. Often, they represent an alliance of populists and plutocrats; in the United States, for example, President Donald Trump has been backed by a coalition of cultural conservatives, who favor traditional religious and nationalist values, and economic libertarians, who favor lower taxes and business regulation. Yet in Poland, where the right-wing Law and Justice party governed for most of the past decade, the party and its allies gained much of their electoral support by adopting policies of economic redistribution that helped poorer Poles, particularly those in rural areas. In 2023, however, a liberal coalition unseated Law and Justice in national elections. This nuanced and data-driven analysis shows how support for the right was undermined by widespread opposition to conservative policies on abortion and other issues, along with Law and Justice's failure to deliver low-inflation growth, benefits for farmers, and smooth relations with the EU. The authors acknowledge that Poland is increasingly polarized and concede that the far right has at times exploited institutional opportunities to tilt the political system toward its goals. Yet their overall view is that Poland remains a country with robust issue-based political competition. This is a must-read for all who follow central European politics.

Fateful Hours: The Collapse of the Weimar Republic
BY VOLKER ULLRICH. TRANSLATED BY JEFFERSON CHASE. Norton, 2025, 384 pp.

As liberal political systems face challenges in much of the industrial world, many observers have invoked an alarming historical parallel: the end of the Weimar Republic in Germany, in 1933, which ushered in the rule of the Nazi Third Reich. Ullrich, a best-selling historian of Germany and biographer of Hitler, offers a readable and reliable account of this period, when politics had become polarized in a time of significant economic stress. He reminds readers that Hitler did not seize power but was given it by conservatives. To defeat the threat of a surging left, businessmen and nationalists colluded to countenance domestic culture wars, xenophobic nationalism, the erosion of constitutional norms, and outright violence, ultimately naming Hitler, a vulgar racist, as national executive. Ullrich stresses the role of tactical mistakes and misjudgments, not least by the far left, which shortsightedly refused to compromise its beliefs and join with more moderate groups to oppose democratic backsliding. Concerned citizens in many democracies must wonder whether similar processes are underway today.

Rebooting a Nation: The Incredible Rise of Estonia, E-Government, and the Startup Revolution
BY JOEL BURKE. Hurst, 2025, 304 pp.

Burke, a Washington think-tanker who spent time working in the Estonian government, details why this small country of barely a million has emerged as a model of sound policymaking. After freeing itself peacefully from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia has taken tough steps to liberalize its economy, integrate with Europe, and oppose Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere. Its high-tech firms, such as Wise and Bolt, are known across the globe. Most striking of all is Estonia's embrace of digital freedoms and its pioneering approach to digital regulation. A centralized yet secure system allows all Estonians to control their government data, including medical, driving, school, business, and tax records. Citizens can oversee who accesses their data and for what purpose, and abusers are hit with stiff penalties. Efficient and transparent regulation also makes Estonia attractive to global business. Because the system is integrated, moreover, citizens must provide vital information only once. The author overlooks, however, that while Estonia has reformed public-sector digital services, it remains quite permissive in regulating the behavior of influential private actors in the digital space.

Ungovernable: The Political Diaries of a Chief Whip
BY SIMON HART. Macmillan, 2025, 368 pp.

Hart is a moderate and decent British politician who was unexpectedly elevated to cabinet minister and chief whip in Parliament under recent Conservative governments. This book contains his diary entries over this period, which are uniquely frank, delivered with deadpan irony, and full of the hidden texture of everyday parliamentary life: insider betrayals, backroom deals, strategic leaks, rhetorical grandstanding, partisan squabbles, and scatological insults. As they angle for peerages, hanker for safe seats, and roll their eyes in the corner of cabinet meetings, most members of Parliament come across as petty, childish, and more ambitious than competent. Among many others, Hart dismisses two recent prime ministers as exceptional only in the degree of their talent for spin: Boris Johnson because of his propensity for bluster and Liz Truss because of her wooden "deputy head girl" personality. A more damning indictment of how politicians are chosen and what they do once they reach office is hard to imagine. This is at once the most entertaining and the most troubling political memoir I have read in many years.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

On the Move: Migration Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean
BY ANDREW SELEE, VALERIE LACARTE, ARIEL G. RUIZ SOTO, AND DIEGO CHAVES-GONZÁLEZ. Stanford University Press, 2025, 208 pp.

In this excellent, timely, and accessible brief, experts from the Migration Policy Institute survey recent trends in mass migration across the Western Hemisphere and the various policy responses of national governments. Since 2010, the explosion in regional migration has been driven largely by devastating crises in three countries: Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In just over a decade, nearly eight million Venezuelans have departed the hellscape created by President Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro. Latin American countries that have received large numbers of migrants, such as Chile, Colombia, and Peru, have generally shown empathy toward the new arrivals, allowing them to obtain legal status and secure access to social services. At the same time, in reaction to the sharp increases and public visibility of migrant flows, governments have begun to tighten border controls and strengthen their institutional capacities to regulate migration.

A Flower Traveled in My Blood: The Incredible True Story of the Grandmothers Who Fought to Find a Stolen Generation of Children
BY HALEY COHEN GILLILAND. Avid Reader Press, 2025, 512 pp.

This well-crafted, emotionally rich work of narrative nonfiction presents a cautionary tale—suddenly starkly relevant to our times—of the horrors that can transpire when a government callously labels its political opponents "subversives" and "terrorists" and empowers law enforcement with unrestricted authorities. In Argentina during the 1970s, a military junta tortured, murdered, and disappeared many thousands of their alleged enemies. Masked, unidentified men snatched their victims off the streets, often in broad daylight. Some female targets had young children or were pregnant; military officers secretly gifted or sold the infants to interested couples, who were often themselves in the military. From 1977 until today, courageous, relentless mothers and grandmothers have pressured the national government, with some success, to identify and locate the disappeared offspring. Drawing on previously published accounts, archival materials, and fresh interviews with affected families, Gilliland, an American journalist, celebrates this triumph of human valor in the face of unspeakable evils.

The Eternal Forest: A Memoir of the Cuban Diaspora
BY ELENA SHEPPARD. St. Martin's Press, 2025, 288 pp.

Cuba's Private Sector: Pressure Valve or Engine of Development?
BY RICARDO TORRES PÉREZ. Cuba Study Group, 2025, 27 pp.

Desi Arnaz: The Man Who Invented Television
BY TODD S. PURDUM. Simon and Schuster, 2025, 368 pp.

Three new books shed light on the long legacy of the Cuban revolution and on the island's fraught relationship with the United States. Of the countless memoirs dwelling on the Cuban revolution of 1959, Sheppard's may be the most heart wrenching and the most beautifully written. In her unflinching yet graceful style, Sheppard memorializes her beloved "small town rich" family, which was sundered in two by the revolution. Half the family migrated to Miami, where they felt guilty for living in comfort while their relatives back home suffered ever-worsening deprivations under communism. On both sides of the Florida straits, the family members suffered suicides, hurricanes, and dementia, adding to the book's emotional atmosphere of physical decay, romantic anguish, and irredeemable regrets. As the bifurcated family grew further apart and photographs faded, the lives of those living in the United States gradually normalized. In her lyrical homage, Sheppard wraps her family's tragic saga in the rich cloth of Cuban history.

Already near collapse, the Cuban economy continues to contract, and previous gains in education and health care are receding memories. As socialist central planning failed to produce sustained growth, the ruling Cuban Communist

Party has, reluctantly, allowed citizens to open small-scale private businesses. Marshaling what little reliable data exists, Torres Pérez provides a uniquely valuable survey of the country's emerging private sector. Since 2021, the government has granted legal status to 11,000 small and medium-sized firms, which collectively employ some 60,000 workers in light manufacturing, construction, lodging, and the restaurant industry. Yet authorities keep a tight rein on the private sector, which they continue to perceive as a source of unwelcome competition with state-owned enterprises; an accumulation of private wealth might transform into a formidable political opposition. For the Cuban leadership, Torres Pérez concludes, the private sector is a mere pressure-release valve, easing unemployment and furnishing consumer staples, not a promising engine of dynamic growth.

Desi Arnaz (1917–86) grew up in Santiago de Cuba, the epicenter of Afro-Cuban music, where he learned to play guitar and dance the conga. He would turn those skills into brilliant careers as a popular Latin bandleader in Miami and New York and, later, a pioneering television studio executive in Hollywood. In this meticulously researched and masterfully written biography, Purdum, a veteran journalist, explores the secrets of Arnaz's triumphs—his striking sexual magnetism, risk-taking business acumen, burning ambition, and plain hard work—as well as his self-destructive decline into alcoholism and depression. Purdum writes that as a Hollywood power broker, Arnaz retained pride in his "*cubanidad,* his intense feeling of national identity and ego." His celebration of the ethnically mixed family in his smash-hit television series, *I Love Lucy*, in which he starred alongside his wife, Lucille Ball, made Arnaz a "breakthrough cultural figure." In a fascinating aside, Purdum links Arnaz's rise in the 1940s to U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which advanced commerce and diplomacy with the countries of the Southern Hemisphere, and the resulting popularity of all things Latin American.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

The Mission: The CIA in the Twenty-First Century
BY TIM WEINER. Harper Collins, 2025, 464 pp.

Weiner, who has spent decades reporting on the Central Intelligence Agency, chronicles the CIA's struggle to understand its mission after the end of the Cold War with rare on-the-record interviews. After the 9/11 attacks, the CIA found itself in charge overnight of a global war against an enemy about which it knew almost nothing. This ignorance, combined with the panicked need to prevent another attack, led to appalling secret renditions, the torture (by Americans) of often innocent prisoners, the catastrophic war in Iraq, and the agency-led hunt for weapons that did not exist. More hair-raising because it is less well known is Weiner's definitive treatment of Russia's massive, unprecedented political warfare on Donald Trump's behalf in the 2016

U.S. presidential campaign. That effort was uncovered through the combined efforts of the CIA (which had a spy in Russian President Vladimir Putin's circle), the FBI, and the National Security Agency. Directors of these agencies at the time conclude, on the record, that the Russian operation swung the election in Trump's favor. U.S. presidents continue to be tempted to use the CIA as a middle road between diplomacy and overt military action, despite this approach's many sorry outcomes. Inside the CIA, the tension persists between whether the agency should analyze the world or use covert action to change it.

The Big One: How We Must Prepare for Future Deadly Pandemics
BY MICHAEL T. OSTERHOLM AND MARK OLSHAKER. Hachette, 2025, 384 pp.

The COVID-19 virus was highly transmissible but killed just 3.4 percent of the people it infected, according to World Health Organization estimates. The far less transmissible coronaviruses SARS and MERS killed 15 and 35 percent, respectively. Epidemiologists' nightmare, what they call the Big One, is a virus that combines high transmissibility with high virulence. Most believe such a virus will emerge; the only question is when. This volume lays out in gripping, rigorously documented detail what the resulting pandemic would look like, narrating—often hour by hour—its unstoppable global spread as health-care providers and policymakers struggle to control it. In this scenario, three years after its outbreak, the Big One has killed 140 million worldwide. Adding in the burdens of underreporting, broken health-care systems, and economic devastation, worldwide mortality surpasses 350 million. The book outlines all that could be done in advance to reduce that toll dramatically, but these steps are not being taken. COVID-19 killed a hundred times as many Americans as died on 9/11 and in the wars that followed. Yet the United States spends lavishly on the military, ignoring the catastrophe that is likely to come.

Gilded Rage: Elon Musk and the Radicalization of Silicon Valley
BY JACOB SILVERMAN. Bloomsbury, 2025, 336 pp.

Over the last 15 years, a group of businessmen mostly based in Silicon Valley—startup founders and tech venture capitalists such as Elon Musk, Marc Andreessen, Peter Thiel, David Sacks, Vivek Ramaswamy, and JD Vance—traded liberal or libertarian views for increasingly extreme right-wing, conspiratorial, and faux-populist ones. Silverman concludes that there were many reasons why. Tech leaders' business success and wealth, inflated by years of near-zero interest rates, fed an impenetrable faith in their own exceptionalism. Silverman believes public disgust with "Democratic fecklessness" and alienation that stemmed from COVID-19 restrictions contributed to these leaders' appeal. Then Musk and the rest found in U.S. President Donald Trump a man whose desire to dismantle the administrative state matched Silicon Valley's dictum to "move fast

and break things," without much concern for what would replace what had been broken. Trump promised an end to pending judicial investigations, the deregulation of cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence, lower taxes, and a flood of lucrative government contracts. His victory in the 2024 election reinforced these businessmen's belief in their own wisdom and delivered appointments to key government positions, more money, and more power to shape policy. This is a disturbing book that does not suggest a happy outcome.

Charles Sumner: Conscience of a Nation BY ZAAKIR TAMEEZ. Macmillan, 2025, 640 pp.

This biography illuminates a little-known but inspiring and consequential life, turning the one-dimensional figure of U.S. Senator Charles Sumner, principally known as the victim of a nearly lethal 1856 caning on the Senate floor, into a towering figure and restoring him to his rightful position as the nineteenth century's leading advocate for civil rights. Before becoming a senator, he teamed up with a Black attorney to argue for the integration of public education in Boston, a century before *Brown v. Board of Education*. Later, he prodded President Abraham Lincoln to connect the Union's effort in the Civil War more explicitly to the abolition of slavery and to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. (Lincoln gave Sumner the pen he used to sign it.) A brilliant orator and writer, Sumner battled depression and agonizing pain to make lasting innovations to constitutional law and push progressive causes such as prison reform and public education as well as abolition. The Republican Party honored him after his death by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1875, a version of a bill he had written. Although it was declared unconstitutional by the Jim Crow Supreme Court eight years later, it became a model for its 1964 namesake.

Our Fragile Freedoms: Essays BY ERIC FONER. Norton, 2025, 496 pp.

Foner, the foremost historian of the American Civil War period, has collected nearly 60 of his book reviews and opinion essays that offer a kaleidoscopic view of how Americans have struggled with the meaning of freedom. He covers the political, economic, and social aspects of the struggle over slavery and its legacy; the history of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution and their subsequent judicial interpretations; and the evolving way that people narrate their own histories, shaped as much by what they choose to forget as by what they remember. In accessible and inviting prose, Foner grapples with unresolved historical questions such as how much slavery contributed to U.S. economic growth. These past episodes often feel present. Chapters devoted to a variety of previous democratic backslides, such as the violent politics of the Gilded Age and the government's abuse of citizens' civil liberties during World War I, put today's polarization in unexpected perspective.

Letters to the Editor

The Dark Side of China's Success

To the Editor:

Dan Wang and Arthur Kroeber ("The Real China Model," September/October 2025) convincingly detail the impressive industrial capacity China has built over the past few decades. But their analysis focuses on the results of China's successful development while overlooking the political economy that made it possible: an authoritarian state based on unequal citizenship for migrants and the systematic extraction of surplus value created by workers. The "process knowledge" that Wang and Kroeber show China has relied on to grow and innovate wasn't free. It came at an enormous social cost.

The authors' prescription for how the United States can compete with China—that Washington should think in the same ways Beijing has—rests on a dangerous fallacy. The United States cannot replicate the outcomes of China's development model without adopting its political system. China's success is inseparable from the coercive power of its party-state. Emulating its strategy would require suppressing consumption, extending massive subsidies to businesses, accepting wasteful investments, and allowing the state to dictate how capital is used. The authors' proposed reforms, such as expediting permitting, ignore how procedural safeguards can be essential tools to hold the state accountable and protect individual rights.

An effective strategy to establish an industrial ecosystem that works for the United States should leverage its foundational strengths: an open society, market competition, and universal citizenship. Rather than selectively copying China, U.S. policymakers should build on the American innovation ethos, its deep capital markets, and the manufacturing capacity of its allies. This approach is more likely to succeed because it aligns with core U.S. values of freedom, private property, and democracy.

WU JIEH-MIN
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The Illusion of Nuclear Deterrence

To the Editor:

In their article "Europe's Bad Nuclear Options" (July/August 2025), Florence Gaub and Stefan Mair argue that the U.S. nuclear umbrella "for decades has shielded the continent from outside threats." The underlying assumption is that having a nuclear umbrella is desirable and that nuclear deterrence theory is valid.

But nuclear weapons have not prevented conflict between nuclear states, as fighting between India and Pakistan has shown, and there are many possible explanations other than deterrence for the absence of nuclear war among such states, including luck. If one sets aside the faulty assumption that nuclear deterrence will hold, then increasing Europe's reliance on nuclear weapons—or even just maintaining it—becomes an untenable proposition.

Instead, more European governments should join the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which bans all nuclear weapons activities. Austria, Ireland, and Malta have already joined the TPNW, which has 96 other signatories, and local governments in Berlin, Paris, and Rome have passed resolutions calling on their governments to do the same. In polling conducted by YouGov in April 2025, majorities in Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden opposed their countries' developing their own nuclear arsenals, and even higher percentages opposed American nuclear weapons being stationed in their country. As long as nuclear weapons exist, so does the risk of their use. Europe's only good nuclear option is joining the TPNW.

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THE ARCHIVE

September/October 1997

Has Democracy a Future?

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

At the height of post–Cold War triumphalism about democracy, the historian and presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., took to these pages to consider democracy's past and sound a note of warning about its future. There were other moments in history when democracy had seemed dominant, only to find itself "almost at once on the defensive." And Schlesinger could see that the forces of race, technology, and relentless globalization were challenges that could all too easily "blow it off course and even drive it onto the rocks."

"For the first time in all history," President Clinton declared in his second inaugural address, "more people on this planet live under democracy than dictatorship." *The New York Times*, after careful checking, approved: 3.1 billion people live in democracies, 2.66 billion do not. According to end-of-history doctrine as expounded by its prophet, the minority can look forward to "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

For historians, this euphoria rang a bell of memory. Did not the same radiant hope accompany the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century? This most terrible hundred years in Western history started out in an atmosphere of optimism and high expectations. . . . By 1941 only about a dozen democracies were left on the planet.

The political, economic, and moral failures of democracy had handed the initiative to totalitarianism. Something like this could happen again. If liberal democracy fails in the 21st century, as it failed in the twentieth, to construct a humane, prosperous, and peaceful world, it will invite the rise of alternative creeds apt to be based, like fascism and communism, on flight from freedom and surrender to authority.

After all, democracy in its modern version—representative government, party competition, the secret ballot, all founded on guarantees of individual rights and freedoms—is at most 200 years old. A majority of the world's inhabitants may be living under democracy in 1997, but democratic hegemony is a mere flash in the long vistas of recorded history.

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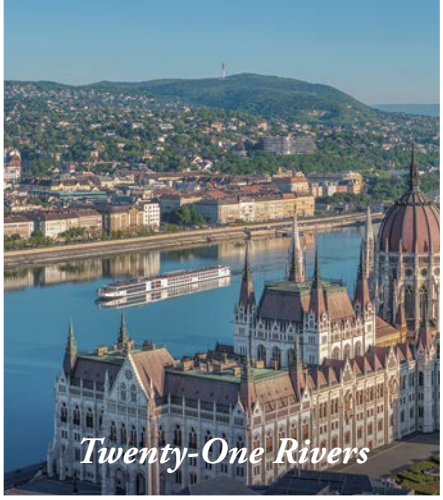

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