

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2024



Does Peace Have a Chance?

Israel, Gaza, and the Fight for a New Middle East



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Volume 103, Number 2

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Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor
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THE FIGHT FOR A NEW MIDDLE EAST

The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution

How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace

MARTIN INDYK

For years, the vision of an Israeli state and a Palestinian state existing side by side in peace and security has been derided as hopelessly naive—or worse, as a dangerous illusion. After decades of U.S.-led diplomacy failed to achieve that outcome, it seemed to many observers that the dream had died; all that was left to do was bury it. But it turns out that reports of the death of the two-state solution were greatly exaggerated.

In the wake of the monstrous attack Hamas launched on Israel on October 7 and the grievous war that Israel has waged on the Gaza Strip ever since, the allegedly dead two-state solution has been resurrected. U.S. President Joe Biden and his top

national security officials have repeatedly and publicly reaffirmed their belief that it represents the only way to create lasting peace among the Israelis, the Palestinians, and the Arab countries of the Middle East. And the United States is hardly alone: the call for a return to the two-state paradigm has been echoed by leaders across the Arab world, the countries of the EU, middle powers such as Australia and Canada, and even Washington's main rival, China.

The reason for this revival is not complicated. There are, after all, only a few possible alternatives to the two-state solution. There is Hamas's solution, which is the destruction of Israel. There is the Israeli ultra-right's

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solution, which is the Israeli annexation of the West Bank, the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the deportation of Palestinians to other countries. There is the “conflict management” approach pursued for the last decade or so by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which aimed to maintain the status quo indefinitely—and the world has seen how that worked out. And there is the idea of a binational state in which Jews would become a minority, thus ending Israel’s status as a Jewish state. None of those alternatives would resolve the conflict—at least not without causing even greater calamities. And so if the conflict is to be resolved peacefully, the two-state solution is the only idea left standing.

All that was true before October 7. But a lack of leadership, trust, and interest on both sides—and the repeated failure of American efforts to change those realities—made it impossible to conceive of a credible pathway to a two-state solution. And doing so now has become even more difficult. The Israelis and the Palestinians are angrier and more fearful than at any time since the outbreak of the second intifada in October 2000; the two sides seem less likely than ever to achieve the mutual trust that a two-state solution would require. Meanwhile, in an age of great-power competition abroad and political polarization at home, and after decades of failed diplomatic and military interventions in the Middle East, Washington enjoys far less influence and credibility in the region than it did in the 1990s, when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S.-led eviction of the Iraqi

dictator Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait, the United States kick-started the process that eventually led to the Oslo accords. And yet, as a result of the war in Gaza, the United States finds itself with a stronger need for a credible process that can eventually lead to an agreement, and stronger leverage to transform the resurrection of the two-state solution from a talking point to a reality. Doing so, however, will take a significant commitment of time and political capital. Biden will have to play an active role in shaping the decisions of a reluctant Israeli ally, an ineffective Palestinian partner, and an impatient international community. And because what he will be pushing for is an incremental approach that would achieve peace only over a lengthy period, the two-state solution needs to be enshrined now as the ultimate objective in a U.S.-sponsored UN Security Council resolution.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

The two-state solution dates back to at least 1937, when a British commission suggested a partition of the British mandate territory then known as Palestine into two states. Ten years later, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, which proposed two states for two peoples: one Arab, one Jewish. Although the resolution’s recommended territorial partition left neither side satisfied, the Jews accepted it—but the Palestinians, encouraged by their Arab state sponsors, rejected it. The ensuing war led to the founding of the state of Israel; millions of Palestinians, meanwhile, became refugees, and their national aspirations languished.

The idea of a Palestinian state lay mostly dormant for decades as Israel and its Arab neighbors became preoccupied with their own conflict, one result of which was the Israeli occupation and settlement of Gaza and the West Bank after the 1967 Six-Day War, which placed millions of Palestinians under direct Israeli control but without the rights accorded to Israeli citizens. Eventually, however, terrorist attacks launched by the Palestine Liberation Organization and an uprising of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation in the 1980s forced Israel to come to terms with the fact that the situation had become untenable. In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the American-brokered Oslo accords, recognizing each other and laying the groundwork for a phased, incremental process intended to eventually lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The two-state solution's moment appeared to have arrived.

By the end of the Clinton administration, the Oslo process had generated a detailed outline of what the two-state solution would look like: a Palestinian state in 97 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza, with mutually agreed swaps of territory that would compensate the Palestinian state for the three percent of West Bank land that Israel would annex, which at that time contained some 80 percent of all the Jewish settlers on Palestinian lands. The Palestinians would have their capital in East Jerusalem, where predominantly Arab suburbs would come under Palestinian sovereignty and predominantly Jewish suburbs under Israeli sovereignty. The

two countries would share control of Jerusalem's so-called Holy Basin, the site of the most important shrines of the three Abrahamic faiths.

But a final agreement on those terms never materialized. As a member of the Clinton administration's negotiating team at the time, I came to see that neither side was ready to compromise on the highly emotional question of who would control Jerusalem or on the issue of "the right of return" of Palestinian refugees, which was deeply threatening to the Israelis. In the end, the edifice of peace that so many had labored so hard to construct was consumed in a paroxysm of violence as the Palestinians launched another, more intense uprising and the Israelis expanded their occupation of the West Bank. The ensuing conflict lasted for five years, claiming thousands of lives on both sides and destroying all hopes for reconciliation.

Every subsequent American president has sought to revive the two-state solution, but none of their initiatives proved capable of overcoming the mistrust generated by the Palestinian return to violence and the Israeli settlers' determination to annex the West Bank. The Israelis became frustrated by the Palestinian leadership's unwillingness to respond to what they regarded as generous offers for Palestinian statehood, and the Palestinians never believed that the offers were genuine or that Israel would deliver if they dared compromise on their claims. Leaders on both sides preferred to blame each other rather than find a way to lead their people out of the miserable morass that the failed peace process had created.

STATE OF DENIAL

By the time Biden became U.S. president in 2021, the world had given up on the two-state solution. Netanyahu, who had dominated his country's politics for the preceding 15 years, had persuaded the Israelis that they had no Palestinian partner for peace and therefore did not need to address the challenge of what to do with the three million Palestinians in the West Bank and the two million in Gaza whom they effectively controlled. Netanyahu sought instead to "manage" the conflict by kneecapping the PA (Israel's putative partner in the peace process) and taking steps to make it easier for Hamas, which shared his antipathy to the two-state solution, to consolidate its rule in Gaza. At the same time, he gave free rein to the settler movement in the West Bank to make it impossible for a contiguous part of a Palestinian state to ever emerge there.

The Palestinians also lost faith in the two-state solution. Some turned back to armed struggle, while others began to gravitate to the idea of a binational state in which Palestinians would enjoy equal rights with Jews. Hamas's version of a "one-state solution," which would do away with Israel altogether, also gained greater traction in the West Bank, where the group's popularity began to eclipse the geriatric and corrupt leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the PA.

For years, American diplomats had warned that this status quo was unsustainable and that another Palestinian uprising would soon emerge. But it turned out that the Palestinians had no stomach for another intifada and preferred to sit on their land as best they could and wait the Israelis out.

This suited the Biden administration. It was determined to deprioritize the Middle East as it addressed more pressing strategic challenges in Asia and Europe. What it wanted in the Middle East was calm. So whenever the Israeli-Palestinian conflict threatened to flare up, particularly over provocative settler activities, American diplomats would swoop in to reduce the tensions, with support from Egypt and Jordan, which had a common interest in avoiding an explosion.

For his part, Biden paid lip service to the two-state solution but didn't seem to believe in it. He kept in place policies favorable to the settlers that had been introduced by his predecessor, Donald Trump, such as the labeling of products from West Bank settlements as "made in Israel." Biden also failed to make good on his campaign promise to reopen the U.S. consulate for Palestinians in Jerusalem. (The consulate had been absorbed into the U.S. embassy when Trump moved it to Jerusalem.)

Meanwhile, the Arab states had decided to all but abandon the Palestinian cause. They had come to see Israel as a natural ally in countering the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" that had taken root across the Arab world. This new strategic calculation found expression in the Abraham Accords, negotiated by the Trump administration, in which Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) each fully normalized relations with Israel without insisting that Israel do anything that might make the establishment of a Palestinian state more likely.

Biden sought to broaden this Israeli-Sunni Arab compact by seeking normalization between Israel and Saudi

Arabia, the world's largest oil producer and the custodian of Islam's holiest sites. From a U.S. point of view, there was a compelling strategic logic to normalization: Israel and Saudi Arabia could serve as the anchors for a U.S. "offshore balancing" role that would stabilize the region while freeing up American attention and resources to deal with an assertive China and an aggressive Russia.

Biden found a willing partner in Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, widely known as MBS, who had embarked on an ambitious effort to modernize his country and diversify its economy. Fearing he would be unable to defend the fruits of that investment with Saudi Arabia's limited military capabilities, he sought a formal defense treaty with the United States, as well as the right to maintain an independent nuclear fuel cycle and to buy advanced U.S. arms, using the prospect of normalization with Israel to make such an agreement palatable to the heavily pro-Israel U.S. Senate. MBS cared little for the Palestinians and was not willing to condition his deal on progress toward a two-state solution. The Biden administration, however, feared that bypassing the Palestinians completely could lead to a Palestinian uprising, especially because, in 2022, Netanyahu had formed a coalition government with ultranationalist and ultrareligious parties who were bent on annexing the West Bank and toppling the PA. The administration also assessed that it could not secure the necessary Democratic votes in the Senate for a defense treaty with the unpopular Saudis without a substantial Palestinian component in the package.

Since the Saudis needed some political cover for their deal with Israel, they were amenable to Biden's proposal for significant constraints on West Bank settlement activity, the transfer of additional West Bank territory to Palestinian control, and the resumption of Saudi aid to the PA.

By early October 2023, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States were on the brink of a regional realignment. Netanyahu had not yet accepted the Palestinian component of the deal, and his coalition's opposition to any settlement concessions made it unclear how much of the proposed agreement would survive—as did MBS's general diffidence. Still, had a breakthrough taken place, the Palestinians would likely have been sidelined yet again, and Netanyahu's ultra-right government would have gained greater confidence in pursuing its annexation strategy. But then it all came crashing down.

LAST PLAN STANDING

At first glance, it may be hard to see why what happened next would help resurrect the two-state solution. It is difficult to express in words the trauma that all Israelis suffered on October 7: the complete failure of the vaunted military and intelligence capabilities of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to protect Israeli citizens; the horrific atrocities committed by Hamas fighters that left some 1,200 Israelis dead and nearly 250 captives in Gaza; the ongoing hostage saga that suffuses every Israeli home with grief and concern; the displacement of border communities in southern and northern Israel. In this context, not surprisingly, Israelis of all stripes have no interest

in contemplating reconciliation with their Palestinian neighbors. Before October 7, most Israelis were already convinced that they had no Palestinian partner for peace; today, they have every reason to believe that they were right. And the way that Hamas's popularity has increased in the West Bank since the war started has only reinforced this assessment. According to polling conducted in November and December by the Palestinian researcher Khalil Shikaki, 75 percent of West Bank Palestinians support Hamas's continued rule in Gaza, compared with 38 percent of Gazans. The Israelis point to the refusal by the Palestinians—including Abbas—to condemn Hamas's atrocities, the outright denial on the part of many Arabs that anything of the sort took place, and the newly anti-Semitic dimension of the international support for the Palestinian cause and conclude that the Palestinians want to kill them, not make peace with them.

Most Palestinians have understandably reached a similar conclusion with regard to the Israelis: the assault on Gaza has killed more than 25,000 Palestinians (including more than 5,000 children), destroyed more than 60 percent of the homes in the territory, and displaced nearly all of its 2.2 million residents. On the West Bank, anger over the war is compounded by the systematic violence of Israeli settlers who have assaulted Palestinians, driven some from their homes, and prevented others from harvesting their olives and grazing their sheep. At least some Palestinians, potentially a majority, do not reject the idea of an independent Palestinian state as an eventual solution that could end the Israeli occupation

and allow them to live a life of dignity and freedom. (Notably, that remains the official position of the PA, whereas the official position of the Netanyahu government is to adamantly oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state.) But few Palestinians believe that the Israelis will allow them to build a viable state free of military occupation.

For all these reasons, there is a complete disconnection between renewed international calls for a two-state solution and the fears and desires currently shaping Israeli and Palestinian society. Many have argued that the best the United States can do in these circumstances is to try to bring the fighting to an end as soon as possible and then focus on rebuilding the shattered lives of the Israelis and the Palestinians, putting the issue of an ultimate resolution of the conflict aside for the time being until passions cool, new leadership emerges, and circumstances become more conducive to the contemplation of what now seem like far-fetched ideas of peace and reconciliation.

Yet taking a short-term, pragmatic approach has its own dangers: that, after all, is what Washington did after the four rounds of fighting between Hamas and Israel that broke out between 2008 and 2021—and look what that produced. After this round, moreover, Israel will not simply withdraw and leave Hamas in control, as it did in the past. Netanyahu is already speaking about a long-term Israeli security presence in Gaza. This is a recipe for disaster. If Israel remains stuck in Gaza, it will be fighting off a Hamas-led insurgency—just as it fought off an insurgency led by Hezbollah and other groups for 18 years when it was stuck in southern Lebanon after

invading in 1982. There is no credible way to bring the war in Gaza to an end without trying to fashion a new, more stable order there. But that cannot be done without also establishing a credible path to a two-state solution. The Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, are insisting on that as a condition for their support for the revitalization of the PA and the reconstruction of Gaza, as is the rest of the international community. The PA would need to be able to point to that goal in order to legitimize any role it played in controlling Gaza. And the Biden administration must be able to include the goal of two states as part of the Israeli-Saudi agreement it is still eager to broker.

The first step would be for the Palestinians to establish a credible governing authority in Gaza to fill the vacuum left by the eradication of Hamas rule. This is the opportunity for the PA to expand its writ and unite the divided Palestinian polity. But with its credibility already at a low point, the PA cannot afford to be seen as Israel's subcontractor, maintaining order for the sake of Israel's security interests. Fortunately, Netanyahu's opposition to the PA taking control in Gaza seems to have backfired, serving only to legitimize the idea in the minds of many Palestinians.

But in its current state, the PA is in no position to take responsibility for governing and policing Gaza. As Biden has put it, the PA must be "revitalized." It needs a new prime minister, a new set of competent technocrats who are not corrupt, a trained security force for Gaza, and reformed institutions that no longer incite against Israel or reward prisoners

and "martyrs" for terrorist acts against the Israelis. The United States and the Sunni Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, are already engaged in detailed discussions with the PA about all these steps and seem satisfied that the PA is willing to undertake them. But it will require the active cooperation and support of the Netanyahu government, which adamantly opposes a PA role in Gaza and has so far refused to make any decisions about the "day after" there.

Once the revitalization process got underway, it would probably take around a year to train and deploy PA security and civilian cadres in Gaza. During this period, Israel would likely undertake some military activity against residual Hamas forces. In the meantime, an interim governing body would need to run the territory. That entity would need to be legitimized by a UN Security Council resolution and would oversee the gradual assumption of responsibility by the PA. It would control a peacekeeping force tasked with maintaining order. To prevent friction with the IDF, the force would need to be led by a U.S. general. But there would be no need for American boots on the ground: troops could come from other countries friendly to Israel that have deep experience in peacekeeping operations and would be acceptable to the Palestinians, including Australia, Canada, India, and South Korea. Sunni Arab states should be invited to participate in the force, although it is unlikely that they would want to take responsibility for policing the Palestinians.

But even without contributing troops, the Sunni Arab states would

have a critical role to play. Egypt has a considerable interest in securing the stability that would allow millions of Gazans to move away from the Egyptian border, where they pose a continual threat of flooding into Egypt. Egyptian intelligence has good ground knowledge of Gaza, and the Egyptian army can help prevent the smuggling of arms into Gaza from the Sinai Peninsula—although it failed to do so before October 7. Jordan has less influence in Gaza than Egypt does, but the Jordanians have ably trained Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and could do the same for PA forces in Gaza. The oil-rich Gulf Arab states have the necessary resources to rebuild Gaza and fund the revitalization of the PA. But none of them will be suckered into footing the bill unless they can tell their own people that doing so will lead to the end of the Israeli occupation and the eventual emergence of a Palestinian state—which would prevent another round of war that would leave them holding the bag again.

A FRIEND IN NEED

There are, of course, two major obstacles to such a plan, and they are the main combatants in the war. Although its control of northern Gaza is now in doubt, Hamas still maintains its underground strongholds in the southern cities of Khan Younis and Rafah. As of this writing, it still holds around 130 hostages whom it intends to use as bargaining chips; the longer the fighting drags on, the more domestic pressure will build on Netanyahu to agree to a semipermanent cease-fire in exchange for the rest of the hostages, potentially leaving a good part of Hamas's

infrastructure and control mechanisms in place. Washington can try to convince the IDF to shift to a more targeted approach that will produce fewer casualties. But for any postwar order to take shape, Hamas's command-and-control system must be broken—and that outcome is far from guaranteed.

On the other side, the survival of Netanyahu's government coalition with ultra-right and ultrareligious parties depends on the rejection of the two-state solution and any return of the PA to Gaza. Although speculation is rife in Israel that Netanyahu will be hounded out of office soon and new elections will bring a moderate, centrist coalition to power, his survival skills are unmatched; he should never be counted out.

Nevertheless, Biden retains considerable leverage over Netanyahu. The IDF is now heavily dependent on military resupply from the United States as it contemplates having to fight a two-front war against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Israel has expended massive amounts of materiel in its campaign in Gaza, requiring two emergency efforts by the Biden administration to expedite resupply by bypassing congressional oversight, much to the chagrin of some of the Senate Democrats whom Biden will need to support an Israeli-Saudi deal. Even if Israel opts for a more targeted campaign in Gaza, it will have to restock its arsenal and be prepared for a resource-intensive war with Hezbollah. Holding up resupplies is something that Biden is reluctant to do because he does not want to look as if he is undermining Israel's security. But in a stand-off with Netanyahu, Biden could drag

his feet on certain decisions by tying things up in bureaucratic procedures or asking for congressional reviews. That might lead the IDF to press Netanyahu to give in. Pressure might also come from the decorated military men who serve in his emergency war cabinet: the retired generals Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, who lead the main opposition party, and Yoav Gallant, the defense minister.

This dynamic has already begun to play out. Even though it has taken a Herculean effort, the Biden administration has succeeded in convincing the IDF to reshape its strategy and tactics—limiting the scope of its operations against Hamas and restraining it from taking on Hezbollah—and has persuaded it to allow increasing amounts of humanitarian aid into Gaza, including opening the Israeli port of Ashdod to supplies. Gallant has even publicly stated his support for the PA to assume a role in Gaza, directly contradicting the prime minister.

In the long run, the IDF will remain heavily dependent on military support from the United States to rebuild its deterrent power, which took a blow on October 7. This new dependence is best illustrated by the need for the United States to deploy two carrier battle groups to the eastern Mediterranean and a nuclear-powered submarine to the region to deter Iran and Hezbollah from joining the fray at the outset of the war. Before October 7, Israel's military capabilities alone had served as a sufficient deterrent, and the United States was able to deploy its major forces elsewhere. But according to reporting by Israel's Channel 12, in January, when U.S. officials decided it

was time to withdraw one of the carrier battle groups, the IDF asked them to keep it in place.

This heavy tactical and strategic dependence on the United States is a new phenomenon. Washington has long served as Israel's second line of defense. But the deployment of the U.S. carrier battle groups signaled that in some ways, the United States has become Israel's first line of defense. Israel is no longer able to "defend itself by itself," as Netanyahu was fond of bragging before October 7. He may do his best to ignore this new reality, but the IDF cannot afford to do so.

Meanwhile, Israel is weathering a tsunami of international criticism as its indiscriminate use of force in the early stages of the war, when it was reacting out of rage rather than calculation, caused massive civilian casualties. The United States alone has stood in the breach, repeatedly protecting Israel from international censure and defending its right to continue prosecuting the war against Hamas despite the almost universal demands for a cease-fire. This serves American interests, too, since Hamas's destruction is a prerequisite for establishing a more peaceful order in Gaza. But Israel is just one American abstention away from UN Security Council resolutions that could invoke sanctions. Like its newly acute military dependence on Washington, this political isolation makes Israel vulnerable to U.S. leverage.

Until now, Netanyahu seemed determined to resist the influence of his only real friend in the international community, using outright public rejections of the two-state solution to shore up his coalition and gain credit with his base

for standing up to the United States. But Biden has a number of other sources of leverage beyond potentially dragging his feet on military resupply or letting it be known that he is considering an abstention on a UN resolution critical of Israel. Netanyahu is dependent on the international community to finance the rehabilitation of Gaza. Israel is in no position to pay the \$50 billion or so that will be needed to repair the damage its military campaign has wrought. And yet if Netanyahu does not reach an understanding with Biden on a credible pathway to a two-state solution, Israel will be left holding the bag. The oil- and gas-rich Arab states have repeatedly made it clear that they will not pay for Gaza's reconstruction without a firm commitment to a Palestinian state. And leaving Gaza in ruins will ensure that Hamas returns to power there, in charge of an otherwise failed state on Israel's borders. He may not recognize it yet, but Netanyahu has no choice but to find a way to accommodate this demand.

Finally, Biden can influence the public debate in Israel by going over Netanyahu's head to address the Israeli people. They deeply appreciate that he was there for them in their darkest moments after the October 7 attack. His visit to Israel comforted the country when Netanyahu could not. Ever since, Israelis have watched as the president of the United States has defended them, fought for the return of the Israeli hostages, rushed military supplies to the IDF, and vetoed UN resolutions critical of Israel. By contrast, Netanyahu's standing with the Israeli public was already at a historic low before October 7 because of the divi-

siveness of the self-serving campaign he had been mounting to reduce the powers of the judiciary. If an election were held today, he would be routed. According to recent opinion polls, over 70 percent of Israelis want him to resign. Meanwhile, over 80 percent of Israelis approve of U.S. leadership in the wake of the war and prefer Biden to Trump by 14 points—the first time in decades that Israelis have preferred the Democratic candidate for U.S. president to the Republican.

WHAT BIDEN MUST DO

If Biden found himself in a show-down with Netanyahu, a speech to the Israeli people could give the American president the edge. The best time to deliver it would be after the United States helped broker another hostages-for-prisoners swap, for which the Israeli public would be profoundly grateful. The point would not be to sell the two-state solution to the Israelis, who are not yet ready to hear that pitch. Rather, the idea would be to offer an avuncular explanation of what the United States is trying to do to ensure a stable “day after” in Gaza that would prevent a repeat of October 7 and also provide a pathway, over time, to end the broader conflict. Biden would explain that he does not want to see his beloved Israel condemned to never-ending war, with each generation sending its children off to fight in the streets of Gaza and the refugee camps of the West Bank. He would offer an alternative that would instead hold out the hope of an enduring peace—as long as Israel's government followed his lead. He would need to counter Netanyahu's

claim that Israel has to maintain overall security control in the West Bank and Gaza by emphasizing alternative U.S.-supervised security arrangements, including the demilitarization of the Palestinian state, which would reconcile Israeli security needs with Palestinian sovereignty—and keep Israelis safer than would a permanent military occupation.

Caving in to Biden would go against all of Netanyahu's political instincts. The only way Netanyahu can reliably stay in power now is by maintaining his coalition with the ultranationalists, who adamantly oppose the revitalization of the PA and the two-state solution. If he gave in, he would run the considerable risk of losing power. Normally, when he is backed into the corner, Netanyahu dances: giving in a little to the United States while reassuring his hard-liners that his concessions are not serious. On the issue of Israeli settlements in particular, he has gotten away with that maneuver for 15 years.

But the jig is up. Netanyahu cannot credibly claim to support a two-state solution. He did so before, in 2009, but it has since become obvious that he was lying, as he now boasts of having prevented the emergence of a Palestinian state. But even if Netanyahu maintains his opposition to that outcome, cooperation with a U.S. post-war plan for Gaza would commit him to actions, such as allowing the PA to operate in Gaza and restricting settlement activity in the West Bank, that would constitute a credible pathway to a two-state solution—and would thus doom his fragile coalition and likely end his career.

Biden would clearly prefer to avoid a face-off with Netanyahu, but it seems inevitable. As the president contemplates how to get Netanyahu's attention, he needs to find a way to change Netanyahu's calculus—or, if Netanyahu continues to balk, to help win Israeli public support for Biden's preferred "day after" approach.

Saudi Arabia can lend a significant hand in this effort. Before October 7, Biden thought he was on the cusp of a strategic breakthrough on Israeli-Saudi peace. That opportunity still exists, the Gaza war notwithstanding. MBS is not about to let his ambitious trillion-dollar plan for the development of his country be buried by Hamas. Nor is he happy at the boost that the war has given to Iran and its partners in the "axis of resistance," which threatens Saudi Arabia as much as Israel. Because the deal he had negotiated with Biden serves the vital interests of his kingdom, he is still interested in forging ahead when things quiet down. But normalization with Israel is now highly unpopular in Saudi Arabia, where public opinion, as elsewhere in the Arab world, has turned even more fiercely against Israel. The only way MBS can square this circle is to insist on the very thing he was indifferent to before October 7: a credible pathway toward a two-state solution.

Biden should make clear the choice facing Israelis. They can continue on the road to a forever war with the Palestinians, or they can embrace the U.S. "day after" plan—and be rewarded with peace with Saudi Arabia and better relations with the broader Arab and Muslim worlds. Netanyahu has already publicly rejected these terms. But he

did so after the deal was offered in private. Biden should try again—but this time, he should pitch the deal directly to the Israeli public in a way that would shift its attention from the trauma of October 7.

After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat captured Israelis' imaginations with a surprise visit to Jerusalem. MBS is unlikely to be as adventurous, but he might be persuaded to join Biden in appealing directly to the Israeli public via an interview with a respected Israeli TV journalist. Working together, Biden and MBS could use the Saudi offer of peace to enhance a message of hope. They could point to the Saudi and Sunni Arab role in promoting PA rule in Gaza and the two-state solution as ways of ensuring that the Palestinians will do their part. Biden would need to add, in nonthreatening terms, that such a breakthrough would serve the vital strategic interests of the United States, as well as bring peace with Saudi Arabia to Israel. He would need to convey that he therefore thinks it's reasonable to expect Israel to cooperate—and that he would not understand if its government refused to do so.

Biden will face a less acute but similar problem when it comes to persuading the Palestinians and Arab leaders, who have little reason to trust his commitment to a Palestinian state—especially since they know there is a chance that Biden will not be in the White House come 2025. Winning them over will not be easy. Some have suggested that the United States should recognize the Palestinian state now, with its borders negotiated later. But a grand gesture of that sort would put the cart before

the horse: the PA must first embark on building credible, accountable, transparent institutions, demonstrating that it is a trustworthy “state in the making,” before it is rewarded with recognition.

There is, however, another way to demonstrate American and international commitment to the two-state solution. The basis for every negotiation among Israel, its Arab neighbors, and the Palestinians is UN Security Council Resolution 242, which was passed and accepted by Israel and the Arab states following the Six-Day War in 1967. (In 1998, the PLO also accepted it as the basis for the negotiations that led to the Oslo accords.) Resolution 242 is silent, however, on the Palestinian issue, except for a passing reference to the need for a just settlement of the refugee issue. It makes no mention of any of the other final-status issues, although it does make an explicit reference to “the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war” and the need for Israeli withdrawal from territories (although not “the territories”) it occupied in the 1967 war.

A new resolution that updated Resolution 242 could enshrine the U.S. and international community's commitment to the two-state solution in international law. It would invoke UN General Assembly Resolution 181 in calling for two states for two peoples based on mutual recognition of the Jewish state of Israel and the Arab state of Palestine. It could also call on both sides to avoid unilateral actions that would impede the achievement of the two-state solution, including settlement activity, incitement, and terrorism. And it could call for direct

negotiations between the parties “at the appropriate time” to resolve all final-status issues and end the conflict and all claims arising from it. If such a resolution were introduced by the United States, endorsed by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, and passed unanimously, Israel and the PLO would have little choice but to accept it, just as they accepted Resolution 242.

THE TIME HAS COME

Wars often don't end until both sides have exhausted themselves and become convinced that they are better off coexisting with their enemies than pursuing a futile effort to destroy them. The Israelis and the Palestinians are a long way from that point. But maybe, after the fighting in Gaza ends and the passions cool, they will begin to think again about how to get there. There are already some reasons for hope. Consider, for example, the fact that Israel's Arab citizens have so far refused Hamas's call to rise up. There has been relatively little communal violence in Israel's mixed Arab-Jewish cities since October 7, and one of the most prominent leaders of the Arab-Israeli community, the politician and Knesset member Mansour Abbas (no relation to the Palestinian prime minister), has given courageous voice to the goal of coexistence. “All of us, Arab and Jewish citizens, must take pains to cooperate in order to maintain peace and calm,” he wrote in *The Times* of Israel in late October. “We will strengthen the fabric of relations, increasing understanding and tolerance, to overcome this crisis peacefully.” Nor have the Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem turned to popular violence (as opposed

to isolated terrorist incidents), despite the provocations and predations of extremist settlers; the 150,000 or so Palestinians who live in the West Bank but worked in Israel proper before October 7 may understandably burn with a sense of humiliation, but they would rather return to their jobs than see their children fighting with Israeli soldiers at checkpoints.

Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are ready to make the deep compromises that genuine coexistence would require; indeed, they are far less ready to do so than they were at the end of the Clinton administration, when they failed to close the deal. But the massive costs of refusing to compromise have become much clearer in recent months, and will become clearer still in the years to come. Over time, majorities in both societies may recognize that the only way to secure the future for their children is to separate out of respect rather than engage out of hatred. That realization could be accelerated by responsible, courageous leadership on both sides—should it ever emerge. In the meantime, the process can start with an international commitment to an Arab state of Palestine living alongside a Jewish state of Israel in peace and security—a promise articulated by the United States, endorsed by the Arab states and the international community, and given credibility by a concerted effort to generate a more stable order in Gaza and the West Bank. In the end, the parties to the conflict and the rest of the world may then come to see that decades of destruction, denialism, and deceit did not kill the two-state solution—but only made it stronger. 🌍

THE FIGHT FOR A NEW MIDDLE EAST

The Two-State Mirage

How to Break the Cycle of Violence in a One-State Reality

MARC LYNCH AND SHIBLEY TELHAMI

Israel's devastating response to Hamas's shocking October 7 attack has produced a humanitarian catastrophe. During the first 100 days of war alone, Israel dropped the kiloton equivalent of three nuclear bombs on the Gaza Strip, killing some 24,000 Palestinians, including more than 10,000 children; wounding tens of thousands more; destroying or damaging 70 percent of Gaza's homes; and displacing 1.9 million people—about 85 percent of the territory's inhabitants. By this point, an estimated 400,000 Gazans were at risk of starvation, according to the United Nations, and infectious disease was spreading rapidly. During the same period in the West Bank, hundreds of Palestinians were

killed by Israeli settlers or Israeli troops, and more than 3,000 Palestinians were arrested, many without charges.

Almost from the outset, it was clear that Israel did not have an endgame for its war in Gaza, prompting the United States to fall back on a familiar formula. On October 29, just as Israel's ground invasion was getting underway, U.S. President Joe Biden said, "There has to be a vision for what comes next. And in our view, it has to be a two-state solution." Three weeks later, after the extraordinary devastation of northern Gaza, the president said again, "I don't think it ultimately ends until there is a two-state solution." And on January 9, after more than three months of war, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken

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took up the refrain again, telling the Israeli government that a lasting solution “can only come through a regional approach that includes a pathway to a Palestinian state.”

These calls to revive the two-state solution may come from good intentions. For years, a two-state solution has been the avowed goal of U.S.-led diplomacy, and it is still widely seen as the only arrangement that could plausibly meet the national aspirations of two peoples living in a single land. Establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel is also the principal demand of most Arab and Western governments, as well as the United Nations and other international bodies. U.S. officials have therefore fallen back on the rhetoric and concepts of previous decades to find some silver lining in the carnage. With the unspeakable horrors of the October 7 attack and of the ongoing war on Gaza making clear that the status quo is unsustainable, they argue that there is now a window to achieve a larger settlement: Washington can both push the Israelis and the Palestinians to finally embrace the elusive goal of two states coexisting peacefully side by side and at the same time secure normalization between Israel and the Arab world.

But the idea of a Palestinian state emerging from the rubble of Gaza has no basis in reality. Long before October 7, it was clear that the basic elements needed for a two-state solution no longer existed. Israel had elected a right-wing government that included officials who were openly opposed to two states. The Palestinian leadership recognized by the West—the Palestinian Authority (PA)—had become deeply unpopular among Palestinians.

And Israeli settlements had grown to the extent that creating a viable, contiguous Palestinian state had become almost impossible. For nearly a quarter century, there had also been no serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and no major constituency in Israeli politics supported resuming them. Hamas’s shocking attack on Israel and Israel’s subsequent months-long obliteration of Gaza have only exacerbated and accelerated those trends.

The principal effect of talking again about two states is to mask a one-state reality that will almost surely become even more entrenched in the war’s aftermath. It would be good if the Israelis and the Palestinians could negotiate a peaceful division of land and people into two sovereign states. But they cannot. In repeated public statements in January, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear not just that he opposes a Palestinian state but also that there will continue to be, as he put it, “full Israeli security control over all of the territory west of the Jordan [River]”—land that would include East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. In other words, Israel seems likely to continue to rule over millions of Palestinian noncitizens through an apartheid-like governance structure in which those Palestinians are denied full rights in perpetuity.

Israel’s politicians bear most of the responsibility for this grim reality as it developed over decades, aided by weak Palestinian leaders and indifferent Arab governments. But no external party shares more blame than the United States, which has enabled and defended the most right-wing government in Israel’s history. The Biden

administration cannot create peace just by calling for it. But it could recognize that its rhetoric about a two-state future has failed and shift toward an approach focused on dealing with the situation as it is. This would entail making sure that Israel adheres to international law and liberal norms for all people in the territories under its control, upholding Biden's pledge to promote "equal measures of freedom, justice, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians alike." Such an approach, which would bring U.S. policy more in line with its avowed aspirations, would be far more likely to protect and serve both the Israelis and the Palestinians—and support global U.S. interests.

THE MAKINGS OF MAYHEM

Hamas's horrific October 7 attack has sometimes been described as an "invasion" in which militants breached the "border" between Israel and Gaza. But there is no border between the territory and Israel, any more than there is a border between Israel and the West Bank. Borders demarcate lines of sovereignty between states—and the Palestinians do not have a state.

The Gaza Strip came under Egyptian control during the 1948 war, when the state of Israel was established. In 1967, Israel conquered Gaza, along with the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Over the next 26 years, Israel directly governed the small, densely packed strip, introducing Jewish settlements as it did in the other territories it captured. In 1993, following the Oslo accords, Israel handed over some daily management of Gaza to the PA but retained effective domination with a permanent military

presence, control over its land perimeter and airspace, and oversight of its finances and tax revenues.

In 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and dismantle Israeli settlements there. But that did not change the fundamental realities of occupation. Although the Palestinians were left to determine the internal governance of the strip, Israel retained absolute power over shared boundaries, shorelines, and airspace, with Egypt policing Gaza's sole border along the Sinai Peninsula, closely coordinating with Israel. As a result, Israel, with Egyptian assistance, controlled everything that went in or out of Gaza—food, building supplies, medicine, people.

After Hamas won elections in Gaza in 2006 and then consolidated power there in 2007, the Israeli government found it useful for the Islamist organization to police the strip indefinitely, thus leaving the Palestinians with divided leadership and defusing international pressure on Israel to negotiate. Meanwhile, Israel imposed a blockade on the territory, effectively cutting it off from the rest of the world. Hamas, in turn, significantly expanded the system of underground tunnels it had inherited from Israel to circumvent the blockade, strengthen its hold on Gaza's economy and politics, and build its military capabilities. Episodic eruptions of conflict—usually involving rocket barrages by Hamas followed by retaliatory strikes by Israel—allowed Hamas to demonstrate its resistance credentials and Israel to show that it was "mowing the grass," degrading Hamas's military capabilities and infrastructure and often killing hundreds of civilians

without challenging the organization's internal control. Gaza's young population suffered under the blockade and the intermittent violence, but Hamas maintained a lock on power.

In the years leading up to October 7, this status quo in Gaza—and the parallel administration of the West Bank by an enfeebled PA—seemed deplorable but sustainable to many observers in both the region and the West. Thus, the Biden administration could simply set aside the Palestinian issue in its push for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia; Israeli politicians could bicker over antidemocratic judicial reforms and Netanyahu's power grabs, even as a sustained Israeli protest movement largely overlooked the government's creeping annexation of the West Bank. The shock and outrage provoked by Hamas's brutal attack and Israel's extraordinary retaliation shattered that illusion, making clear that ignoring a demonstrably unjust situation was not only unsustainable but highly dangerous and that the regional order could not be remade without acknowledging the plight of the Palestinians.

NEITHER TWO STATES NOR ONE

As the war in Gaza has unfolded, many Israelis have argued that there can be no return to the status quo, by which they mean no cease-fire without the total "destruction" of Hamas. But the alternatives to Hamas rule that Israeli leaders have proposed are very much a continuation of the existing situation. Israel is not suddenly conquering Gaza: it never ceased controlling it, a reality that is all too present for Gazans who have suffered for 17 years under the

Israeli blockade. It is more accurate to say that Israel, which has been the sovereign occupying power in Gaza for 56 years under a variety of political configurations, is once again attempting to rewrite the rules of its domination. And as the Israeli government has made clear, it has no intention of pursuing a renewed quest for a Palestinian state.

Israelis had soured on a two-state solution long before October 7. Over the past decade, the Israeli peace camp, represented by the Meretz Party, had declined electorally to the point of near elimination; in 2022, it failed to cross the electoral threshold for Knesset representation. The current Israeli government had all but disavowed a two-state outcome and included right-wing members who openly aspired to full annexation of Gaza and the West Bank. October 7 accelerated the trend. The Israeli public has overwhelmingly lost what little faith remained in a two-state outcome, as a settler movement intent on dominating all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea has relentlessly risen to power.

Some would argue that those settlers wield such influence only because Netanyahu relies on them to stay in power. But the problem is much greater. Most Israelis today are similarly uninterested in either a two-state solution or a one-state solution based on equality for all residents in the territory under Israeli control; many also feel that the October 7 attack confirmed their worst fears about the Palestinians. Whether acknowledged or not, the rejection of both a two-state outcome and a single state based on equality for all leaves two possibilities: the further entrenching of Jewish supremacy and apartheid-like



controls over a non-Jewish population that will soon outnumber Jewish Israelis, or the large-scale transfer of Palestinians from the land, as some Israeli cabinet ministers have openly called for.

On the Palestinian side, the stature of the PA, which has been key to Washington's thinking about postwar Gaza, has crumbled. Along with its inability to stem Israeli policies, it is plagued by perceptions of corruption and the lack of an electoral mandate. Today, hardly any Palestinians still support PA President Mahmoud Abbas. (One poll conducted in late November during the brief cease-fire in Gaza placed his support at seven percent.) Meanwhile, Hamas's popularity among the Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank, has risen. Recent polling shows that there is still some support for a two-state solution among the Palestinians but virtually no confidence in the United States to deliver it.

This is the stark political reality that those who push for a two-state negoti-

ating framework will face. Neither the leadership nor the public on either side supports such a process. The facts on the ground—a vast and ever-growing Israeli security and road infrastructure designed to connect and protect Jewish settlements across the West Bank, combined with the near-complete destruction of Gaza—make a viable Palestinian state almost inconceivable. And the United States has given no sign that it is willing to exert the power necessary to overcome those obstacles.

Some now lament that October 7 struck mortal blows to both the two-state solution and a just and peaceful one-state alternative. But neither had been on offer. The main effect of the war thus far has been to lay bare and dramatically increase the injustices of a single state based on the economic, legal, and military subjugation of one group by another—a situation that violates international law and offends liberal values. This is the situation that

must be confronted before the question of two states can be broached. And it is here that the United States could make a significant difference.

CRITICAL CONDITIONS

Instead of pushing for a two-state outcome that has almost no prospect of materializing, Washington should recognize the current reality and use its influence to enforce adherence to international laws and norms by all parties. The United States has long avoided holding Israel to those standards; the Biden administration has gone further, shielding Israel from the United States' own laws. (In January, an investigation by *The Guardian* found that since 2020, the U.S. State Department had used "special mechanisms" to continue providing weapons to Israel despite a U.S. law prohibiting assistance to foreign military units involved in gross human rights violations.) That needs to change. Simply by upholding the rules-based liberal international order, Washington could do much to mitigate the darkest injustices of the present situation. Such an approach would not be about Washington dictating what the Israelis and the Palestinians should do. Rather, it is about ending the anomalous practice of using significant U.S. resources to empower behavior that the U.S. finds objectionable and that even conflicts with U.S. interests.

A rules-based approach to managing the postwar situation in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem would need to involve several components. First, the United States should abandon its refusal (at least as of this writing) to call for a cease-fire and seek an end to the war in Gaza and the return of

Israeli hostages as quickly as possible. A cease-fire would stop the daily killing of hundreds of Palestinians and allow for humanitarian assistance to enter the territory, forestalling the rapid spread of famine and infectious disease. It would also end Hamas's rocket fire at Israel, de-escalate tensions with Hezbollah on the Israeli-Lebanese border, and allow displaced Israelis to return to their border towns. And it might even lead Yemen's Houthis to end their campaign against Red Sea shipping, which has perilously widened the war. (Both Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and members of the Houthis have said in public statements that they would stop attacks in the event of a cease-fire, and Nasrallah has asserted that attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-backed militias would also end.)

By failing to call for a cease-fire throughout the fall of 2023 and into 2024, the Biden administration not only allowed the war to spread dangerously but also emboldened Israel's far-right government to significantly augment its repression and destruction of Palestinian communities, including in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. If Biden is unable to demand an end to the war at a time when there is near-global unanimity on the need for a cease-fire, and a clear majority of Americans—some three in five according to a late December poll—support such a step, he will hardly be able to position the United States to provide bold leadership for the so-called day after.

But a cease-fire alone is not enough to end deeply unlawful conduct. The excesses of the war on Gaza have been so extreme that many international observers, they have left international

law in tatters. One outcome has been to isolate Washington and undermine its claim of defending international norms and the liberal international order. The fact that South Africa, one of the leaders of the global South, has accused Israel of the extraordinary charge of genocide before the International Court of Justice suggests the extent to which many parts of the world are no longer in line with Washington and its Western allies, undermining U.S. leadership in international institutions. In a preliminary ruling on January 26, the court determined that some alleged Israeli actions in Gaza plausibly constitute violations of the UN Genocide Convention. Although the court did not demand a cease-fire, it ordered a sweeping set of measures Israel must undertake to limit harm to Palestinian civilians. If Washington continues unconditional support for Israel in Gaza without demanding adherence to those measures, it may appear even more complicit in the war. It is imperative that the United States support international accountability for alleged war crimes on all sides.

Following a cease-fire, the United States must get serious about pushing Israel to shift course. So far, U.S. policymakers' efforts to outline a postwar plan for Gaza have been repeatedly rebuffed by Israeli officials. Israel has dismissed the idea of returning the PA to Gaza, which is a cornerstone of current U.S. strategy. Instead, Israeli politicians talk openly about restoring illegal settlements and creating a buffer zone in northern Gaza and seem intent on forcing large numbers of Palestinians out of the territory— notions that flout explicit American redlines. Meanwhile, Netanyahu's government has systematically

ignored even the most anodyne requests to minimize the killing of civilians, allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid, plan for a postwar Gaza, and help rebuild the PA. Israel's current strategy seems likely to end in either the mass expulsion of Gazans or a perpetual, costly, and violent counterinsurgency. The United States has actively opposed the former, in line with the forcefully expressed positions of its allies in Jordan and Egypt, and the latter would only be made worse the longer Israeli troops remain in Gaza. But the Biden administration has refused to impose any consequences to attempt to compel Israel to accept those demands.

To overcome Israeli intransigence, the United States must stop shielding Israel from the consequences of severe violations of international law and norms at the United Nations and other international organizations. Such a step in itself could start an essential policy debate within Israel and among the Palestinians, which could open up new possibilities. At the same time, the White House should condition further aid to Israel on adherence to U.S. law and international norms and should encourage similar efforts in Congress instead of opposing them. It should also instruct U.S. government agencies to follow the law and international rules in providing assistance to Israel rather than seeking creative ways to subvert them.

Indeed, Biden's reluctance to tie military aid to Israel to human rights or even to U.S. law has already led to extraordinary moves by members of his own party. Consider the resolution proposed in December by Maryland Senator Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat, and 12 of his colleagues to condition

supplemental military aid to Israel and Ukraine on the requirement that weapons are used in accordance with U.S. law, international humanitarian law, and the law of armed conflict. Similarly, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent, proposed a resolution that would make military aid to Israel contingent on a U.S. State Department review of possible human rights violations in the war. But as has already been shown with the defeat of Sanders's proposal in January, such efforts are unlikely to succeed without presidential leadership, especially in an election year in which congressional Democrats are reluctant to undermine the electoral prospects of their already unpopular president. Only the White House can successfully lead on this issue.

RULES FOR REALITY

Paradoxically, the traumas experienced by the Palestinians and the Israelis since October 7 have demonstrated both the urgent need for a two-state solution and the improbability of establishing one. The White House could still try, if it were willing to use American muscle to reopen a path to a Palestinian state. But nothing in its current approach suggests it will do more than continue to offer lip service to the goal while enabling the horrific reality.

The pain and shock of war for both the Israelis and the Palestinians could propel internal reassessments—and new leadership—on both sides at a time when no other good outcome is in view. Perhaps Biden may be able to rally Arab states to normalize relations with Israel, as the White House so desperately wants, on the condition that Israel agree to a two-state process. But

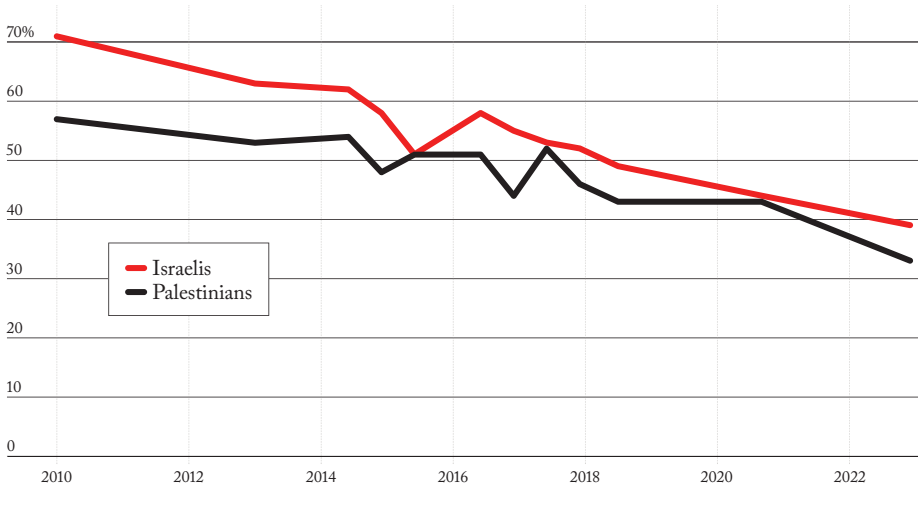
few Palestinians, or other parties that might be involved in such a plan, seem likely to trust U.S. leadership, given the administration's record during and preceding the war. American credibility in the Middle East is at an all-time low.

At this juncture, any two-state initiative would need to deliver concrete, upfront results to have even a chance of success. Those tangible benefits would need to be weighted more heavily toward the Palestinians, given the extremity of their circumstances. For example, Biden could immediately recognize a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, commit to no longer defending Israeli settlements at the United Nations, and make military aid to Israel conditional on Israel adhering to international law and refraining from any actions that undermine a Palestinian state. The United States could also pledge to guarantee Israeli security within Israel's internationally agreed-on borders. But it is highly unlikely that Israel would accept any of these terms, and there is nothing in Biden's history to suggest he is capable of applying the necessary pressure to carry them out.

Advocates of a renewed push for a two-state solution will claim that it is the most realistic option. It manifestly is not. No matter how the war in Gaza ends, it is improbable that a two-state solution—or an equitable one-state solution, for that matter—will be on offer. Indeed, there is no immediate path forward without first coming to terms with the darker one-state reality that Israel has consolidated. U.S. policy, therefore, should be centered not on implausible efforts to revive talks of unachievable outcomes but on forcefully spelling out the legal and human

ERODING TERRITORY

Percentage of respondents supporting a two-state solution



Sources: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, with Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University.

rights standards it expects to be met. Washington can use its power to oppose conditions and policies it will not support, whether that is the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza, the continued seizure of Palestinian land in the West Bank, or the continuation and deepening of an apartheid-like system of military administration in Palestinian areas. Those limits must be made clear, and they must be enforced. The United States should back international justice mechanisms and accountability for war crimes by all parties. It should demand adherence to international human rights law and norms in the treatment of all people under Israel's effective control, whether or not they are Israeli citizens. And it must refuse to continue business as usual with any government that violates these standards.

In setting concrete legal boundaries for the present situation, the United

States would regain some of the credibility it has lost in the Middle East and the global South. By bringing the current reality more in line with international law, Washington could begin to create the conditions in which a better political landscape could one day emerge. It's time for the U.S. government to take responsibility for the failed approach that has led to this devastating war. Decades of exempting Israel from international standards while pursuing empty and toothless talk of an unattainable two-state future has severely undermined the United States' standing in the world. Washington should stop using its power to enable blatant violations of international rights and norms. Until it does so, a profoundly unjust and illiberal status quo will continue, and the United States will be perpetuating the problem rather than solving it. 🌐

THE FIGHT FOR A NEW MIDDLE EAST

Only the Middle East Can Fix the Middle East

The Path to a Post-American Regional Order

DALIA DASSA KAYE AND SANAM VAKIL

In the early weeks of 2024, as the catastrophic war in the Gaza Strip began to inflame the broader region, the stability of the Middle East appeared to be once again at the center of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. In the initial days after Hamas's October 7 attacks, the Biden administration moved two aircraft carrier strike groups and a nuclear-powered submarine to the Middle East, while a steady stream of senior U.S. officials, including President Joe Biden, began making high-profile trips to the region. Then, as the conflict became more difficult to contain, the United States went further. In early November, in response to attacks on U.S. military personnel in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-backed groups, the United

States conducted strikes on weapons sites in Syria used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; in early January, U.S. forces killed a senior commander of one of these groups in Baghdad. And in mid-January, after weeks of attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea by the Houthi movement, which is also supported by Iran, the United States, together with the United Kingdom, initiated a series of strikes on Houthi strongholds in Yemen.

Despite this show of force, it would be unwise to bet on the United States' committing major diplomatic and security resources to the Middle East over the longer term. Well before Hamas's October 7 attacks, successive U.S. administrations had signaled their

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intent to shift away from the region to devote more attention to a rising China. The Biden administration has also been contending with Russia's war in Ukraine, further limiting its bandwidth for coping with the Middle East. By 2023, U.S. officials had largely given up on a revived nuclear agreement with Iran, seeking instead to reach informal de-escalation arrangements with their Iranian counterparts. At the same time, the administration was bolstering the military capacity of regional partners such as Saudi Arabia in an effort to transfer some of the security burden from Washington. Despite Biden's early reluctance to do business with Riyadh—whose leadership U.S. intelligence believes was responsible for the 2018 killing of the Saudi journalist and *Washington Post* contributor Jamal Khashoggi—the president prioritized a deal to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. In pursuing the deal, the United States was willing to offer significant incentives to both sides while mostly ignoring the Palestinian issue.

October 7 upended this approach, underscoring the centrality of the Palestinian issue and forcing the United States into more direct military engagement. Yet remarkably, the war in Gaza has not led to significant shifts in Washington's underlying policy orientation. The administration continues to push for Saudi normalization despite Israeli opposition to a separate state for the Palestinians, which the Saudis have made a condition of any such agreement. And U.S. officials seem unlikely to end their effort to disentangle the United

States from Middle East conflicts. If anything, the war's increasingly complicated dynamics may result in even less U.S. appetite for engagement in the region. Doubling down on commitments in the Middle East is also not likely to be a winning strategy for either American political party in a crucial election year.

Of course, the United States will continue to be involved in the Middle East. If missile strikes on U.S. forces result in American deaths or if a terrorist attack linked to the Gaza conflict kills American civilians, it could force a greater U.S. military engagement than the administration might want. But waiting for the United States to take the lead in effectively managing Gaza and delivering a lasting Middle East peace would be like waiting for Godot: current regional and global dynamics simply make it too difficult for Washington to play that dominant role. That doesn't mean that other global powers will replace the United States. Neither European nor Chinese leaders have demonstrated much interest in or capacity for taking on the job, even as U.S. influence wanes. Given this emerging reality, regional powers—particularly Israel's immediate Arab neighbors Egypt and Jordan, along with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have been coordinating since the war began—urgently need to step up and define a collective way forward.

Finding common ground after Hamas's brutal October 7 attacks and Israel's devastating campaign in Gaza will be exceptionally difficult. And the longer the war continues,

the greater the risk of broader fractures across the Middle East. But in the years preceding the attacks, both Arab and non-Arab states showed the potential for new forms of cooperation in what amounted to a major reset of relations across the region. Even after months of war, many of these ties have remained intact. Now, before this trend reverses, these governments must come together to build lasting mechanisms for conflict prevention and, ultimately, peace.

Most urgently, regional powers must support a meaningful political process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. But they should also take decisive steps to prevent such a cataclysm from happening again. In particular, they should seek to establish new and stronger regional security arrangements that can provide stability with or without U.S. leadership. It is well past time for the Middle East to have a standing forum for regional security that establishes a permanent venue for dialogue among its own powers. Gleaning opportunity from tragedy will take hard work and a commitment at the highest political levels. But as distant as this vision may seem today, the potential exists for Middle East leaders to arrest the spiral of violence and move the region in a more positive direction.

ANXIETIES OF INFLUENCE

Despite mounting frustration with the Biden administration for not taking decisive action to end the war, some Arab leaders, along with pro-interventionists in Washington, may be eager to see the United States “back” in the Middle East. The Biden

administration’s swift diplomatic and military response—and its willingness to use force against Iranian-aligned groups—has suggested that the region is once more at the heart of U.S. national security concerns. In fact, in terms of military might, the United States never left: at the time of the October 7 attacks, tens of thousands of U.S. forces were already stationed in the region, and Washington continues to maintain sizable military bases in Bahrain and Qatar, as well as smaller military deployments in Syria and Iraq.

But the United States’ military and diplomatic activity since October 7 has not instilled confidence. For one thing, the administration’s effort to prevent a wider regional conflict has been decidedly mixed. At one of the most concerning flash points, Israel’s simmering conflict with Hezbollah on the Lebanese border, Washington has been unable to prevent growing violence on both sides. Along with significant military and civilian casualties, tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to evacuate towns in northern Israel and southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has thus far refused to withdraw its forces from the border in exchange for economic incentives, and Israel—which has already assassinated a top Hamas official in Beirut—has signaled that time is running out for diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the United States has struggled to contain military pressure from Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Since the start of the war, U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have faced more than 150 attacks from these groups. And despite a series of retaliatory strikes by the United States and the United Kingdom, Washington

has been unable to put an end to the Houthis' relentless missile and drone attacks in the Red Sea. Already, the Houthis have been able to cause significant disruptions to international trade, forcing major shipping companies to avoid the Suez Canal. Notably, U.S. attempts to corral a multinational maritime force to counter the threat have been unable to attract regional partners such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, which remain wary of the administration's Gaza policies.

As Washington's military leverage diminishes, its diplomatic muscle has also weakened. Rather than showing resolve, the continual visits of senior administration officials to the region have demonstrated how little sway the United States retains—or in the case of Israel, the administration's unwillingness to use it. During the initial months of the war, one of the administration's few apparent accomplishments was a one-week pause in fighting in late November, which led to the release of over 100 Israeli and foreign hostages and a modest delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza. But even in that case, Qatari and Egyptian mediation was crucial. Otherwise, the United States has been unwilling (at least as of this writing) to call for a cease-fire, and the administration's public diplomacy has mostly been limited to rhetorical efforts to restrain the worst impulses of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government.

The administration has been more vocal in promoting "day after" peace ideas focused on what it calls a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority leadership in the West Bank and Gaza and regional support for rebuilding Gaza.

But regional powers, particularly the wealthy Gulf Arab states, have made clear that they will not endorse such plans without irreversible steps toward Palestinian statehood. After U.S. officials began speaking more publicly about the need for a two-state solution as part of a larger normalization pact with Saudi Arabia, Netanyahu flatly rejected the possibility and insisted that Israel must remain in full security control of Palestinian areas. But even centrist Israeli officials expressed astonishment that the United States was pressing peace initiatives while the all-out war against Hamas was continuing. Meanwhile, the administration's backing of Israel in the fighting and its perceived lack of empathy for Palestinian suffering have created significant obstacles to attracting regional support, let alone Palestinian buy-in, for any American-led plan.

The United States will continue to be a major player in the region because of its military assets and its unparalleled relationship with Israel. But any expectation that Washington will be able to achieve a grand bargain that could definitively end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is detached from the realities of today's Middle East. In the end, major diplomatic breakthroughs are most likely to come from, and depend on, the region itself.

GOING IT ALONE, TOGETHER

The consequences of Washington's diminishing influence in the Middle East have not been limited to the current conflict. As U.S. engagement in the region declined in the years leading up to October 7, major regional powers

steadily increased their efforts to shape and set security arrangements. Indeed, beginning in 2019, governments across the region began to mend previously fraught relations. This unusual regional reset was driven not only by economic priorities—overcoming frictions that had previously disrupted or held back trade and growth—but also by the perception that Washington’s interest in managing Middle East conflicts was waning.

Take the rapprochement between the Gulf states and Iran. In 2019, the UAE began restoring bilateral ties with Iran after a three-year rupture, seeing an opportunity to directly manage relations and protect its interests from Iranian-backed groups that had been disrupting Gulf shipping and threatening Emirati tourism and trade. Abu Dhabi formally resumed diplomatic ties with Tehran in 2022, paving the way for Riyadh to follow suit. In March 2023, the longtime rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran announced that they were resuming relations in an accord brokered by China after months of back-channel talks moderated by Oman and Iraq. The United States had no part in these deals.

Meanwhile, in 2021, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE ended a three-and-a-half-year blockade of Qatar that had been motivated principally by Qatar’s backing of Muslim Brotherhood groups, its close ties with Iran and Turkey, and its activist Al Jazeera television channel. Around the same time, the UAE and Saudi Arabia reconciled with Turkey, which they had previously shunned in response to Turkish support for Qatar and for groups affiliated with the

Muslim Brotherhood. (Saudi-Turkish ties had also been strained because of a Turkish judicial investigation into the murder of Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.) By resuming ties, the Saudis and Emiratis opened the door to crucial Gulf investment in the struggling Turkish economy. And in May 2023, Arab leaders invited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad back into the Arab League, marking the end of more than a decade of isolation during Syria’s brutal civil war.

As part of this broader reset, governments across the Middle East also began to participate in a variety of regional forums. The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, which met for the first time in Baghdad in 2021 and again in Amman in 2022 to discuss Iraq’s stability, convened a wide array of previous rivals—including Iran and Turkey, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and Jordan and Egypt. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, established in 2020, brought together Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, and Jordan, along with representatives from the Palestinian Authority, in what is designed to be a regular dialogue built around gas security and decarbonization. And the so-called I2U2, a group that includes India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States, was set up in 2021 to foster cross-regional partnerships focusing on health, infrastructure, and energy.

Another aspect of this regional reset was Israel’s normalization with several Arab governments. In the 2020 Abraham Accords, Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE agreed to establish formal ties with Israel, creating opportunities

for new economic relations and trade. Notably, one goal of the accords was to pave the way for new direct security relationships between Israel and the Arab world. Before the October 7 attacks, the Biden administration had high hopes that Saudi Arabia, as a leading member of the Arab world, would also join this group. Building on those accords, the March 2022 Negev Summit brought together Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the UAE, and the United States to encourage economic and security cooperation in what was intended to be a regular meeting.

Glaringly absent from the normalization deals, however, was the Palestinian issue, which was largely set aside. As a result, Jordan refused to participate in the Negev Summit, and as tensions over Israel's settlements in the West Bank flared in early 2023, a further meeting of the group was repeatedly postponed. Now, with the devastation of Gaza, any further progress will be contingent on not just ending the war but also building a viable plan for a Palestinian state.

RUPTURES AND RESILIENCE

In theory, the catastrophic war in Gaza would seem to pose a grave threat to the Middle East reset. In most cases, newly established regional relations are still fragile and have yet to address thorny issues such as weapons proliferation, the continued backing of militant groups in Libya and Sudan by the UAE, Iran's support for armed nonstate militia groups across the region, and Syria's export of the drug Captagon. Along with endangering Israel's fledgling normalization

of relations with Arab governments, the intensifying involvement of Iranian-backed groups—from Hezbollah and the Houthis to various militias in Syria and Iraq—has the potential to create new fissures between Iran and the Gulf states. Yet so far, the emerging realignments have proved surprisingly durable.

Rather than derailing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Gaza war seems to have strengthened them. In November 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi attended a rare joint meeting of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation hosted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, and the following month, Iranian and Saudi leaders met again in Beijing to discuss the Gaza war. The two countries have also planned an exchange of state visits by Raisi and Mohammed in the coming months—meetings that are supposed to formalize new economic and security ties. And despite simmering tensions over the Houthis in particular, the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers met at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024, as well.

Meanwhile, diplomatic ties between Israel and its Abraham Accord partners have so far held. The UAE has made clear that it views dialogue with the Israeli government, even in the current crisis, as an important way to make progress on an Israeli-Palestinian political settlement. And although Bahrain's parliament has condemned the sustained assault on Gaza, the country has not formally severed ties with Israel. For both Arab states, normalization is not

just about strengthening economic bonds with Israel but also reinforcing strategic ties with the United States. For despite Washington's perceived shift away from the region in recent years, Gulf Arab states still seek U.S. security guarantees and protection: in January 2022, Biden designated Qatar as a "major non-NATO ally," and in September 2023, Bahrain and the United States signed an agreement to strengthen their strategic partnership.

Certainly, the war has created new obstacles to regional cooperation, particularly when it comes to Israel and neighboring states. Both Turkey and Jordan have withdrawn their ambassadors from Israel, and direct flights between Israel and Morocco stopped in October. By late January, with more than 26,000 killed in Gaza and no cease-fire in sight, Arab public opinion was more strongly opposed to normalization than ever. Many also fear that the U.S. and British military strikes on the Houthis could embolden the group in Yemen and set back efforts to formalize a long-sought cease-fire in the Houthis' nearly decadelong war in Yemen with Saudi Arabia. And although Gulf Arab states have made a commitment to continue reaching out diplomatically to Tehran, few officials in the region are hopeful that Iran will alter its approach of "forward defense," in which it relies on militant groups to build strategic leverage and maintain deterrence. In mid-January, Tehran's direct missile strikes on Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria in response to Israeli strikes and an attack by the Islamic State in the Iranian city of Kerman increased tensions further.

For now, there are indications that Middle East leaders seek to transcend these disputes. For example, to manage growing economic pressure and unrest at home, Iran has given new priority to regional business and trade relations not only with Gulf Arab states but also with Iraq, Turkey, and Central Asian countries, as well as China and Russia. This points to the pragmatic impulses driving Tehran's message that it seeks to avoid direct engagement in the Gaza conflict despite its backing of various proxy groups. But as tit-for-tat attacks mount across the region in the absence of a Gaza cease-fire, Iran's calculations could very well shift.

THE GAZA EFFECT

Paradoxically, one of the strongest forces holding the region together may be the plight of Gaza itself and the Palestinian issue, which the war has so starkly brought to world attention. Facing overwhelming popular anger and the long-term potential for radicalization and the return of extremist groups, regional leaders have largely aligned their policy responses to the war. Despite divergent strategies toward Israel and the Palestinians before October 7, governments around the Middle East are broadly united on demanding an immediate cease-fire, opposing any transfer of Palestinians out of Gaza, calling for humanitarian access to Gaza and for the urgent provision of aid, and supporting negotiations for the release of Israeli hostages in return for an end to the war. The question now is whether this unity can be steered toward building a legitimate peace process.



For many regional Arab and Muslim countries, the highest priority has been defining a clear plan for Gaza and, ultimately, Palestinian statehood. Israeli leaders have suggested that Gulf states with substantial resources, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, might share the cost of rebuilding Gaza. But Israel's current government has said it opposes a Palestinian state, and with the war continuing, no Arab governments are willing to make such a commitment or be seen to be underwriting Israel's war effort. Instead, they have unveiled their own proposals for a postwar peace.

In December 2023, Egypt and Qatar put forward a plan that began with a cease-fire contingent on phased hostage releases and prisoner exchanges. After a transition period, these confidence-building steps would, in theory, lead to the creation of a Palestinian unity government. Composed of members of both Fatah,

the nationalist party that has long controlled the PA, and Hamas, the new leadership would jointly run the West Bank and Gaza, in view of a critical regional demand that the different Palestinian territories no longer be politically separated. This last phase would require Palestinian elections and the creation of a Palestinian state. Although Israel dismissed the plan itself, both for the inclusion of Hamas and over the issue of statehood, it provided a starting point for further discussion.

In turn, Turkey has floated the concept of a multicountry guarantor system, with states in the region protecting and bolstering Palestinian security and governance and the United States and European countries providing security guarantees for Israel. Others have proposed that the United Nations run a transitional authority in the West Bank and Gaza, an approach that would allow time

to overhaul the Palestinian governance structure and ultimately lay the groundwork for Palestinian elections. For its part, Iran has repeatedly stated that it will reinforce any outcome that is supported by the Palestinians themselves—suggesting that there is a renewed opportunity to persuade Tehran to support a deal and forestall its usual spoiler role.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been developing a peace plan with other Arab states that would condition normalizing ties with Israel on the creation of an irrevocable path to a Palestinian state. Riyadh's approach is underpinned by the 2002 Arab peace initiative that committed to Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for the creation of a Palestinian state in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. The current Saudi plan aligns with Washington's push for Israeli-Saudi normalization. It remains unclear, however, whether the Saudis would agree with their American counterparts on what constitutes credible and irreversible steps toward a Palestinian state, particularly given strong Israeli resistance.

Under Netanyahu, the Israeli government continues to reject all these proposals. But as of late January, Israel remained far from accomplishing its war aim of eradicating Hamas, and it had yet to secure the release of more than 100 remaining hostages. There were also rising tensions in both the war cabinet and the Israeli public about the future course of the military campaign. Moreover, the country has deferred any serious public or political debate on its future security until the war is over. When that hap-

pens, Israel will need to have open diplomatic channels with, and secure funding and security guarantees from, Arab governments, as well as retain Washington's engagement through the process.

It may take years to establish the necessary political conditions for a serious peace process after such a terrible war. Nonetheless, the conflict and its regional spillover are a stark reminder that although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the only cause, regional stability will be at constant risk as long as it continues. And regional governments are increasingly aware that they cannot rely on the United States alone to provide a viable peace process for them.

RIVALS INTO NEIGHBORS

Even as it has thrust the Palestinian issue back to the forefront of the international agenda, the war in Gaza has underscored the important new political dynamics in play across the Middle East. On the one hand, the United States appears to have less influence. But at the same time, regional powers, including those previously at odds, are taking the initiative, involving themselves in mediation, and coordinating their policy responses. Whereas before October 7, regional powers—in particular, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE—were less aligned on the Palestinian issue, they are now acting with impressive unity, coordination, and planning. To turn this shared resolve into a lasting source of collective leadership, however, these powers must embrace more permanent regional institutions and arrangements.

Most critically, these should include a standing dialogue forum for the entire region. Episodic summits for cabinet ministers and ad hoc “mini-lateral” groupings such as the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and I2U2 will no doubt continue to define the regional landscape in the years ahead. But a permanent forum for regional security is lacking. In other parts of the world, cooperative security forums, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have been able to develop alongside bilateral and regional security alliances, enhancing communication even among adversaries and helping prevent conflict. There is no reason for the Middle East to remain the global exception. And given the region’s pressing need to coordinate and de-escalate, the current crisis provides a crucial opportunity to begin such an initiative.

Although leaders have been skeptical about the idea of a forum embracing the entire region, there are several ways that new cooperative security mechanisms could be built. For example, ever since the Madrid peace process was launched in the early 1990s to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such arrangements have been informally proposed in dialogues among experts. Over the past few years, numerous policymakers and others have made clear that this approach is ripe for implementation at an official level. Although such a forum should ultimately aim to include the entire region—all Arab states, Iran, Israel, and Turkey—that won’t immediately be feasible. But a

smaller number of key states could start an official process, holding open the prospect of wider participation down the road. Since several Arab states and Turkey have relationships with both Israel and Iran, their participation will be especially valuable at the outset.

The new organization, which could be called the MENA Forum, to encompass the broadest understanding of the Middle East and North Africa region, should initially focus on cross-cutting issues on which there is broad consensus, such as climate, energy, and emergency responses to crises. Although the resolution of the Gaza war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will likely need to be led through a separate Arab initiative, the forum could coordinate positions on postwar Gaza through its emergency response agenda, including humanitarian support and reconstruction aid for Palestinians. The forum would not directly mediate conflicts itself: cooperative security dialogues have proved most effective when focused on improving communication and coordination to defuse tensions and on providing mutual security and socioeconomic benefits to members. But through regular contacts and a gradual building of trust, such a process could support conflict resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and beyond.

Indeed, standing regional meetings can provide important opportunities, not to mention political cover, for dialogues on contentious disputes among rivals and adversaries who otherwise lack direct channels of communication. These could include

not only Israelis and Palestinians but eventually also Israelis and Iranians, who could meet in technical working groups on noncontroversial issues of mutual concern. Such interactions have already quietly unfolded on the sidelines of other multilateral forums focused on climate and water, suggesting that more inclusive regional cooperation is ultimately possible.

Establishing a Middle East security forum will require political will at the highest levels, as well as a strong regional champion that is considered a neutral party. One possibility is to announce the new organization at a meeting of foreign ministers, possibly on the margins of another regional gathering, like one of the economic sessions that have been held at the Dead Sea in Jordan. The initiative will be more likely to succeed if it is both created and led from the region. Middle powers in Asia and Europe could provide political and technical support in areas where they may have valuable expertise, for example. At least at the outset, China, Russia, and the United States should have limited roles to prevent the forum from turning into another platform for great-power competition. Nonetheless, support from both Washington and Beijing will be critical to ensure that the forum becomes a useful supplement, rather than a threat, to their own diplomacy in the region.

A TIME TO LEAD

Among the difficult realities that the war in Gaza has exposed, one of the starkest may be the limits of American power. As much as it may be wished for, the United States is unlikely to

provide the decisive leadership or the leverage needed to push through a lasting Israeli-Palestinian settlement. It will be up to the Middle East's own leaders and diplomats to take charge. By capturing the region's attention and diplomatic energy, the war has provided a rare opportunity for new forms of cooperative leadership.

A regional security forum cannot by itself deliver Middle East peace—no single initiative can do that. And without accountable governance, genuine long-term stability will remain elusive. Nor is an organization like this going to replace all the competitive power balancing that has long been a hallmark of Middle East statecraft. Even in Asia and Europe, cooperative arrangements have not supplanted national strategic rivalries or been able to foreclose military confrontation, as the war in Ukraine has so painfully demonstrated. Nonetheless, a regular forum would add a crucial layer of stability to the conflict-prone Middle East. Such a project is also increasingly urgent.

Although October 7 has not yet reversed all the regional currents favoring de-escalation and accommodation, time may be running out to capitalize on this reset. Leading Arab states, together with regional powers such as Turkey, must seize the moment to lock in some of the rapprochement that preceded Gaza and the coordination that has arisen since. The Middle East is facing a moment of reckoning. If it becomes paralyzed by the horrific bloodshed in Gaza, it could further descend into crisis and conflict. Or it can start building a different future. 🌍

Israel's Self-Destruction

Netanyahu, the Palestinians, and the Price of Neglect

ALUF BENN

One bright day in April 1956, Moshe Dayan, the one-eyed chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), drove south to Nahal Oz, a recently established kibbutz near the border of the Gaza Strip. Dayan came to attend the funeral of 21-year-old Roi Rotberg, who had been murdered the previous morning by Palestinians while he was patrolling the fields on horseback. The killers dragged Rotberg's body to the other side of the border, where it was found mutilated, its eyes poked out. The result was nationwide shock and agony.

If Dayan had been speaking in modern-day Israel, he would have used his eulogy largely to blast the horrible cruelty of Rotberg's killers. But as framed in the 1950s, his speech was remarkably sympathetic toward the perpetrators. "Let us not cast blame

on the murderers," Dayan said. "For eight years, they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages where they and their fathers dwelt into our estate." Dayan was alluding to the *nakba*, Arabic for "catastrophe," when the majority of Palestinian Arabs were driven into exile by Israel's victory in the 1948 war of independence. Many were forcibly relocated to Gaza, including residents of communities that eventually became Jewish towns and villages along the border.

Dayan was hardly a supporter of the Palestinian cause. In 1950, after the hostilities had ended, he organized the displacement of the remaining Palestinian community in the border town of Al-Majdal, now the Israeli city of Ashkelon. Still, Dayan realized what

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many Jewish Israelis refuse to accept: Palestinians would never forget the *nakba* or stop dreaming of returning to their homes. “Let us not be deterred from seeing the loathing that is inflaming and filling the lives of hundreds of thousands of Arabs living around us,” Dayan declared in his eulogy. “This is our life’s choice—to be prepared and armed, strong and determined, lest the sword be stricken from our fist and our lives cut down.”

On October 7, 2023, Dayan’s age-old warning materialized in the bloodiest way possible. Following a plan masterminded by Yahya Sinwar, a Hamas leader born to a family forced out of Al-Majdal, Palestinian militants invaded Israel at nearly 30 points along the Gazan border. Achieving total surprise, they overran Israel’s thin defenses and proceeded to attack a music festival, small towns, and more than 20 kibbutzim. They killed around 1,200 civilians and soldiers and kidnapped well over 200 hostages. They raped, looted, burned, and pillaged. The descendants of Dayan’s refugee camp dwellers—fueled by the same hatred and loathing that he described but now better armed, trained, and organized—had come back for revenge.

October 7 was the worst calamity in Israel’s history. It is a national and personal turning point for anyone living in the country or associated with it. Having failed to stop the Hamas attack, the IDF has responded with overwhelming force, killing thousands of Palestinians and razing entire Gazan neighborhoods. But even as pilots drop bombs and commandos flush out Hamas’s tunnels, the Israeli government has not reckoned with the

enmity that produced the attack—or what policies might prevent another. Its silence comes at the behest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has refused to lay out a postwar vision or order. Netanyahu has promised to “destroy Hamas,” but beyond military force, he has no strategy for eliminating the group and no clear plan for what would replace it as the de facto government of postwar Gaza.

His failure to strategize is no accident. Nor is it an act of political expediency designed to keep his right-wing coalition together. To live in peace, Israel will have to finally come to terms with the Palestinians, and that is something Netanyahu has opposed throughout his career. He has devoted his tenure as prime minister, the longest in Israeli history, to undermining and sidelining the Palestinian national movement. He has promised his people that they can prosper without peace. He has sold the country on the idea that it can continue to occupy Palestinian lands forever at little domestic or international cost. And even now, in the wake of October 7, he has not changed this message. The only thing Netanyahu has said Israel will do after the war is maintain a “security perimeter” around Gaza—a thinly veiled euphemism for long-term occupation, including a cordon along the border that will eat up a big chunk of scarce Palestinian land.

But Israel can no longer be so blinkered. The October 7 attacks have proved that Netanyahu’s promise was hollow. Despite a dead peace process and waning interest from other countries, the Palestinians have kept their cause alive. In the body-camera foot-

age taken by Hamas on October 7, the invaders can be heard shouting, "This is our land!" as they cross the border to attack a kibbutz. Sinwar openly framed the operation as an act of resistance and was personally motivated, at least in part, by the *nakba*. The Hamas leader spent 22 years in Israeli prisons and is said to have continually told his cellmates that Israel had to be defeated so that his family could return to its village.

The trauma of October 7 has forced Israelis, once again, to realize that the conflict with the Palestinians is central to their national identity and a threat to their well-being. It cannot be overlooked or sidestepped, and continuing the occupation, expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank, laying siege to Gaza, and refusing to make any territorial compromise (or even recognize Palestinian rights) will not bring the country lasting security. Yet recovering from this war and changing course is bound to be extremely difficult, and not just because Netanyahu does not want to resolve the Palestinian conflict. The war has caught Israel at perhaps its most divided moment in history. In the years leading up to the attack, the country was fractured by Netanyahu's effort to undermine its democratic institutions and turn it into a theocratic, nationalist autocracy. His bills and reforms provoked widespread protests and dissension that threatened to tear the country apart before the war and will haunt it once the conflict ends. In fact, the fight over Netanyahu's political survival will become even more intense than it was before October 7, making it hard for the country to pursue peace.

But whatever happens to the prime minister, Israel is unlikely to have a serious conversation about settling with the Palestinians. Israeli public opinion as a whole has shifted to the right. The United States is increasingly preoccupied with a crucial presidential election. There will be little energy or motivation to reignite a meaningful peace process in the near future.

October 7 is still a turning point, but it is up to Israelis to decide what kind of turning point it will be. If they finally heed Dayan's warning, the country could come together and chart a path to peace and dignified coexistence with the Palestinians. But indications so far are that Israelis will, instead, continue to fight among themselves and maintain the occupation indefinitely. This could make October 7 the beginning of a dark age in Israel's history—one characterized by more and growing violence. The attack would not be a one-off event, but a portent of what's to come.

BROKEN PROMISE

In the 1990s, Netanyahu was a rising star on Israel's right-wing scene. After making his name as Israel's ambassador to the UN from 1984 to 1988, he became widely famous by leading the opposition to the Oslo accords, the 1993 blueprint for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation signed by the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization. After the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 by a far-right Israeli zealot and a wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks in Israeli cities, Netanyahu managed to defeat Shimon Peres, a key architect of the

Oslo peace agreement, by a razor-thin margin in the 1996 prime minister's race. Once in office, he promised to slow the peace process and reform Israeli society by "replacing the elites," whom he viewed as soft and prone to copying Western liberals, with a corps of religious and social conservatives.

Netanyahu's radical ambitions, however, were met with the combined opposition of the old elites and the Clinton administration. Israeli society, then still generally supportive of a peace agreement, also quickly soured on the prime minister's extreme agenda. Three years later, he was toppled by the liberal Ehud Barak, who pledged to continue the Oslo process and solve the Palestinian issue in its entirety.

But Barak failed, as did his successors. When Israel completed its unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in the spring of 2000, it was subject to cross-border attacks and threatened by a massive Hezbollah buildup. Then the peace process imploded as Palestinians launched the second intifada that fall. Five years later, Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip paved the way for Hamas to take charge there. The Israeli public, once supportive of peacemaking, lost its appetite for the security risks that came with it. "We offered them the moon and the stars and got suicide bombers and rockets in return," went a common refrain. (The counterargument—that Israel had offered too little and would never agree to a sustainable Palestinian state—found little resonance.) In 2009, Netanyahu returned to power, feeling vindicated. After all, his warnings against territorial concessions to Israel's neighbors had come true.

Back in office, Netanyahu offered Israelis a convenient alternative to the now discredited "land for peace" formula. Israel, he argued, could prosper as a Western-style country—and even reach out to the Arab world at large—while pushing aside the Palestinians. The key was to divide and conquer. In the West Bank, Netanyahu maintained security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, which became Israel's de facto policing and social services subcontractor, and he encouraged Qatar to fund Gaza's Hamas government. "Whoever opposes a Palestinian state must support delivery of funds to Gaza because maintaining separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state," Netanyahu told his party's parliamentary caucus in 2019. It is a statement that has come back to haunt him.

Netanyahu believed he could keep Hamas's capabilities in check through a naval and economic blockade, newly deployed rocket and border defense systems, and periodic military raids on the group's fighters and infrastructure. This last tactic, dubbed "mowing the grass," became integral to Israeli security doctrine, along with "conflict management" and status quo maintenance. The prevailing order, Netanyahu believed, was durable. In his view, it was also optimal: maintaining a very low-level conflict was less politically risky than a peace deal and less costly than a major war.

For over a decade, Netanyahu's strategy appeared to work. The Middle East and North Africa sank into the revolutions and civil wars of the Arab Spring, making the Palestinian cause

far less salient. Terrorist attacks fell to new lows, and periodic rocket fire from Gaza was usually intercepted. With the exception of a short war against Hamas in 2014, Israelis rarely needed to go head-to-head with Palestinian militants. For most people, most of the time, the conflict was out of sight and out of mind.

Instead of worrying about the Palestinians, Israelis began to focus on living the Western dream of prosperity and tranquility. Between January 2010 and December 2022, real estate prices more than doubled in Israel as Tel Aviv's skyline filled with high-rise apartments and office complexes. Smaller towns expanded to accommodate the boom. The country's GDP grew by more than 60 percent as tech entrepreneurs launched successful businesses and energy companies found offshore natural gas deposits in Israeli waters. Open-skies agreements with other governments turned foreign travel, a major facet of the Israeli lifestyle, into a cheap commodity. The future looked bright. The country, it seemed, had moved past the Palestinians, and it had done so without sacrificing anything—territory, resources, funds—toward a peace agreement. Israelis got to have their cake and eat it, too.

Internationally, the country was also thriving. Netanyahu withstood U.S. President Barack Obama's pressure to revive the two-state solution and freeze Israeli settlements in the West Bank, in part by forging an alliance with Republicans. Although Netanyahu failed to stop Obama from concluding a nuclear deal with Iran, Washington withdrew from the pact after Donald Trump won the presidency. Trump

also moved the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and his administration recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights from Syria. Under Trump, the United States helped Israel conclude the Abraham Accords, normalizing its relations with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates—a prospect that once seemed impossible without an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Planeloads of Israeli officials, military chiefs, and tourists began frequenting the swank hotels of Gulf sheikdoms and the souks of Marrakech.

As he sidelined the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu also worked to remake Israel's domestic society. After winning a surprise reelection in 2015, Netanyahu put together a right-wing coalition to revive his old dream of igniting a conservative revolution. Once again, the prime minister began railing against "the elites" and initiated a culture war against the erstwhile establishment, which he viewed as hostile to himself and too liberal for his supporters. In 2018, he won passage of a major, controversial law that defined Israel as "the Nation-State of the Jewish People" and declared that Jews had the "unique" right to "exercise self-determination" in its territory. It gave the country's Jewish majority precedence and subordinated its non-Jewish people.

The same year, Netanyahu's coalition collapsed. Israel then sank into a long political crisis, with the country dragged through five elections between 2019 and 2022—each of them a referendum on Netanyahu's rule. The intensity of the political battle was heightened by a corruption case against the prime minister, leading to his criminal indictment

in 2020 and an ongoing trial. Israel split between the “Bibists” and “Just not Bibists.” (“Bibi” is Netanyahu’s nickname.) In the fourth election, in 2021, Netanyahu’s rivals finally managed to replace him with a “change government” led by the right-wing Naftali Bennett and the centrist Yair Lapid. For the first time, the coalition included an Arab party.

Even so, Netanyahu’s opposition never challenged the basic premise of his rule: that Israel could thrive without addressing the Palestinian issue. The debate over peace and war, traditionally a crucial political topic for Israel, became back-page news. Bennett, who began his career as Netanyahu’s aide, equated the Palestinian conflict to “shrapnel in the butt” that the country could live with. He and Lapid sought to maintain the status quo vis-à-vis the Palestinians and simply focus on keeping Netanyahu out of office.

That bargain, of course, proved impossible. The “change government” collapsed in 2022 after it failed to prolong obscure legal provisions that allowed West Bank settlers to enjoy civil rights denied their non-Israeli neighbors. For some of the Arab coalition members, signing on to these apartheid provisions was one compromise too many.

For Netanyahu, still facing trial, the government’s collapse was exactly what he had been hoping for. As the country organized yet another election, he fortified his base of right-wingers, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and socially conservative Jews. To win back power, he reached out in particular to West Bank settlers, a demographic that still saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as its

raison d’être. These religious Zionists remained committed to their dream of Judaizing the occupied territories and making them a formal part of Israel. They hoped that if given the opportunity, they could drive out the territories’ Palestinian population. They had failed to prevent an evacuation of Jewish settlers from Gaza in 2005 when Ariel Sharon was prime minister, but in the years since, they had gradually captured key positions in the Israeli military, civil service, and media as members of the secular establishment shifted their focus to making money in the private sector.

The extremists had two principal demands of Netanyahu. The first, and most obvious, was to further expand Jewish settlements. The second was to establish a stronger Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, the historic site of both the Jewish Temple and the Muslim mosque of al Aqsa in Jerusalem’s Old City. Since Israel took control of the surrounding area in the Six-Day War in 1967, it has given the Palestinians quasi-autonomy at the site, out of fear that removing it from Arab governance would incite a cataclysmic religious conflict. But the Israeli far right has long sought to change that. When Netanyahu was first elected in 1996, he opened a wall at an archaeological site in an underground tunnel adjacent to al Aqsa to expose relics from the times of the Second Temple, prompting a violent explosion of Arab protests in Jerusalem. The second Palestinian intifada in 2000 was similarly sparked by a visit to the Temple Mount by Sharon, then the opposition leader as the head of Netanyahu’s party, Likud.

In May 2021, violence erupted again. This time, the main provocateur

was Itamar Ben-Gvir, a far-right politician who has publicly celebrated Jewish terrorists. Ben-Gvir had opened a “parliamentary office” in a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem where Jewish settlers, using old property deeds, have pushed out some residents, and Palestinians held mass protests in response. After hundreds of demonstrators gathered at al Aqsa, Israeli police raided the mosque compound. As a result, fighting erupted between Arabs and Jews and quickly spread to ethnically mixed towns across Israel. Hamas used the raid as an excuse to target Jerusalem with rockets, which brought yet more violence in Israel and another round of Israeli reprisals in Gaza.

Still, the fighting dissipated when Israel and Hamas reached a new cease-fire in shockingly quick order. Qatar kept up its payments, and Israel gave work permits to some Gazans to improve the strip’s economy and reduce the population’s desire for conflict. Hamas stood by when Israel hit an allied militia, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in the spring of 2023. The relative quiet along the border allowed the IDF to redeploy its forces and move most combat battalions to the West Bank, where they could protect settlers from terrorist attacks. On October 7, it became clear those redeployments were exactly what Sinwar wanted.

BIBI’S COUP

In Israel’s November 2022 election, Netanyahu won back power. His coalition captured 64 of the Israeli parliament’s 120 seats, a landslide by recent standards. The key figures in the new government were Bezalel

Smotrich, the leader of a nationalist religious party representing West Bank settlers, and Ben-Gvir. Working with the ultra-Orthodox parties, Netanyahu, Smotrich, and Ben-Gvir devised a blueprint for an autocratic and theocratic Israel. The new cabinet’s guidelines, for example, declared that “the Jewish people have an exclusive, inalienable right to the entire Land of Israel”—denying outright any Palestinian claim to territory, even in Gaza. Smotrich became minister of finance and was put in charge of the West Bank, where he initiated a massive program to expand Jewish settlements. Ben-Gvir was named national security minister, in control of police and prisons. He used his power to encourage more Jews to visit the Temple Mount (al Aqsa). Between January and October of 2023, about 50,000 Jews toured it—more than in any other equivalent period on record. (In 2022, there were 35,000 Jewish visitors on the Mount.)

Netanyahu’s radical new government stirred outrage among Israeli liberals and centrists. But even though humiliating Palestinians was central to their agenda, these critics continued to ignore the fate of the occupied territories and al Aqsa when denouncing the cabinet. Instead, they focused largely on Netanyahu’s judicial reforms. Announced in January 2023, these proposed laws would curb the independence of Israel’s Supreme Court—the custodian of civil and human rights in a country that lacks a formal constitution—and dismantle the legal advisory system that provides checks and balances on executive power. If they had been enacted, the bills would have made it much easier for Netanyahu and

his partners to build an autocracy and might even have spared him from his corruption trial.

The judicial reform bills were, without doubt, extraordinarily dangerous. They rightfully prompted an enormous wave of protests, with hundreds of thousands of Israelis demonstrating every week. But in confronting this coup, Netanyahu's opponents again acted as if the occupation were an unrelated issue. Even though the laws were drafted partly to weaken whatever legal protection the Israeli Supreme Court would give Palestinians, demonstrators shied away from mentioning the occupation or the defunct peace process out of fear of being smeared as unpatriotic. In fact, the organizers worked to sideline Israel's anti-occupation protesters to avoid having images of Palestinian flags appear in the demonstrations. This tactic succeeded, ensuring that the protest movement was not "tainted" by the Palestinian cause: Israeli Arabs, who make up around 20 percent of the country's population, largely refrained from joining the demonstrations. But this made it harder for the movement to succeed. Given Israel's demographics, center-left Jews need to partner with the country's Arabs if they ever want to form a government. By delegitimizing Israeli Arabs' concerns, the demonstrators played right into Netanyahu's strategy.

With the Arabs out, the battle over the judicial reforms proceeded as an intra-Jewish affair. Demonstrators adopted the blue and white Star of David flag, and many of their leaders and speakers were retired senior military officers. Protesters showed off their military credentials, reversing the

decline in prestige that had shadowed the IDF since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Reservist pilots, who are crucial to the air force's preparedness and combat power, threatened to withdraw from service if the laws were passed. In a show of institutional opposition, the IDF's leaders rebuffed Netanyahu when he demanded that they discipline the reservists.

That the IDF would break with the prime minister was not surprising. Throughout his long career, Netanyahu has frequently clashed with the military, and his strongest rivals have been retired generals who became politicians, such as Sharon, Rabin, and Barak—not to mention Benny Gantz, whom Netanyahu made part of his emergency war cabinet but may eventually challenge and succeed him as prime minister. Netanyahu has long rejected the generals' vision of an Israel that is strong militarily but flexible diplomatically. He has also scoffed at their characters, which he views as timid, unimaginative, and even subversive. It was therefore no shock when he fired his own defense minister, the retired general Yoav Gallant, after Gallant appeared on live television in March 2023 to warn that Israel's rifts had left the country vulnerable and that war was imminent.

Gallant's firing led to more spontaneous street protests, and Netanyahu reinstated him. (They remain bitter rivals, even as they run the war together.) But Netanyahu ignored Gallant's warning. He also ignored a more detailed warning delivered in July by Israel's chief military intelligence analyst that enemies might strike the country. Netanyahu apparently believed that such

warnings were politically motivated and reflected a tacit alliance between incumbent military chiefs at the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv and former commanders who were protesting across the street.

To be sure, the warnings Netanyahu received mostly focused on Iran's network of regional allies, not Hamas. Although Hamas's attack plan was known to Israeli intelligence, and even though the group practiced maneuvers in front of IDF observation posts, senior military and intelligence officials failed to imagine that their Gaza adversary could actually follow through, and they buried suggestions to the contrary. The October 7 attack was, in part, a failure of Israel's bureaucracy.

Still, the fact that Netanyahu convened no serious discussions on the intelligence he did receive is indefensible, as was his refusal to seriously compromise with the political opposition and heal the country's rift. Instead, he decided to move ahead with his judicial coup, regardless of grave warnings and possible blowback. "Israel can do without a couple of Air Force squadrons," he declared arrogantly, "but not without a government."

In July 2023, the first judicial law was passed by the Israeli parliament, in another high point for Netanyahu and his far-right coalition. (It was eventually struck down by the Supreme Court, in January 2024.) The prime minister believed he would soon further elevate himself by concluding a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia, the richest, most important Arab state, as part of a triple deal that featured a U.S.-Saudi defense pact. The result would be the ultimate victory of Israeli foreign pol-

icy: an American-Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran and its regional proxies. For Netanyahu, it would have been a crowning achievement that endeared him to the mainstream.

The prime minister was so self-assured that on September 22, he mounted the stage of the UN General Assembly to promote a map of "the new Middle East," centered on Israel. This was an intentional dig at his late rival Peres, who coined that phrase after signing the Oslo accords. "I believe that we are at the cusp of an even more dramatic breakthrough: an historic peace with Saudi Arabia," Netanyahu boasted in his speech. The Palestinians, he made clear, had become but an afterthought to both Israel and the broader region. "We must not give the Palestinians a veto over new peace treaties," he said. "The Palestinians are only two percent of the Arab world." Two weeks later, Hamas attacked, shattering Netanyahu's plans.

AFTER THE BANG

Netanyahu and his supporters have tried to shift blame for October 7 away from him. The prime minister, they argue, was misled by security and intelligence chiefs who failed to update him on a last-minute alert that something suspicious was happening in Gaza (although even these red flags were interpreted as indications of a small attack, or simply noise). "Under no circumstances and at no stage was Prime Minister Netanyahu warned of Hamas' war intentions," Netanyahu's office wrote on Twitter several weeks after the attack. "On the contrary, the assessment of the entire security echelon, including the head of military

intelligence and the head of Shin Bet, was that Hamas was deterred and was seeking an arrangement.” (He later apologized for the post.)

But military and intelligence incompetence, dismal as it was, cannot shield the prime minister from culpability—and not only because, as head of the government, Netanyahu bears ultimate responsibility for what happens in Israel. His reckless prewar policy of dividing Israelis made the country vulnerable, tempting Iran’s allies to strike at a riven society. Netanyahu’s humiliation of the Palestinians helped radicalism thrive. It is no accident that Hamas named its operation “al Aqsa flood” and portrayed the attacks as a way of protecting al Aqsa from a Jewish takeover. Protecting the holy Muslim site was seen as a reason to attack Israel and face the inevitably dire consequences of an IDF counterattack.

The Israeli public has not absolved Netanyahu of responsibility for October 7. The prime minister’s party has plummeted in the polls, and his approval rating has tanked as well, although the government maintains a parliamentary majority. The country’s desire for change is expressed in more than just public opinion surveys. Militarism is back across the aisle. The anti-Bibi demonstrators rushed to fulfill their reserve duties despite the protests, as erstwhile anti-Netanyahu organizers supplanted the dysfunctional Israeli government in caring for evacuees from the country’s south and north. Many Israelis have armed themselves with handguns and assault rifles, aided by Ben-Gvir’s campaign to ease the regulation of private small arms. After decades of gradual decline, the defense budget is expected to rise by roughly 50 percent.

Yet these changes, although understandable, are accelerations, not shifts. Israel is still following the same path that Netanyahu has guided it down for years. Its identity is now less liberal and egalitarian, more ethnonationalist and militaristic. The slogan “United for Victory,” seen on every street corner, public bus, and television channel in Israel, is aimed at unifying the country’s Jewish society. The state’s Arab minority, which overwhelmingly supported a quick cease-fire and prisoner exchange, has been repeatedly forbidden by the police to carry out public protests. Dozens of Arab citizens have been legally indicted for social media posts expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, even if the posts did not support or endorse the October 7 attacks. Many liberal Israeli Jews, meanwhile, feel betrayed by Western counterparts who, in their view, have sided with Hamas. They are rethinking their prewar threats to emigrate away from Netanyahu’s religious autocracy, and Israeli real estate companies are anticipating a new wave of Jewish immigrants seeking to escape the rising anti-Semitism they have experienced abroad.

And just as in prewar times, almost no Israeli Jews are thinking about how the Palestinian conflict might be solved peacefully. The Israeli left, traditionally interested in pursuing peace, is now nearly extinct. The centrist parties of Gantz and Lapid, nostalgic for the good old pre-Netanyahu Israel, seem to feel at home in the newly militaristic society and do not want to risk their mainstream popularity by endorsing land-for-peace negotiations. And the right is more hostile to Palestinians than it has ever been.

Netanyahu has equated the PA with Hamas and, as of this writing, has rejected American proposals to make it the postwar ruler of Gaza, knowing that such a decision would revive the two-state solution. The prime minister's far-right buddies want to depopulate Gaza and exile its Palestinians to other countries, creating a second *nakba* that would leave the land open to new Jewish settlements. To fulfill this dream, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich have demanded that Netanyahu reject any discussion of a postwar arrangement in Gaza that leaves the Palestinians in charge and demanded that the government refuse to negotiate for the further release of Israeli hostages. They have also ensured that Israel does nothing to halt fresh attacks by Jewish settlers on Arab residents of the West Bank.

If past is precedent, the country is not entirely hopeless. History suggests there is a chance that progressivism might come back and conservatives might lose influence. After prior major attacks, Israeli public opinion initially shifted to the right but then changed course and accepted territorial compromises in exchange for peace. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 eventually led to peace with Egypt; the first intifada, beginning in 1987, led to the Oslo accords and peace with Jordan; and the second intifada, erupting in 2000, ended with the unilateral pullout from Gaza.

But the chances that this dynamic will recur are dim. There is no Palestinian group or leader accepted by Israel in the way Egypt and its president were after 1973. Hamas is committed to Israel's destruction, and

the PA is weak. Israel, too, is weak: its wartime unity is already cracking, and the odds are high that the country will further tear itself apart if and when the fighting diminishes. The anti-Bibists hope to reach out to disappointed Bibists and force an early election this year. Netanyahu, in turn, will whip up fears and dig in. In January, relatives of hostages broke into a parliamentary meeting to demand that the government try to free their family members, part of a battle between Israelis over whether the country should prioritize defeating Hamas or make a deal to free the remaining captives. Perhaps the only idea on which there is unity is in opposing a land-for-peace agreement. After October 7, most Jewish Israelis agree that any further relinquishment of territory will give militants a launching pad for the next massacre.

Ultimately, then, Israel's future may look very much like its recent history. With or without Netanyahu, "conflict management" and "mowing the grass" will remain state policy—which means more occupation, settlements, and displacement. This strategy might appear to be the least risky option, at least for an Israeli public scarred by the horrors of October 7 and deaf to new suggestions of peace. But it will only lead to more catastrophe. Israelis cannot expect stability if they continue to ignore the Palestinians and reject their aspirations, their story, and even their presence.

This is the lesson the country should have learned from Dayan's age-old warning. Israel must reach out to Palestinians and to each other if they want a livable and respectful coexistence. 🌍

India's Feet of Clay

How Modi's Supremacy Will Hinder His Country's Rise

RAMACHANDRA GUHA

This spring, India is scheduled to hold its 18th general election. Surveys suggest that the incumbent, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is very likely to win a third term in office. That triumph will further underline Modi's singular stature. He bestrides the country like a colossus, and he promises Indians that they, too, are rising in the world. And yet the very nature of Modi's authority, the aggressive control sought by the prime minister and his party over a staggeringly diverse and complicated country, threatens to scupper India's great-power ambitions.

A leader of enormous charisma from a modest background, Modi dominates the Indian political landscape as only two of his 15 predecessors have done: Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister from Indian independence in 1947 until 1964, and Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, prime minister from 1966 to 1977 and then again from 1980 to 1984. In their pomp, both enjoyed wide popularity throughout India, cutting

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across barriers of class, gender, religion, and region, although—as so often with leaders who stay on too long—their last years in office were marked by political misjudgments that eroded their standing.

Nehru and Indira Gandhi both belonged to the Indian National Congress, the party that led the country's struggle for freedom from British colonial rule and stayed in power for three decades following independence. Modi, on the other hand, is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which spent many years in opposition before becoming what it now appears to be, the natural party of governance. A major ideological difference between the Congress and the BJP is in their attitudes toward the relationship between faith and state. Particularly under Nehru, the Congress was committed to religious pluralism, in keeping with the Indian constitutional obligation to assure citizens "liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship." The BJP, on the other hand, wishes to make India a majoritarian state in which politics, public policy, and even everyday life are cast in a Hindu idiom.

Modi is not the first BJP prime minister of India—that distinction belongs to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was in office in 1996 and from 1998 to 2004. But Modi can exercise a kind of power that was never available to Vajpayee, whose coalition government of more than a dozen parties forced him to accommodate diverse views and interests. By contrast, the BJP has enjoyed a parliamentary majority on its own for the last decade, and Modi is far more assertive than the understated Vajpayee ever was. Vajpayee delegated power to his cabinet ministers, consulted opposition leaders, and welcomed debate in Parliament. Modi, on the other hand, has centralized power in his office to an astonishing degree, undermined the independence of public institutions such as the judiciary and the media, built a cult of personality around himself, and pursued his party's ideological goals with ruthless efficiency.

Despite his dismantling of democratic institutions, Modi remains extremely popular. He is both incredibly hardworking and politically astute, able to read the pulse of the electorate and adapt his rhetoric and tactics accordingly. Left-wing intellectuals dismiss him as a mere demagogue. They are grievously mistaken. In terms of commitment and intelligence, he is far superior to his populist counterparts such as former U.S. President Donald Trump, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, or former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Although his economic record is mixed, he has still won the trust of many poor people by supplying food and cooking gas at highly subsidized rates

via schemes branded as Modi's personal gifts to them. He has taken quickly to digital technologies, which have enabled the direct provision of welfare and the reduction of intermediary corruption. He has also presided over substantial progress in infrastructure development, with spanking new highways and airports seen as evidence of a rising India on the march under Modi's leadership.

Modi's many supporters view his tenure as prime minister as nothing short of epochal. They claim that he has led India's national resurgence. Under Modi, they note, India has surpassed its former ruler, the United Kingdom, to become the world's fifth-largest economy; it will soon eclipse Japan and Germany, as well. It became the fourth country to land a spaceship on the moon. But Modi's impact runs deeper than material achievements. His supporters proudly boast that India has rediscovered and reaffirmed its Hindu civilizational roots, leading to a successful decolonizing of the mind—a truer independence than even the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi achieved. The prime minister's speeches are peppered with claims that India is on the cusp of leading the world. In pursuit of its global ambitions, his government hosted the G-20 meeting in New Delhi last year, the event carefully choreographed to show Modi in the best possible light, standing splendidly alone at center stage as one by one, he welcomed world leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, and showed them to their seats. (The party was spoiled, only slightly, by the deliberate absence of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who may not have wanted to indulge Modi in his pageant of prestige.)

Modi's authority threatens India's great-power ambitions.

Nonetheless, the future of the Indian republic looks considerably less rosy than the vision promised by Modi and his acolytes. His government has not assuaged—indeed, it has actively worked to intensify—conflicts along lines of both religion and region, which will further fray the country's social fabric. The inability or unwillingness to check environmental abuse and degradation threatens public health and economic growth. The hollowing out of democratic institutions pushes India closer and closer to becoming a democracy only in name and an electoral autocracy in practice. Far from becoming the Vishwa Guru, or “teacher to the world”—as Modi's boosters claim—India is altogether more likely to remain what it is today: a middling power with

a vibrant entrepreneurial culture and mostly fair elections alongside malfunctioning public institutions and persisting cleavages of religion, gender, caste, and region. The façade of triumph and power that Modi has erected obscures a more fundamental truth: that a principal source of India's survival as a democratic country, and of its recent economic success, has been its political and cultural pluralism, precisely those qualities that the prime minister and his party now seek to extinguish.

PORTRAIT IN POWER

Between 2004 and 2014, India was run by Congress-led coalition governments. The prime minister was the scholarly economist Manmohan Singh. By the end of his second term, Singh was 80 and unwell, so the task of running Congress's campaign ahead of the 2014 general elections fell to the much younger Rahul Gandhi. Gandhi is the son of Sonia Gandhi, a former president of the Congress Party, and Rajiv Gandhi, who, like his mother, Indira Gandhi, and grandfather Nehru, had served as prime minister. In a brilliant political move, Modi, who had previously been chief minister of the important state of Gujarat for a decade, presented himself as an experienced, hard-working, and entirely self-made administrator, in stark contrast to Rahul Gandhi, a dynastic scion who had never held political office and whom Modi portrayed as entitled and effete.

Sixty years of electoral democracy and three decades of market-led economic growth had made Indians increasingly distrustful of claims made on the basis of family lineage or privilege. It also helped that Modi was a more compelling orator than Rahul Gandhi and that the BJP made better use of the new media and digital technologies to reach remote corners of India. In the 2014 elections, the BJP won 282 seats, up from 116 five years earlier, while the Congress's tally went down from 206 to a mere 44. The next general election, in 2019, again pitted Modi against Gandhi; the BJP won 303 seats to the Congress's 52. With these emphatic victories, the BJP not only crushed and humiliated the Congress but also secured the legislative dominance of the party. In prior decades, Indian governments had typically been motley coalitions held together by compromise. The BJP's healthy majority under Modi has given the prime minister broad latitude to act—and free rein to pursue his ambitions.

Modi presents himself as the very embodiment of the party, the government, and the nation, as almost single-handedly fulfilling the hopes

and ambitions of Indians. In the past decade, his elevation has taken many forms, including the construction of the world's largest cricket stadium, named for Modi; the portrait of Modi on the COVID-19 vaccination certificates issued by the government of India (a practice followed by no other democracy in the world); the photo of Modi on all government schemes and welfare packages; a serving judge of the Supreme Court gushing that Modi is a "visionary" and a "genius"; and Modi's own proclamation that he had been sent by god to emancipate India's women.

Modi has worked diligently to centralize and personalize political power.

In keeping with this gargantuan cult of personality, Modi has attempted, largely successfully, to make governance and administration an instrument of his personal will rather than a collaborative effort in which many institutions and individuals work together. In the Indian system, based on the British model, the prime minister is supposed to be merely first among equals. Cabinet ministers are meant to

have relative autonomy in their own spheres of authority. Under Modi, however, most ministers and ministries take instructions directly from the prime minister's office and from officials known to be personally loyal to him. Likewise, Parliament is no longer an active theater of debate, in which the views of the opposition are taken into account in forging legislation. Many bills are passed in minutes, by voice vote, with the speakers in both houses acting in an extremely partisan manner. Opposition members of Parliament have been suspended in the dozens—and in one recent case, in the hundreds—for demanding that the prime minister and home minister make statements about such important matters as bloody ethnic conflicts in India's borderlands and security breaches in Parliament itself.

Sadly, the Indian Supreme Court has done little to stem attacks on democratic freedoms. In past decades, the court had at least occasionally stood up for personal freedoms, and for the rights of the provinces, acting as a modest brake on the arbitrary exercise of state power. Since Modi took office, however, the Supreme Court has often given its tacit approval to the government's misconduct, by, for example, failing to strike down punitive laws that clearly violate the Indian constitution. One such law is the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, under which it is almost impossible to get bail and which has been invoked to arrest and designate as "terrorists" hundreds of students and human rights

activists for protesting peacefully on the streets against the majoritarian policies of the regime.

The civil services and the diplomatic corps are also prone to obey the prime minister and his party, even when the demands clash with constitutional norms. So does the Election Commission, which organizes elections and frames election rules to facilitate the preferences of Modi and the BJP. Thus, elections in Jammu and Kashmir and to the municipal council of Mumbai, India's richest city, have been delayed for years largely because the ruling party remains unsure of winning them.

The Modi government has also worked systematically to narrow the spaces open for democratic dissent. Tax officials disproportionately target opposition politicians. Large sections of the press act as the mouthpiece of the ruling party for fear of losing government advertisements or facing vindictive tax raids. India currently ranks 161 out of 180 countries surveyed in the World Press Index, an analysis of levels of journalistic freedom. Free debate in India's once vibrant public universities is discouraged; instead, the University Grants Commission has instructed vice chancellors to install "selfie points" on campuses to encourage students to take their photograph with an image of Modi.

This story of the systematic weakening of India's democratic foundations is increasingly well known outside the country, with watchdog groups bemoaning the backsliding of the world's largest democracy. But another fundamental challenge to India has garnered less attention: the erosion of the country's federal structure. India is a union of states whose constituent units have their own governments elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. As laid down in India's constitution, some subjects, including defense, foreign affairs, and monetary policy, are the responsibility of the government in New Delhi. Others, including agriculture, health, and law and order, are the responsibility of the states. Still others, such as forests and education, are the joint responsibility of the central government and the states. This distribution of powers allows state governments considerable latitude in designing and implementing policies for their citizens. It explains the wide variation in policy outcomes across the country—why, for example, the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have a far better record with regard to health, education, and gender equity compared with northern states such as Uttar Pradesh.

As a large, sprawling federation of states, India resembles the United States. But India's states are more varied in terms of culture, religion, and particularly language. In that sense, India is more akin to the

European Union in the continental scale of its diversity. The Bengalis, the Kannadigas, the Keralites, the Odias, the Punjabis, and the Tamils, to name just a few peoples, all have extraordinarily rich literary and cultural histories, each distinct from one another and especially from that of the heartland states of northern India where the BJP is dominant. Coalition governments respected and nourished this heterogeneity, but under Modi, the BJP has sought to compel uniformity in three ways: through imposing the main language of the north, Hindi, in states where it is scarcely spoken and where it is seen as an unwelcome competitor to the local language; through promoting the cult of Modi as the only leader of any consequence in India; and through the legal and financial powers that being in office in New Delhi bestows on it.

Since coming to power, the Modi government has assiduously undermined the autonomy of state governments run by parties other than the BJP. It has achieved this in part through the ostensibly nonpartisan office of the governor, who, in states not run by the BJP, has often acted as an agent of the ruling party in New Delhi. Laws in domains such as agriculture, nominally the realm of state governments, have been passed by the national Parliament without the consultation of the states. Since several important and populous states—including Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal—are run by popularly elected parties other than the BJP, the Modi government's undisguised hostility toward their autonomous functioning has created a great deal of bad blood.

In this manner, in his decade in office, Modi has worked diligently to centralize and personalize political power. As chief minister of Gujarat, he gave his cabinet colleagues little to do, running the administration through bureaucrats loyal to him. He also worked persistently to tame civil society and the press in Gujarat. Since Modi became prime minister in 2014, this authoritarian approach to governance has been carried over to New Delhi. His authoritarianism has a precedent, however: the middle period of Indira Gandhi's prime ministership, from 1971 to 1977, when she constructed a cult of personality and turned the party and government into an instrument of her will. But Modi's subordination of institutions has gone even further. In his style of administration, he is Indira Gandhi on steroids.

A HINDU KINGDOM

For all their similarities in political style, Indira Gandhi and Modi differ markedly in terms of political ideology. Forged in the crucible

of the Indian freedom struggle, inspired by the pluralistic ethos of its leader Mahatma Gandhi (who was not related to her) and of her father, Nehru, Indira Gandhi was deeply committed to the idea that India belonged equally to citizens of all faiths. For her, as for Nehru, India was not to be a Hindu version of Pakistan—a country designed to be a homeland for South Asia's Muslims. India would not define statecraft or governance in accordance with the views of the majority religious community. India's many minority religious groups—including Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Muslims, Parsis, and Sikhs—would all have the same status and material rights as Hindus. Modi has taken a different view. Raised as he was in the hardline milieu of the Hindu nationalist movement, he sees the cultural and civilizational character of India as defined by the demographic dominance—and long-suppressed destiny—of Hindus.

The attempt to impose Hindu hegemony on India's present and future has two complementary elements. The first is electoral, the creation of a consolidated Hindu vote bank. Hinduism does not have the singular structure of Abrahamic religions such as Christianity or Islam. It does not elevate one religious text (such as the Bible or the Koran) or one holy city (such as Rome or Mecca) to a particularly privileged status. In Hinduism, there are many gods, many holy places, and many styles of worship. But while the ritual universe of Hinduism is pluralistic, its social system is historically highly unequal, marked by hierarchically organized status groups known as castes, whose members rarely intermarry or even break bread with one another.

The BJP under Modi has tried to overcome the pluralism of Hinduism by seeking to override caste and doctrinal differences between different groups of Hindus. It promises to construct a "Hindu Raj," a state in which Hindus will reign supreme. Modi claims that before his ascendance, Hindus had suffered 1,200 years of slavery at the hands of Muslim rulers, such as the Mughal dynasty, and Christian rulers, such as the British—and that he will now restore Hindu pride and Hindu control over the land that is rightfully theirs. To aid this consolidation, Hindu nationalists have systematically demonized India's large Muslim minority, painting Muslims as insufficiently apologetic for the crimes of the Muslim rulers of the past and as insufficiently loyal to the India of the present.

Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, is a belief system characterized by what I call "paranoid triumphalism." It aims to make Hindus fearful

so as to compel them to act together and ultimately dominate those Indians who are not Hindus. At election time, the BJP hopes to make Hindus vote as Hindus. Since Hindus constitute roughly 80 percent of the population, if 60 percent of them vote principally on the basis of their religious affiliation in India's multiparty, first-past-the-post system, that amounts to 48 percent of the popular vote for the BJP—enough to get Modi and his party elected by a comfortable margin. Indeed, in the 2019 elections, the BJP won 56 percent of seats with 37 percent of the popular vote. So complete is the ruling party's disregard for the political rights of India's 200 million or so Muslims that, except when compelled to do so in the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir, it rarely picks Muslim candidates to compete in elections. And yet it can still comfortably win national contests. The BJP has 397 members in the two houses of the Indian parliament. Not one is a Muslim.

Electoral victory has enabled the second element of Hindutva—the provision of an explicitly Hindu veneer to the character of the Indian state. Modi himself chose to contest the parliamentary elections from Varanasi, an ancient city with countless temples that is generally recognized as the most important center of Hindu identity. He has presented himself as a custodian of Hindu traditions, claiming that in his youth, he wandered and meditated in the forests of the Himalaya in the manner of the sages of the past. He has, for the first time, made Hindu rituals central to important secular occasions, such as the inauguration of a new Parliament building, which was conducted by him alone, flanked by a phalanx of chanting priests, but with the members of Parliament, the representatives of the people, conspicuously absent. He also presided, in similar fashion, over religious rituals in Varanasi, with the priests chanting, “Glory to the king.” In January, Modi was once again the star of the show as he opened a large temple in the city of Ayodhya on a site claimed to be the birthplace of the god Rama. Whenever television channels obediently broadcast such proceedings live across India, their cameras focus on the elegantly attired figure of Modi. The self-proclaimed Hindu monk of the past has thus become, in symbol if not in substance, the Hindu emperor of the present.

THE BURDENS OF THE FUTURE

The emperor benefits from having few plausible rivals. Modi's enduring political success is in part enabled by a fractured and nepotistic opposition. In a belated bid to stall the BJP from winning a third term, as

many as 28 parties have come together to fight the forthcoming general elections under a common umbrella. They have adopted the name the Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance, an unwieldy moniker that can be condensed to the crisp acronym INDIA.

Some parties in this alliance are very strong in their own states. Others have a base among particular castes. But the only party in the alliance with pretensions to being a national party is the Congress. Despite his dismal political record, Rahul Gandhi remains the principal leader of the Congress. In public appearances, he is often flanked by his sister, who is the party's general-secretary, or his mother, reinforcing his sense of entitlement. The major regional parties, with influence in states such as Bihar, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, are also family firms, with leadership often passing from father to son. Although their local roots make them competitive in state elections, when it comes to a general election, the dynastic baggage they carry puts them at a distinct disadvantage against a party led by a self-made man such as Modi, who can present himself as devoted entirely and utterly to the welfare of his fellow citizens rather than as the bearer of family privilege. INDIA will struggle to unseat Modi and the BJP and may hope, at best, to dent their commanding majority in Parliament.

The prime minister also faces little external pressure. In other contexts, one might expect a certain amount of critical scrutiny of Modi's authoritarian ways from the leaders of Western democracies. But this has not happened, partly because of the ascendance of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Xi has mounted an aggressive challenge to Western hegemony and positioned China as a superpower deserving equal respect and an equal say in world affairs as the United States—moves that have worked entirely to Modi's advantage. The Indian prime minister has played the U.S. establishment brilliantly, using the large and wealthy Indian diaspora to make his (and India's) importance visible to the White House.

In April 2023, India officially overtook China as the most populous country in the world. It has the fifth-largest economy. It has a large and reasonably well-equipped military. All these factors make it ever more appealing to the United States as a counterweight to China. Both the Trump and the Biden administrations have shown an extraordinary indulgence toward Modi, continuing to hail him as the leader of

India is akin to the European Union in the continental scale of its diversity.

the “world’s largest democracy” even as that appellation becomes less credible under his rule. The attacks on minorities, the suppression of the press, and the arrest of civil rights activists have attracted scarcely a murmur of disapproval from the State Department or the White House. The recent allegations that the Indian government tried to assassinate a U.S. citizen of Sikh descent are likely to fade without any action or strong public criticism. Meanwhile, the leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, seeking a greater share of the Indian market (not least in sales of sophisticated weaponry), have all been unctuous in their flattery of Modi.

Currently, Modi is dominant at home and immune from criticism from abroad. It is likely, however, that history and historians will judge his political and personal legacy somewhat less favorably than his currently supreme position might suggest. For one thing, he came into office in 2014 pledging to deliver a strong economy, but his economic record is at best mixed. On the positive side, the government has sped the impressive development of infrastructure and the process of formalizing the economy through digital technology. Yet economic inequalities have soared; while some business families close to the BJP have become extremely wealthy, unemployment rates are high, particularly among young Indians, and women’s labor participation rates are low. Regional disparities are large and growing, with the southern states having done far better than the northern ones in terms of both economic and social development. Notably, none of the five southern states are ruled by the BJP.

The rampant environmental degradation across the country further threatens the sustainability of economic growth. Even in the absence of climate change, India would be an environmental disaster zone. Its cities have the highest rates of air pollution in the world. Many of its rivers are ecologically dead, killed by untreated industrial effluents and domestic sewage. Its underground aquifers are depleting rapidly. Much of its soil is contaminated with chemicals. Its forests are despoiled and in the process of becoming much less biodiverse, thanks to invasive nonnative weeds.

This degradation has been enabled by an antiquated economic ideology that adheres to the mistaken belief that only rich countries need to behave responsibly toward nature. India, it is said, is too poor to be green. In fact, countries such as India, with their higher population densities and more fragile tropical ecologies, need to care as much, or more, about how to use natural resources wisely. But regimes led

by both the Congress and the BJP have granted a free license to coal and petroleum extraction and other polluting industries. No government has so actively promoted destructive practices as Modi's. It has eased environmental clearances for polluting industries and watered down various regulations. The environmental scholar Rohan D'Souza has written that by 2018, "the slash and burn attitude of gutting and weakening existing environmental institutions, laws, and norms was extended to forests, coasts, wildlife, air, and even waste management." When Modi came to power in 2014, India ranked 155 out of 178 countries assessed by the Environmental Performance Index, which estimates the sustainability of a country's development in terms of the state of its air, water, soils, natural habitats, and so on. By 2022, India ranked last, 180 out of 180.

The effects of these varied forms of environmental deterioration exact a horrific economic and social cost on hundreds of millions of people. Degradation of pastures and forests imperils the livelihoods of farmers. Unregulated mining for coal and bauxite displaces entire rural communities, making their people ecological refugees. Air pollution in cities endangers the health of children, who miss school, and of workers, whose productivity declines. Unchecked, these forms of environmental abuse will impose ever-greater burdens on Indians yet unborn.

These future generations of Indians will also have to bear the costs of the dismantling of democratic institutions overseen by Modi and his party. A free press, independent regulatory institutions, and an impartial and fearless judiciary are vital for political freedoms, for acting as a check on the abuse of state power, and for nurturing an atmosphere of trust among citizens. To create, or perhaps more accurately, re-create, them after Modi and the BJP finally relinquish power will be an arduous task.

The strains placed on Indian federalism may boil over in 2026, when parliamentary seats are scheduled to be reallocated according to the next census, to be conducted in that year. Then, what is now merely a divergence between north and south might become an actual divide. In 2001, when a reallocation of seats based on population was proposed, the southern states argued that it would discriminate against them for following progressive health and education policies in prior decades that had reduced birth rates and enhanced women's freedom. The BJP-led coalition government then in power recognized the merits of the south's case and, with the consent of the opposition, proposed that the reallocation be delayed for a further 25 years.

In 2026, the matter will be reopened. One proposed solution is to emulate the U.S. model, in which congressional districts reflect population size while each state has two seats in the Senate, irrespective of population. Perhaps having the Rajya Sabha, or upper house, of the Indian Parliament restructured on similar principles may help restore faith in federalism. But if Modi and the BJP are in power, they will almost certainly mandate the process of reallocation based on population in both the Lok Sabha, the lower house, and the Rajya Sabha, which will then substantially

favor the more populous if economically lagging states of the north. The southern states are bound to protest. Indian federalism and unity will struggle to cope with the fallout.

Modi has played the U.S. establishment brilliantly.

If the BJP achieves a third successive electoral victory in May, the creeping majoritarianism under Modi could turn into galloping majoritarianism, a trend that poses a fundamental

challenge to Indian nationhood. Democratic- and pluralistic-minded Indians warn of the dangers of India becoming a country like Pakistan, defined by religious identity. A more salient cautionary tale might be Sri Lanka's. With its educated population, good health care, relatively high position of women (compared with India and all other countries in South Asia), its capable and numerous professional class, and its attractiveness as a tourist destination, Sri Lanka was poised in the 1970s to join Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan as one of the so-called Asian Tigers. But then, a deadly mix of religious and linguistic majoritarianism reared its head. The Sinhala-speaking Buddhist majority chose to consolidate itself against the Tamil-speaking minority, who were themselves largely Hindus. Through the imposition of Sinhalese as the official language and Buddhism as the official religion, a deep division was created, provoking protests by the Tamils, peaceful at first but increasingly violent when crushed by the state. Three decades of bloody civil war ensued. The conflict formally ended in 2009, but the country has not remotely recovered, in social, economic, political, or psychological terms.

India will probably not go the way of Sri Lanka. A full-fledged civil war between Hindus and Muslims, or between north and south, is unlikely. But the Modi government is jeopardizing a key source of Indian strength: its varied forms of pluralism. One might usefully contrast Modi's time in office with the years between 1989 and 2014, when neither the Congress nor the BJP had a majority in Parliament.

In that period, prime ministers had to bring other parties into government, allocating important ministries to its leaders. This fostered a more inclusive and collaborative style of governance, more suitable to the size and diversity of the country itself. States run by parties other than the BJP or the Congress found representation at the center, their voices heard and their concerns taken into account. Federalism flourished, and so did the press and the courts, which had more room to follow an independent path. It may be no coincidence that it was in this period of coalition government that India experienced three decades of steady economic growth.

When India became free from British rule in 1947, many skeptics thought it was too large and too diverse to survive as a single nation and its population too poor and illiterate to be trusted with a democratic system of governance. Many predicted that the country would Balkanize, become a military dictatorship, or experience mass famine. That those dire scenarios did not come to pass was largely because of the sagacity of India's founding figures, who nurtured a pluralist ethos that respected the rights of religious and linguistic minorities and who sought to balance the rights of the individual and the state, as well as those of the central government and the provinces. This delicate calculus enabled the country to stay united and democratic and allowed its people to steadily overcome the historic burdens of poverty and discrimination.

The last decade has witnessed the systematic erosion of those varied forms of pluralism. One party, the BJP, and within it, one man, the prime minister, are judged to represent India to itself and to the world. Modi's charisma and popular appeal have consolidated this dominance, electorally speaking. Yet the costs are mounting. Hindus impose themselves on Muslims, the central government imposes itself on the provinces, the state further curtails the rights and freedoms of citizens. Meanwhile, the unthinking imitation of Western models of energy-intensive and capital-intensive industrialization is causing profound and, in many cases, irreversible environmental damage.

Modi and the BJP seem poised to win their third general election in a row. This victory would further magnify the prime minister's aura, enhancing his image as India's redeemer. His supporters will boast that their man is assuredly taking his country toward becoming the Vishwa Guru, the teacher to the world. Yet such triumphalism cannot mask the deep fault lines underneath, which—unless recognized and addressed—will only widen in the years to come. 🌐

Spycraft and Statecraft

Transforming the CIA for an Age of Competition

WILLIAM J. BURNS

For as long as countries have kept secrets from one another, they have tried to steal them from one another. Espionage has been and will remain an integral part of statecraft, even as its techniques continually evolve. America's first spies spent the Revolutionary War using ciphers, clandestine courier networks, and invisible ink to correspond with each other and their foreign allies. In World War II, the emerging field of signals intelligence helped uncover Japanese war plans. During the early Cold War, the United States' intelligence capabilities literally went into the stratosphere, with the advent of the U-2 and other high-altitude spy planes that could photograph Soviet military installations with impressive clarity.

The simple stars etched on the memorial wall at the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, honor the 140 agency officers who gave their lives serving their country. The memorial offers an enduring reminder of countless acts of courage. Yet those instances of heroism

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and the CIA's many quiet successes remain far less well known to the American public than the mistakes that have sometimes marred the agency's history. The defining test for intelligence has always been to anticipate and help policymakers navigate profound shifts in the international landscape—the plastic moments that come along only a few times each century.

As President Joe Biden has reiterated, the United States faces one of those rare moments today, as consequential as the dawn of the Cold War or the post-9/11 period. China's rise and Russia's revanchism pose daunting geopolitical challenges in a world of intense strategic competition in which the United States no longer enjoys uncontested primacy and in which existential climate threats are mounting. Complicating matters further is a revolution in technology even more sweeping than the Industrial Revolution or the beginning of the nuclear age. From microchips to artificial intelligence to quantum computing, emerging technologies are transforming the world, including the profession of intelligence. In many ways, these developments make the CIA's job harder than ever, giving adversaries powerful new tools to confuse us, evade us, and spy on us.

And yet as much as the world is changing, espionage remains an interplay between humans and technology. There will continue to be secrets that only humans can collect and clandestine operations that only humans can conduct. Technological advances, particularly in signals intelligence, have not made such human operations irrelevant, as some have predicted, but have instead revolutionized their practice. To be an effective twenty-first-century intelligence service, the CIA must blend a mastery of emerging technologies with the people-to-people skills and individual daring that have always been at the heart of our profession. That means equipping operations officers with the tools and tradecraft to conduct espionage in a world of constant technological surveillance—and equipping analysts with sophisticated artificial intelligence models that can digest mammoth amounts of open-source and clandestinely acquired information so that they can make their best human judgments.

At the same time, what the CIA does with the intelligence it gathers is also changing. “Strategic declassification,” the intentional public disclosure of certain secrets to undercut rivals and rally allies, has become an even more powerful tool for policymakers. Using it doesn't mean recklessly jeopardizing the sources or methods used to collect

the intelligence, but it does mean judiciously resisting the reflexive urge to keep everything classified. The U.S. intelligence community is also learning the increasing value of intelligence diplomacy, gaining a new understanding of how its efforts to bolster allies and counter foes can support policymakers.

This is a time of historic challenges for the CIA and the entire intelligence profession, with geopolitical and technological shifts posing as big a test as we've ever faced. Success will depend on blending traditional human intelligence with emerging technologies in creative ways. It will require, in other words, adapting to a world where the only safe prediction about change is that it will accelerate.

PUTIN UNBOUND

The post-Cold War era came to a definitive end the moment Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. I have spent much of the past two decades trying to understand the combustible combination of grievance, ambition, and insecurity that Russian President Vladimir Putin embodies. One thing I have learned is that it is always a mistake to underestimate his fixation on controlling Ukraine and its choices. Without that control, he believes it is impossible for Russia to be a great power or for him to be a great Russian leader. That tragic and brutish fixation has already brought shame to Russia and exposed its weaknesses, from its one-dimensional economy to its inflated military prowess to its corrupt political system. Putin's invasion has also prompted breathtaking determination and resolve from the Ukrainian people. I have seen their courage firsthand on frequent wartime trips to Ukraine, punctuated by Russian air raids and vivid images of Ukrainian battlefield tenacity and ingenuity.

Putin's war has already been a failure for Russia on many levels. His original goal of seizing Kyiv and subjugating Ukraine proved foolish and illusory. His military has suffered immense damage. At least 315,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded, two-thirds of Russia's prewar tank inventory has been destroyed, and Putin's vaunted decades-long military modernization program has been hollowed out. All this is a direct result of Ukrainian soldiers' valor and skill, backed up by Western support. Meanwhile, Russia's economy is suffering long-term setbacks, and the country is sealing its fate as China's economic vassal. Putin's overblown ambitions have backfired in another way, too: they have prompted NATO to grow larger and stronger.

Although Putin's repressive grip does not seem likely to weaken anytime soon, his war in Ukraine is quietly corroding his power at home. The short-lived mutiny launched last June by the mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin offered a glimpse at some of the dysfunction lurking behind Putin's carefully polished image of control. For a leader who painstakingly crafted a reputation as the arbiter of order, Putin looked detached and indecisive as Prigozhin's ragtag mutineers made their way up the road to Moscow. For many in the Russian elite, the question was not so much whether the emperor had no clothes as why he was taking so long to get dressed. The ultimate apostle of payback, Putin eventually settled his score with Prigozhin, who was killed in a suspicious plane crash two months to the day after starting his rebellion. But Prigozhin's biting critique of the lies and military misjudgments at the core of Putin's war, and of the corruption at the heart of the Russian political system, will not soon disappear.

Ukraine's challenge is to puncture Putin's arrogance.

This year is likely to be a tough one on the battlefield in Ukraine, a test of staying power whose consequences will go well beyond the country's heroic struggle to sustain its freedom and independence. As Putin regenerates Russia's defense production—with critical components from China, as well as weaponry and munitions from Iran and North Korea—he continues to bet that time is on his side, that he can grind down Ukraine and wear down its Western supporters. Ukraine's challenge is to puncture Putin's arrogance and demonstrate the high cost for Russia of continued conflict, not just by making progress on the frontlines but also by launching deeper strikes behind them and making steady gains in the Black Sea. In this environment, Putin might engage again in nuclear saber-rattling, and it would be foolish to dismiss escalatory risks entirely. But it would be equally foolish to be unnecessarily intimidated by them.

The key to success lies in preserving Western aid for Ukraine. At less than five percent of the U.S. defense budget, it is a relatively modest investment with significant geopolitical returns for the United States and notable returns for American industry. Keeping the arms flowing will put Ukraine in a stronger position if an opportunity for serious negotiations emerges. It offers a chance to ensure a long-term win for Ukraine and a strategic loss for Russia; Ukraine could safeguard its

sovereignty and rebuild, while Russia would be left to deal with the enduring costs of Putin's folly. For the United States to walk away from the conflict at this crucial moment and cut off support to Ukraine would be an own goal of historic proportions.

XI'S POWER PLAY

No one is watching U.S. support for Ukraine more closely than Chinese leaders. China remains the only U.S. rival with both the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. The country's economic transformation over the past five decades has been extraordinary. It is one for which the Chinese people deserve great credit and one that the rest of the world has broadly supported in the belief that a prosperous China is a global good. The issue is not China's rise in itself but the threatening actions that increasingly accompany it. China's leader, Xi Jinping, has begun his third presidential term with more power than any of his predecessors since Mao Zedong. Rather than use that power to reinforce and revitalize the international system that enabled China's transformation, Xi is seeking to rewrite it. In the intelligence profession, we study carefully what leaders say. But we pay even more attention to what they do. Xi's growing repression at home and his aggressiveness abroad, from his "no limits" partnership with Putin to his threats to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, are impossible to ignore.

So, too, however, is the impact of Western solidarity on Xi's calculus about the risks of using force against Taiwan, which elected a new president, Lai Ching-te, in January. For Xi, a man inclined to see the United States as a fading power, American leadership on Ukraine has surely come as a surprise. The United States' willingness to inflict and absorb economic pain to counter Putin's aggression—and its ability to rally its allies to do the same—powerfully contradicted Beijing's belief that America was in terminal decline. Closer to Chinese shores, the resilience of the American network of allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific has had a sobering effect on Beijing's thinking. One of the surest ways to rekindle Chinese perceptions of American fecklessness and stoke Chinese aggressiveness would be to abandon support for Ukraine. Continued material backing for Ukraine doesn't come at the expense of Taiwan; it sends an important message of U.S. resolve that helps Taiwan.

Competition with China is taking place against the backdrop of thick economic interdependence and commercial ties between it and

the United States. Such connections have served the two countries and the rest of the world remarkably well, but they have also created critical vulnerabilities and serious risks for American security and prosperity. The COVID-19 pandemic made clear to every government the danger of being dependent on any one country for life-saving medical supplies, just as Russia's war in Ukraine has made clear to Europe the risks of being dependent on one country for energy. In today's world, no country wants to find itself at the mercy of a single supplier of critical minerals and technologies—especially if that supplier is intent on weaponizing those dependencies. As American policymakers have argued, the best answer is to sensibly “de-risk” and diversify—securing the United States' supply chains, protecting its technological edge, and investing in its industrial capacity.

In this volatile, divided world, the weight of the “hedging middle” is growing. Democracies and autocracies, developed economies and developing ones, and countries across the global South are increasingly intent on diversifying their relationships to maximize their options. They see little benefit and plenty of risk in sticking to monogamous geopolitical relationships with either the United States or China. More countries are likely to be attracted to an “open” geopolitical relationship status (or at least an “it's complicated” one), following the United States' lead on some issues while cultivating relations with China. And if past is precedent, Washington ought to be attentive to rivalries between the growing number of middle powers, which have historically helped spark collisions between major ones.

A FAMILIAR ENTANGLEMENT

The crisis precipitated by Hamas's butchery in Israel on October 7, 2023, is a painful reminder of the complexity of the choices that the Middle East continues to pose for the United States. Competition with China will remain Washington's highest priority, but that doesn't mean it can evade other challenges. It means only that the United States has to navigate with care and discipline, avoid overreach, and use its influence wisely.

I have spent much of the last four decades working in and on the Middle East, and I have rarely seen it more tangled or explosive. Winding down the intense Israeli ground operation in the Gaza Strip, meeting the deep humanitarian needs of suffering Palestinian civilians, freeing hostages, preventing the spread of conflict to other fronts in the

region, and shaping a workable approach for the “day after” in Gaza are all incredibly difficult problems. So is resurrecting hope for a durable peace that ensures Israel’s security as well as Palestinian statehood and takes advantage of historic opportunities for normalization with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Hard as it may be to imagine those possibilities amid the current crisis, it is even harder to imagine getting out of the crisis without pursuing them seriously.

Key to Israel’s—and the region’s—security is dealing with Iran. The Iranian regime has been emboldened by the crisis and seems ready to fight to its last regional proxy, all while expanding its nuclear program and enabling Russian aggression. In the months after October 7, the Houthis, the Yemeni rebel group allied with Iran, began attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea, and the risks of escalation on other fronts persist.

The United States is not exclusively responsible for resolving any of the Middle East’s vexing problems. But none of them can be managed, let alone solved, without active U.S. leadership.

SPIES LIKE US

Geopolitical competition and uncertainty—not to mention shared challenges such as climate change and unprecedented technological advances such as artificial intelligence—make for a fiendishly complicated international landscape. The imperative for the CIA is to transform its approach to intelligence to keep pace with this rapidly transforming world. The CIA and the rest of the U.S. intelligence community—led by Avril Haines, the director of national intelligence—are working hard to meet this moment with the urgency and creativity it requires.

This new landscape presents particular challenges for an organization focused on human intelligence. In a world in which the United States’ principal rivals—China and Russia—are led by personalistic autocrats operating within small and insular circles of advisers, gaining insight into leaders’ intentions is both more important and more difficult than ever.

Just as 9/11 ushered in a new era for the CIA, so did Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. I’m deeply proud of the work that the CIA and our intelligence partners have done to assist the president and senior U.S. policymakers—and especially the Ukrainians themselves—to thwart Putin. Together, we provided early and accurate warning of the coming invasion. That knowledge also enabled the president to decide to

send me to Moscow to warn Putin and his advisers in November 2021 about the consequences of the attack we knew they were planning. Convinced that their window for dominating Ukraine was closing and that the upcoming winter offered a favorable opportunity, they were unmoved and unapologetic—badly overestimating their own position and underestimating Ukrainian resistance and Western resolve.

Good intelligence has since helped the president mobilize and sustain a strong coalition of countries in support of Ukraine. It has also

No one is watching U.S. support for Ukraine more closely than Chinese leaders.

helped Ukraine defend itself with remarkable bravery and perseverance. The president has also made creative use of strategic declassification. Before the invasion, the administration, along with the British government, exposed Russian plans for “false flag” operations that were designed to pin blame on Ukrainians and provide a pretext for Russian military action.

These and subsequent disclosures have denied Putin the false narratives that I have watched him so often weaponize in the past. They have put him in the uncomfortable and unaccustomed position of being on the back foot. And they have bolstered both Ukraine and the coalition supporting it.

Meanwhile, disaffection with the war is continuing to gnaw away at the Russian leadership and the Russian people, beneath the thick surface of state propaganda and repression. That undercurrent of disaffection is creating a once-in-a-generation recruiting opportunity for the CIA. We’re not letting it go to waste.

While Russia may pose the most immediate challenge, China is the bigger long-term threat, and over the past two years, the CIA has been reorganizing itself to reflect that priority. We have started by acknowledging an organizational fact I learned long ago: priorities aren’t real unless budgets reflect them. Accordingly, the CIA has committed substantially more resources toward China-related intelligence collection, operations, and analysis around the world—more than doubling the percentage of our overall budget focused on China over just the last two years. We’re hiring and training more Mandarin speakers while stepping up efforts across the world to compete with China, from Latin America to Africa to the Indo-Pacific.

The CIA has a dozen or so “mission centers,” issue-specific groups that bring together officers from across the agencies’ various directorates.

In 2021, we set up a new mission center focused exclusively on China. The only single-country mission center, it provides a central mechanism for coordinating work on China, a job that extends today to every corner of the CIA. And we're also quietly strengthening intelligence channels to our counterparts in Beijing, an important means of helping policymakers avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and inadvertent collisions between the United States and China.

Even as China and Russia consume much of the CIA's attention, the agency can't afford to neglect other challenges, from counterterrorism to regional instability. The successful U.S. strike in Afghanistan in July 2022 against Ayman al-Zawahiri, the co-founder and former leader of al Qaeda, demonstrated that the CIA remains sharply focused on—and retains significant capabilities to combat—terrorist threats. The CIA is also devoting substantial resources to help fight the invasion of fentanyl, the synthetic opioid that kills tens of thousands of Americans every year. And familiar regional challenges loom, not just in places long considered strategically important, such as North Korea and the South China Sea, but also in parts of the world whose geopolitical significance will only grow in the years ahead, such as Latin America and Africa.

SMARTER SPIES

Meanwhile, we're transforming our approach to emerging technology. The CIA has been working to blend high-tech tools with age-old techniques for collecting intelligence from individuals—human intelligence, or HUMINT. Technology is, of course, making many aspects of spycraft harder than ever. In an era of smart cities, with video cameras on every street and facial recognition technology increasingly ubiquitous, spying has become much harder. For a CIA officer working overseas in a hostile country, meeting sources who are risking their own safety to offer valuable information, constant surveillance poses an acute threat. But the same technology that sometimes works against the CIA—whether it's the mining of big data to expose patterns in the agency's activities or massive camera networks that can track an operative's every move—can also be made to work for it and against others. The CIA is racing against its rivals to put emerging technologies to use. The agency has appointed its first chief technology officer. And it has established another new mission center focused on building better partnerships with the private sector, where American innovation offers a significant competitive advantage.

The CIA's in-house scientific and technological talent remains superb. The agency has developed warehouses' worth of spy gadgetry over the years, my favorite being the Cold War camera designed to look and hover like a dragonfly. The revolution in artificial intelligence, and the avalanche of open-source information alongside what we collect clandestinely, creates historic new opportunities for the CIA's analysts. We're developing new AI tools to help digest all that material faster and more efficiently, freeing officers to focus on what they do best: providing reasoned judgments and insights on what matters most to policymakers and what means most for American interests. AI won't replace human analysts, but it is already empowering them.

Another priority in this new era is to deepen the CIA's unmatched network of intelligence partnerships around the world, an asset the United States' lonelier rivals currently lack. The CIA's ability to benefit from its partners—from their collection, their expertise, their perspectives, and their capacity to operate more easily in many places than the agency can—is critical to its success. Just as diplomacy depends on revitalizing these old and new partnerships, so does intelligence. At its core, the intelligence profession is about human interactions, and there is no substitute for direct contact to strengthen ties with our closest allies, communicate with our fiercest adversaries, and cultivate everyone in between. In more than 50 overseas trips in nearly three years as director, I've run the gamut of those relationships.

Sometimes, it's more convenient for intelligence officers to deal with historic enemies in situations in which diplomatic contact might connote formal recognition. That's why the president sent me to Kabul in late August of 2021 to engage with the Taliban leadership just before the final withdrawal of U.S. troops. Sometimes, the CIA's relationships in complicated parts of the world can offer practical possibilities, as in the ongoing negotiations with Egypt, Israel, Qatar, and Hamas over a humanitarian cease-fire and the release of hostages from Gaza. Sometimes, such ties can provide discreet ballast in relationships full of political ups and downs. And sometimes, intelligence diplomacy can encourage a convergence of interests and quietly support the efforts of U.S. diplomats and policymakers.

IN THE SHADOWS

Every day, as I read through cables from stations around the world, travel to foreign capitals, or speak with colleagues at headquarters, I'm

reminded of the skill and courage of CIA officers, as well as the unrelenting challenges they face. They are doing hard jobs in hard places. Especially since 9/11, they have been operating at an incredibly fast tempo. Indeed, taking care of the CIA's mission in this new and daunting era depends on taking care of our people. That's why the CIA has strengthened its medical resources at headquarters and in the field; improved programs for families, remote workers, and two-career couples; and explored more flexible career paths, especially for technologists, so that officers can move into the private sector and later return to the agency.

We've streamlined our recruiting process for new officers. It now takes a quarter of the time it took two years ago to move from application to final offer and security clearance. These improvements have contributed to a surge of interest in the CIA. In 2023, we had more applicants than in any year since the immediate aftermath of 9/11. We're also working hard to diversify our workforce, reaching historic highs in 2023 in terms of the number of women and minority officers hired, as well as the number promoted into the agency's most senior ranks.

By necessity, CIA officers operate in the shadows, usually out of sight and out of mind; the risks they take and the sacrifices they make are rarely well understood. At a moment when trust in the United States' public institutions is often in short supply, the CIA remains a resolutely apolitical institution, bound by the oath I and everyone else at the agency have taken to defend the Constitution and by our obligations under the law.

CIA officers are also bound together by a sense of community, and by a deep, shared commitment to public service at this crucial moment in American history. They know the truth in the advice I got many years ago from my father, who had a distinguished military career. As I was wrestling with what to do with my professional life, he sent me a handwritten note: "Nothing can make you prouder than to serve your country with honor." That helped launch me into a long and fortunate career in government, first in the Foreign Service and now at the CIA. I've never regretted the choice I made. I take enormous pride in serving with thousands of other CIA officers who feel the same about theirs—and are rising to the challenge of a new era. 🌐

Disaffection
in Russia is
creating a once-
in-a-generation
recruiting
opportunity for
the CIA.

Politics Can't Stop at the Water's Edge

The Right Way to Fight Over Foreign Policy

ELIZABETH N. SAUNDERS

American politicians and analysts have long argued that it is dangerous to politicize U.S. foreign policy and national security. “U.S. foreign policy is stronger when it enjoys bipartisan support,” wrote Democratic Senator Chris Coons in a 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article. “For the United States to play a steady, stabilizing role in world affairs, its allies and adversaries must know that its government speaks with one voice and that its policies won’t shift dramatically with changing domestic political winds.” Following the 2016 election, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, and Nancy Lindborg, the president of the U.S. Institute of Peace, argued that a “bipartisan approach to foreign policy is achievable and remains essential for our security.” Such statements invoke the words of U.S.

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Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, who shaped the 1948 Republican Party platform with a call for Democrats to “join us under the next Republican Administration in stopping partisan politics at the water’s edge.”

But it would be a mistake to yearn for a foreign policy devoid of politics. After all, national security has always been political. George Washington’s administration engaged in spirited debates at home about how the United States should conduct itself in the world. Republicans and Democrats sparred over whether the United States should enter World War I and whether it should join the League of Nations afterward. Before 1941, the parties debated whether the United States ought to aid the United Kingdom in its fight against the Nazis. And during the Cold War, politicians argued intensely over how best to contain the Soviet Union. As in any democracy, politics is a natural part of how the U.S. government makes foreign policy choices.

Most of this politicking happens at the elite level, and it includes what Americans might consider unseemly behavior when applied to national security—bargaining, horse-trading, and careerism. In fact, elected officials frequently accuse their opponents of playing politics with national security. But these political tools are simply how policy gets made. When the Red Scare engulfed the State Department’s China specialists in the early 1950s, for example, the Truman administration asked Vandenberg for help in appointing a Republican adviser to provide cover for the administration’s embattled Asia policy. Truman also knew he would need Republican votes for his military rearmament program in Europe. Recognizing his leverage, Vandenberg pushed the administration to hire John Foster Dulles, his ambitious protégé, with the understanding that Dulles would advance certain GOP priorities in Asia. Truman reluctantly agreed. Dulles became a special adviser in the State Department, and Truman continued to receive internationalist Republican support for his Europe policies. Once in office, Dulles successfully pressed the administration to be more supportive of Taiwan.

Americans cannot change, and thus should not lament, the fact that their leaders look beyond the water’s edge through a political lens. But they should expect the politics of foreign policy to be healthy, and today, the core elements of a hardy foreign policy are either missing or endangered. The United States has fewer and fewer

debates that are shaped by good information and expertise. Both elected and unelected officials lack incentives to take appropriate risks in the name of the wider national interest, or even to develop the policy expertise and political power essential to unearthing and acting on good information. And many of the seasoned officials from one of the United States' two main parties—the Republicans—have been out of power for over 15 years, including during U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, badly damaging the party's pipeline of talent.

Those problems need to be addressed, but they must be addressed on their own terms—not by imagining a time before politics entered national security. That means analysts must also be clear-eyed about the very real problems and pathologies foreign policy faced in the past. Partisan political incentives to appear tough, for example, have long pushed elites toward overly hawkish behavior. Careerist goals can lead officials to help implement controversial policies. And U.S. leaders have a long track record of making mistakes, from their intervention in the Vietnam War to the protracted war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq.

It is tempting to look at the history of American foreign policy and conclude, as many populists do, that elites are doomed to fail as stewards of national security. Yet such thinking is both incorrect and self-defeating. Elites—elected politicians, bureaucratic officials, military leaders—are an inescapable part of crafting and managing foreign policy, and they succeed more frequently than critics think. But to help them make smart choices more often than not, these elites need to function within a system that incentivizes them to develop expertise, to expend personal or political resources on what they believe to be the right policies, and to participate in real political bargaining over the direction of U.S. national security. And today, the link between making good policy and reaping career or political benefits has eroded because of partisan polarization, the centralization of power in the White House and in the leadership in Congress, and the widespread demonization of elites.

These challenges are serious, and fixing them will not be easy. But politicians and commentators can start by not vilifying officials for serving in government or seeking positions outside it when their

National security
has always been
political.

party leaves power. The political system can once again reward candidates for engaging with foreign policy elites and demonstrating interest or experience in international affairs—a former hallmark of the Republican Party that has all but vanished. It can create partisan and career incentives that ensure there are diverse views in national security. And it can make space for people with differing perspectives to share and exercise power.

These shifts cannot guarantee good decisions in foreign policy; nothing can. But they can, at least, make bad decisions less likely, helping the United States as it navigates an uncertain future.

DIVIDED WE STAND

U.S. foreign policy has been political since the founding. During Washington's administration, officials were divided over their fledgling nation's stance in the war between France and Great Britain. In the late 1800s, Democrats and Republicans in Congress pressured a reluctant President William McKinley to go to war with Spain on behalf of Cuban independence.

Even the emergence of the so-called Cold War consensus—a bipartisan commitment to build and use American military power to contain communism—was the product of intense political bargaining. To get the European rearmament program he deemed necessary to counter the Soviet Union, President Harry Truman had to negotiate with isolationist Asia-first Republicans, who opposed new international commitments in Europe; internationalist Europe-first Republicans such as Vandenberg, who generally supported Truman's national security agenda but wanted to use their political leverage; and southern Democrats, who opposed his domestic agenda. Truman largely succeeded, but only by bolstering Taiwan, making concessions on military strategy in the Korean War, and jettisoning his efforts to expand civil rights and the social welfare system.

Even after Truman set this basic direction for national security, the Cold War continued to involve fierce political disagreements. Some of these policy fights reflected real differences of opinion on policy, such as the merits of arms control. But personal ambition and electoral motivations also shaped foreign policy. During the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy and his advisers feared Republican political attacks if he did not follow through on his promise to keep offensive weapons out of Cuba. President Richard Nixon wanted the

Senate to overwhelmingly ratify the agreements that resulted from the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, not only because he deemed it good policy but also so that he could look statesmanlike.

Both parties exhibited internal cleavages. The Democratic Party was home to a cohort of defense hawks who championed a strong military, as well as a more diplomacy-minded wing. Former Republican President Ronald Reagan railed against the détente prized by Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. Each party also had more extreme factions, including far-left Democrats who opposed almost any foreign intervention and, relatedly, isolationist Republicans who wanted Washington to focus its attention at home. Yet the parties made room for their various factions, and the debates both within and between them served as a form of checks and balances. Hawks and doves disagreed but also bargained, creating deals that survived from administration to administration. The stability of American Cold War policy was no utopia of bipartisan consensus. It was the result of hard-won, cross-party compromises.

The system that produced a relatively durable foreign policy also enabled foreign policy disasters that left terrible stains on the records of the various factions. Democrats initiated U.S. military intervention in the Vietnam War. Nixon and Kissinger supported a coup d'état in Chile. Reagan backed a brutal counterinsurgency campaign by El Salvador's military. The politics of national security has always carried the risk of tragic errors.

TOP DOWN

To understand why the politics of national security is both necessary and deeply flawed, analysts must look to elites: the presidents and appointees who shape the bureaucracy, the military leaders who advise on and implement decisions, and members of Congress. Although the democratic process can help keep foreign policy on an even keel, the role of voters is limited. The general public cannot judge every policy issue closely, and people pay closer attention to issues that affect them directly, such as health care or tax policy, than to international relations. Even voters who do care deeply about international affairs have only the blunt tool of infrequent elections to try to shape policy.

When it comes to international affairs, voters tend to be led by their parties instead of the other way around. As the political scientists

Adam Berinsky and John Zaller have shown, people look to elites on matters of national security, trusting those with whom they share a partisan affiliation. They often take their cues from major politicians, choosing their preferred leaders and then adopting those politicians' views as their own. Trump's rise to power in 2016 dramatically illustrated this phenomenon. Republicans have traditionally been more hawkish than Democrats, but as Trump won the GOP nomination and presidency, Republican opposition to foreign interventions rose sharply. As the political scientist Michael Tesler has shown, Trump voters were hawkish in their opinions of U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Syria before 2015, but they completely reversed their views after Trump won the presidency. The party's voters were sharply critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin, but Trump's praise led Republican voters to view Putin and Russia more favorably.

Voters trust hawks more than doves on national security issues.

That elites make national security decisions is not, by itself, bad. Given how much of foreign policy is hidden, elites make prudent choices more often than the public might realize. They can also make decisions quickly and efficiently in crises. Elites who are knowledgeable or care intensely about an issue or a country can also provide valuable insights, monitor events, and process information more effectively than both ordinary people and practitioners with a different set of interests. Elites who have a strong affinity or bias can play a particularly important role in the policy process: for example, scholars have found that high-stakes diplomacy can be more effective when ambassadors are political appointees with the president's ear or when they are biased toward their host country and thus elicit more trust from that country's leaders.

Elites can also hold politicians accountable in ways that ordinary voters cannot. They can pass information on to other elites or the media, criticize policy in front of audiences that matter to policymakers, and resign in protest. The information unearthed and publicized by the January 6 committee—whose very existence resulted from partisan political maneuvering—is a good example. The insurrection threatened U.S. foreign policy and national security by undermining the peaceful transition of power, straining civil-military relations to the near-breaking point, shaking global leaders'

confidence in the stability of core U.S. institutions, and exposing deep fissures that Washington's adversaries might exploit. But the committee helped create some accountability for this disaster. By getting testimony from people in Trump's inner circle, the committee's work helped facilitate some of the legal cases now proceeding against the former president.

Sometimes, elites give each other cover to break from consensus, as did John Murtha, the former Democratic congressman, when he publicly turned against the Iraq war. Such pressure, however, tends to be most powerful when applied by elites who are typically aligned with the president or who are arguing against their known instincts. When Senate Foreign Relations Chairman J. William Fulbright began holding hearings and publicly opposing the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, he helped give voice to dovish sentiments and loosened the grip that President Lyndon Johnson then had on his fellow Democrats in Congress. Fulbright's opposition eventually helped force Johnson to reconsider his Vietnam policy, especially after the shocking North Vietnamese Tet Offensive. Fulbright was an influential critic precisely because he had been Johnson's longtime ally.

Such intra-elite accountability rarely stops bad decisions before they are made. But it is an important source of constraint afterward. In fact, it is usually elites who convince presidents to change course. It was concern inside his own administration and among Republicans in Congress that persuaded Reagan to withdraw U.S. marines from Lebanon in 1984.

HAWKS AND DOVES

So what motivates elites? The answer can involve many factors, including policy views, patriotism, and the desire to do what is right. But it surely also includes political and career incentives—even for those who are not elected by voters. They want to do what is right, but they also want to better their own prospects. Career bureaucrats or military leaders take actions to protect their future ambitions, whether that means speaking out or, more often, keeping quiet and trying to make the best of policies they might not support.

Such motivations are not necessarily detrimental to the policy-making process. During the Cold War, for example, some members of Congress were incentivized to acquire deep, specialized knowledge so they could wield the power this knowledge afforded them in the



Dissenting doves: Fulbright holding a Senate hearing about the Vietnam War, 1966

political arena. Elites vary in how much importance they assign to different issues, but some elites must care enough about a foreign policy to make bargains that give others something of value in return, and there must be some political or career benefit to furthering policy goals even if voters are not paying attention. Partisan political or career incentives can also be healthy for national security if they lead opposition parties to unearth bad ideas, poor policy choices, or incompetent implementation.

But there is no free lunch in national security politics, and the political forces that help foreign policymaking also push it in a hawkish direction. It is not that elites share a warmonger mindset—there are often plenty of powerful dovish voices that go along with or even choose hawkish policies. Instead, it is that the “insiders’ game” elites must play can lead to wars the public might not choose and prolong ones that voters want to end sooner.

The source of hawkish bias lies in the credibility gap that dovish leaders face when making foreign and security policies. For better or for worse, voters trust hawks more than doves on national security issues, so hawks have more leeway on matters of war and peace. Research by the political scientists Michaela Mattes and Jessica Weeks suggests leaders want to signal that they are moderate,

giving hawkish leaders who want to avoid the “warmonger” label an advantage in peace initiatives compared with doves—the famous idea that only a hawk like Nixon could normalize relations with China. Yet the incentive to act against type also applies to dovish leaders, who can reap political benefits or avoid political costs when they use force. In fact, that “against type” incentive is much stronger for doves than it is for hawks. Hawks are given greater deference on matters of war and peace, and so they can play to type—choosing to use military force—and benefit by reinforcing their image as strong and tough leaders. Dovish leaders, by contrast, have a hard time convincing a domestic audience that their peaceful policies are in the national interest.

Elites are not pushed in a hawkish direction solely because they fear they will face political penalties. Policymakers are also motivated by private benefits—such as promotions—when they consider war and peace. And some elites will gain from using military force when they are charged with preparing, maintaining, and controlling the nation’s military resources—even if they do not support a particular war.

As a result of these dynamics, dovish leaders often feel pushed to embrace aggressive policies rather than expend political capital by calling for diplomacy or restraint—especially if they want to use that political capital for other priorities. The result is the “dove’s curse,” in which dovish leaders become trapped in an inconclusive military conflict, fighting just enough to neutralize the issue but not enough to win. Many Democratic presidents have succumbed to this tendency: Truman in Korea, Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam, and Barack Obama in Afghanistan. Dovish leaders also face pressure to appoint hawkish officials to help close their credibility gap on national security, as illustrated by the frequency with which Democratic presidents appoint Republican secretaries of defense. And when a hawk occupies the Oval Office, dovish officials frequently greenlight their policies—loosening the constraints on aggressive leaders and enabling “hawks’ misadventures.” In 2002 and 2003, for example, many congressional Democrats opposed invading Iraq. But they were afraid of looking weak, and some believed opposing the war would mar their presidential aspirations. As a result, President George W. Bush managed to secure their support by making only procedural concessions, such as seeking congressional authorization.

Sometimes, of course, doves do stick to their positions. Biden pulled all American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 as promised, ending a long-standing and costly war that most voters and elites (including his predecessor) had wanted to conclude long ago. And yet the president incurred political costs for his choice. Biden's approval ratings dropped after the tragic circumstances of the withdrawal, as the Taliban moved in and Republicans accused Biden of undermining U.S. power. For doves, fighting or supporting a war is often the politically easier path.

PARTY FOUL

These pathologies are not new, and they are important reminders that there is no perfect baseline for national security decision-making. Even a well-run Washington will follow bad processes and make mistakes. But a clear-eyed view of the national security politics of the past, and how it was both flawed and invaluable, is essential to understanding what is really ailing foreign policy today.

Consider the issue of expertise, especially in Congress. In the past, major foreign relations or armed services committee membership was politically valuable and a source of real influence. Committee chairmen, especially, wielded significant power over policy specifics, and so they sweated the details. During the latter stages of the Cold War, for example, nuclear policy had to go through Democratic Senator Sam Nunn, the knowledgeable chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. If Nunn endorsed a defense bill, he could bring along the votes of other members of his party who were skeptical or who simply did not follow defense issues closely. In the post-Cold War years, he used his defense clout to team up with Republican Senator Richard Lugar and push through funding for the Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative, designed to safeguard nuclear material and know-how in the former Soviet Union.

But now, this nexus between power and expertise has melted away. Changes in committee membership rules have disincentivized learning by increasing turnover and weakening the once powerful congressional committees, while presidential and congressional leaders have increased their power since September 11. If committees can no longer influence policy, representatives have far fewer incentives to invest scarce time and political resources in learning about a region or a national security issue.

Institutional changes are only one reason why elites are now less capable of making foreign policy. The bigger culprit is intense partisan polarization. By pulling elected representatives to extremes, polarization reduces the pool of moderates who can make the kind of bargains that guided Washington through the Cold War. Instead, it incentivizes officials to shoot down ideas tabled by the opposing “team” irrespective of the policy merits. And as the political scientist Rachel Myrick has argued, polarization undermines U.S. credibility by making it harder for Washington to commit to policies that last beyond the current administration.

Polarization, however, has not done equal damage to both parties. These dynamics have affected Republicans far more than Democrats, thanks to Trump’s capture of the GOP and his delegitimization of its traditional internationalism, as well as right-wing media pressure to take oppositional stances and avoid policy debates. This toxic combination of forces has changed incentives for Republican presidential and congressional candidates so much that they no longer feel the need to demonstrate their capability on foreign policy. Ironically, even though the Democratic Party has increased its share of the country’s national security professionals in Congress, the GOP retains the advantage in public opinion polls in terms of national security competence.

The GOP has dismantled much of its pipeline of foreign policy talent by becoming actively disdainful of expertise. When Trump campaigned for president in 2016, he did so on an explicitly anti-experience platform, and once in office, he drove many of his party’s most talented officials out of government. Other officials refused to even consider serving. Trump has continued to rail against expertise in his 2024 campaign and has plans to—in the words of the leading pro-Trump think tank—“destroy” parts of the civil service. A second Trump term could prompt even more foreign policy officials to voluntarily leave government.

The Republican Party, of course, still has many experts, and there is sincere internal debate within the GOP about whether some form of isolationism or restraint is preferable to the party’s more traditionally hawkish stance. Although there is nothing wrong with

Even a well-run Washington will follow bad processes and make mistakes.

arguing for reducing U.S. commitments around the world, many GOP elected officials are likely most interested in falling in line behind Trump's positions and in opposing Biden's. The sight of Republican candidates refusing to take a strong stand against Russia at last September's presidential primary debate at the Reagan Library underscores this dynamic.

The GOP's problems will not be easy to solve. Many of the party's talented national security professionals sat out the Trump years and would likely do so if he wins again. At a minimum, that means a large share of the Republican Party's experienced officials will have been out of power for two Obama terms, a Trump term, a Biden term, and then, presumably, either a second Biden or Trump term—a total of 20 years. Even if a traditional Republican wins the presidency in 2028, the newly elected leader will have few top-level officials to appoint who both share the president's views and have recent experience in a presidential administration. This president will have fewer junior officials, too. Because traditional, top-level GOP foreign policy experts have gone so long without power, they have not been able to hire deputies, and those deputies have not had the chance to hire staffers who can then move up the ranks.

Whatever one's party affiliation, this broken GOP pipeline should be of great concern, and restoring it is in the national interest. As Kori Schake has written in these pages, "The United States needs a strong and vibrant Republican Party." It helps Democrats to have another party that will bargain, share blame, and subject it to scrutiny and opposition—and whose support can be earned when the United States confronts a crisis. But this process only works if the parties believe they benefit from having and publicly discussing substantive views about foreign policy. It is no indictment of the Biden team or the pipeline of Democratic officials behind him to say that if traditional conservative Republicans continue to remain out of power, the Democratic Party's ideas are likely to stagnate.

DON'T HATE THE PLAYER

It is never a good time for an unhealthy politics that devalues knowledge and professionalism. But the present moment is especially perilous. Technological developments on which the U.S. economy and military are increasingly reliant, such as high-performance computing, network connectivity, and artificial intelligence, demand a government

that welcomes, incentivizes, and seeks out expertise—as well as one that makes difficult policy choices.

Resurrecting such a politics will not be easy. Yet leaders and commentators on both ends of the political spectrum can start by not vilifying national security professionals as corrupt swamp creatures. Elites are not saints: they certainly have self-interested motivations, but so does everyone. The public may like to lionize policymakers who risk their jobs out of conviction, such as the former congresswoman Liz Cheney (who lost her Republican primary election for taking on Trump), but the United States simply cannot depend on elites to always adopt good ideas, sacrifice their careers, or undergo full ideological conversions when they speak out on a particular issue. Attacking elites, particularly for supporting policies or serving in a particular administration that needs professionals to keep the lights on, is self-defeating. The best the country can do is to align incentives so that smart policymaking points in the same direction as career longevity.

It would also be bad for national security if bureaucrats and elected officials resigned in response to every poor policy outcome. Many State Department, Pentagon, and CIA officials are civil servants who are supposed to serve the government regardless of who is in charge, and they provide ballast and institutional memory that help stabilize Washington's behavior. Not every member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment has the power to make decisions. Many work hard to make the best of bad policies or to make the best of reasonable policies that have gone wrong.

If commentators want to encourage elites to resign on moral grounds—to be principled even at the cost of their government careers—they must stop judging bureaucrats and appointees who take lucrative corporate positions or prestigious think-tank posts when they leave. If officials know they can make money working as lobbyists or consultants, or that they can retain input in the policy process from a perch outside government, they are more likely to protest bad policies or make decisions that carry some risk to their careers. The so-called revolving door, where political officials cycle between government and the private sector, can also help reduce threats to democracy. As the political scientist Adam Przeworski wrote, democracy is “a system in which parties lose elections.” To make this simple proposition work, those who lose must have

more to gain by waiting to contest another election than by turning against the system.

Accepting career incentives does not mean that journalists and watchdogs should ignore officials who violate norms or rules. There are lines that elites should not be allowed to cross without paying a cost, such as violating the very institutions and norms that underpin American democracy. No one who helps or cheers on efforts to overturn an election deserves a good post-government position. The careless (or worse) treatment of national security secrets and classified documents also violates important norms and rules. And some policies are so abhorrent that those who craft them should suffer career consequences.

Elite politics is the worst way to run things—except for all the others.

But most of the policy choices made by duly elected administrations are not so clear-cut. Should supporting or merely participating in policymaking related to the Iraq war, for example, mean the end of a foreign policy career? Every administration needs people to maintain basic systems—including those involving nuclear weapons—and to make day-to-day policy decisions. Employers can and should scrutinize records and choose not to hire former officials whose values or performance do not align with their standards. But where reasonable people can disagree, analysts should be cautious about undermining the career prospects of officials who serve.

It is here that the U.S. foreign policy apparatus needs more elite politics. To end the vilification of careerism and expertise and return to a system that values at least some foreign policy fluency or competence, candidates should not be punished for engaging with or giving speeches at “establishment” institutions. They should not be knocked for publicly debating different foreign policies. To have a healthy politics, the United States must tolerate a range of legitimate views in both parties, allowing the parties to better bargain over policy.

Reviving a healthy culture of debate will be difficult because it requires that elites refrain from demonizing government officials for every misstep, or for simply serving in their posts. It will require that elites and commentators distinguish between honest disagreements and attempts to violate democratic norms and rules. It will require that they call out people who do not give officials leeway and who instead engage

in wanton, anti-elite attacks. But both parties must engage in such restraint and enforcement if foreign policy is to get back on track.

Fixing the GOP's dwindling pipeline of talent, and the party's broader ills, is an even harder task. It will be extremely difficult for anyone to persuade Republican officials to compromise or to build up a new corps of foreign policy officials, or for Democrats to compromise as Republicans become increasingly unwilling to engage in real policy bargaining. But here again, more politics can help. If the GOP again embraces the democratic process and accepts that it will cycle in and out of office, the party is more likely to adopt moderate policies and work in a more cooperative fashion.

Americans should hope that elites can fix these issues and revive a more functional system. The United States confronts a more complex security environment today than in the early Cold War years—perhaps the last time Washington faced such an unsettled world. The present order involves more players than the Cold War, and the two largest powers, the United States and China, have an interdependent economic relationship, whereas the Soviet Union and its allies were largely siloed from Western economic activity. Making decisions about how to prioritize supporting friends under attack (such as Israel and Ukraine), reassure treaty allies, and engage in “de-risking” with China will, necessarily, require the hard, kludgy work of partisan politics. The United States has too many competing ideological, political, and societal interests to operate any other way.

Adding more politics will not guarantee good decisions. Elites made plenty of bad choices even in simpler times. In politics there are rarely easy fixes, only different tradeoffs. But through elite bargaining, both within and across parties, the United States managed to become the most powerful country in the world and to avoid a third world war. In democracies, elite politics is the worst way to run things—except for all the others. 🌐

The Age of Amorality

Can America Save the Liberal Order Through Illiberal Means?

HAL BRANDS

“How much evil we must do in order to do good,” the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1946. “This, I think, is a very succinct statement of the human situation.” Niebuhr was writing after one global war had forced the victors to do great evil to prevent the incalculably greater evil of a world ruled by its most aggressive regimes. He was witnessing the onset of another global conflict in which the United States would periodically transgress its own values in order to defend them. But the fundamental question Niebuhr raised—how liberal states can reconcile worthy ends with the unsavory means needed to attain them—is timeless. It is among the most vexing dilemmas facing the United States today.

U.S. President Joe Biden took office pledging to wage a fateful contest between democracy and autocracy. After Russia invaded Ukraine, he

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summoned like-minded nations to a struggle “between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.” Biden’s team has indeed made big moves in its contest with China and Russia, strengthening solidarity among advanced democracies that want to protect freedom by keeping powerful tyrannies in check. But even before the war between Hamas and Israel presented its own thicket of problems, an administration that has emphasized the ideological nature of great-power rivalry was finding itself ensnared by a morally ambiguous world.

In Asia, Biden has bent over backward to woo a backsliding India, a communist Vietnam, and other not so liberal states. In Europe, wartime exigencies have muted concerns about creeping authoritarianism on NATO’s eastern and southern fronts. In the Middle East, Biden has concluded that Arab dictators are not pariahs but vital partners. Defending a threatened order involves reviving the free-world community. It also, apparently, entails buttressing an arc of imperfect democracies and outright autocracies across much of the globe.

Biden’s conflicted strategy reflects the realities of contemporary coalition building: when it comes to countering China and Russia, democratic alliances go only so far. Biden’s approach also reflects a deeper, more enduring tension. American interests are inextricably tied to American values: the United States typically enters into great-power competition because it fears mighty autocracies will otherwise make the world unsafe for democracy. But an age of conflict invariably becomes, to some degree, an age of amorality because the only way to protect a world fit for freedom is to court impure partners and engage in impure acts.

Expect more of this. If the stakes of today’s rivalries are as high as Biden claims, Washington will engage in some breathtakingly cynical behavior to keep its foes contained. Yet an ethos of pure expediency is fraught with dangers, from domestic disillusion to the loss of the moral asymmetry that has long amplified U.S. influence in global affairs. Strategy, for a liberal superpower, is the art of balancing power without subverting democratic purpose. The United States is about to rediscover just how hard that can be.

A DIRTY GAME

Biden has consistently been right about one thing: clashes between great powers are clashes of ideas and interests alike. In the seventeenth century, the Thirty Years’ War was fueled by doctrinal differences no less than by the struggle for European primacy. In the late eighteenth century, the politics of revolutionary France upheaved the geopolitics of the entire continent.

World War II was a collision of rival political traditions—democracy and totalitarianism—as well as rival alliances. “This was no accidental war,” German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop declared in 1940, “but a question of the determination of one system to destroy the other.” When great powers fight, they do so not just over land and glory. They fight over which ideas, which values, will chart humanity’s course.

In this sense, U.S. competition with China and Russia is the latest round in a long struggle over whether the world will be shaped by liberal democracies or their autocratic enemies. In World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, autocracies in Eurasia sought global primacy by achieving preeminence within that central landmass. Three times, the United States intervened, not just to ensure its security but also to preserve a balance of power that permitted the survival and expansion of liberalism—to “make the world safe for democracy,” in U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s words. President Franklin Roosevelt made a similar point in 1939, saying, “There comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone, but the tenets of faith and humanity on which their churches, their governments, and their very civilization are founded.” Yet as Roosevelt understood, balancing power is a dirty game.

Western democracies prevailed in World War II only by helping an awful tyrant, Joseph Stalin, crush an even more awful foe, Adolf Hitler. They used tactics, such as fire-bombing and atomic-bombing enemy cities, that would have been abhorrent in less desperate times. The United States then waged the Cold War out of conviction, as President Harry Truman declared, that it was a conflict “between alternative ways of life”; the closest U.S. allies were fellow democracies that made up the Western world. Yet holding the line in a high-stakes struggle also involved some deeply questionable, even undemocratic, acts.

In a Third World convulsed by instability, the United States employed right-wing tyrants as proxies; it suppressed communist influence through coups, covert and overt interventions, and counterinsurgencies with staggering death tolls. To deter aggression along a global perimeter, the Pentagon relied on the threat of using nuclear weapons so destructive that their actual employment could serve no constructive end. To close the ring around the Soviet Union, Washington eventually partnered with another homicidal communist, the Chinese leader Mao Zedong. And to

Clashes between great powers are clashes of ideas and interests alike.

ease the politics of containment, U.S. officials sometimes exaggerated the Soviet threat or simply deceived the American people about policies carried out in their name.

Strategy involves setting priorities, and U.S. officials believed that lesser evils were needed to avoid greater ones, such as communism running riot in vital regions or democracies failing to find their strength and purpose before it was too late. The eventual payoff from the U.S. victory in the Cold War—a world safer from autocratic predation, and safer for human freedom, than ever before—suggests that they were, on balance, correct. Along the way, the fact that Washington was pursuing such a worthy objective, against such an unworthy opponent, provided a certain comfort with the conflict's ethical ambiguities. As NSC-68, the influential strategy document Truman approved in 1950, put it (quoting Alexander Hamilton), "The means to be employed must be proportioned to the extent of the mischief." When the West was facing a totalitarian enemy determined to remake humanity in its image, some pretty ugly means could, apparently, be justified.

That comfort wasn't infinite, however, and the Cold War saw fierce fights over whether the United States was getting its priorities right. In the 1950s, hawks took Washington to task for not doing enough to roll back communism in Eastern Europe, with the Republican Party platform of 1952 deriding containment as "negative, futile, and immoral." In the 1960s and 1970s, an avalanche of amorality—a bloody and misbegotten war in Vietnam, support for a coterie of nasty dictators, revelations of CIA assassination plots—convinced many liberal critics that the United States was betraying the values it claimed to defend. Meanwhile, the pursuit of *détente* with the Soviet Union, a strategy that deemphasized ideological confrontation in search of diplomatic stability, led some conservatives to allege that Washington was abandoning the moral high ground. Throughout the 1970s and after, these debates whipsawed U.S. policy. Even in this most Manichean of contests, relating strategy to morality was a continual challenge.

In fact, Cold War misdeeds gave rise to a complex of legal and administrative constraints—from prohibitions on political assassination to requirements to notify congressional committees about covert action—that mostly remain in place today. Since the Cold War, these restrictions have been complemented by curbs on aid to coup makers who topple elected governments and to military units that engage in gross violations of human rights. Americans clearly regretted some

measures they had used to win the Cold War. The question is whether they can do without them as global rivalry heats up again.

IDEAS MATTER

Threats from autocratic enemies heighten ideological impulses in U.S. policy by underscoring the clash of ideas that often drives global tensions. Since taking office, Biden has defined the threat from U.S. rivals, particularly China, in starkly ideological terms.

The world has reached an “inflection point,” Biden has repeatedly declared. In March 2021, he suggested that future historians would be studying “the issue of who succeeded: autocracy or democracy.” At root, Biden has argued, U.S.-Chinese competition is a test of which model can better meet the demands of the modern era. And if China becomes the world’s preeminent power, U.S. officials fear, it will entrench autocracy in friendly countries while coercing democratic governments in hostile ones. Just witness how Beijing has used economic leverage to punish criticism of its policies by democratic societies from Australia to Norway. In making the system safe for illiberalism, a dominant China would make it unsafe for liberalism in places near and far.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reinforced Biden’s thesis. It offered a case study in autocratic aggression and atrocity and a warning that a world led by illiberal states would be lethally violent, not least for vulnerable democracies nearby. Coming weeks after Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin had sealed a “no limits” strategic partnership, the Ukraine invasion also raised the specter of a coordinated autocratic assault on the liberal international order. Ukraine, Biden explained, was the central front in a “larger fight for . . . essential democratic principles.” So the United States would rally the free world against “democracy’s mortal foes.”

The shock of the Ukraine war, combined with the steady hand of U.S. leadership, produced an expanded transatlantic union of democracies. Sweden and Finland sought membership in NATO; the West supported Ukraine and inflicted heavy costs on Russia. The Biden administration also sought to confine China by weaving a web of democratic ties around the country. It has upgraded bilateral alliances with the likes of Japan and Australia. It has improved the Quad (the security and diplomatic dialogue with Australia, India, and Japan) and established AUKUS (a military partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom). And it has repurposed existing multilateral bodies, such as the G-7, to meet the peril from Beijing. There are even whispers of a “three plus one”

coalition—Australia, Japan, the United States, plus Taiwan—that would cooperate to defend that frontline democracy from Chinese assault.

These ties transcend regional boundaries. Ukraine is getting aid from Asian democracies, such as South Korea, that understand that their security will suffer if the liberal order is fractured. Democracies from multiple continents have come together to confront China's economic coercion, counter its military buildup, and constrict its access to high-end semiconductors. The principal problem for the United States is a loose alliance of revisionist powers pushing outward from the core of Eurasia. Biden's answer is a cohering global coalition of democracies, pushing back from around the margins.

Today, those advanced democracies are more unified than at any time in decades. In this respect, Biden has aligned the essential goal of U.S. strategy, defending an imperiled liberal order, with the methods and partners used to pursue it. Yet across Eurasia's three key regions, the messier realities of rivalry are raising Niebuhr's question anew.

CONTROVERSIAL FRIENDS

Consider the situation in Europe. NATO is mostly an alliance of democracies. But holding that pact together during the Ukraine war has required Biden to downplay the illiberal tendencies of a Polish government that—until its electoral defeat in October—was systematically eroding checks and balances. Securing its northern flank, by welcoming Finland and Sweden, has involved diplomatic horse-trading with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, in addition to frequently undercutting U.S. interests, has been steering his country toward autocratic rule.

In Asia, the administration spent much of 2021 and 2022 carefully preserving U.S. ties to the Philippines, at the time led by Rodrigo Duterte, a man whose drug war had killed thousands. Biden has assiduously courted India as a bulwark against China, even though the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has curbed speech, harassed opposition leaders, fanned religious grievances, and allegedly killed dissidents abroad. And after visiting New Delhi in September 2023, Biden traveled to Hanoi to sign a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Vietnam's one-party regime. Once again, the United States is using some communists to contain others.

Then there is the Middle East, where Biden's “free world” coalition is quite the motley crew. In 2020, Biden threatened to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” over the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

By 2023, his administration—panicked by Chinese inroads and rising gas prices—was trying to make that country Washington’s newest treaty ally instead. That initiative, moreover, was part of a concept, inherited from the Trump administration, in which regional stability would rest on rapprochement between Arab autocracies and an Israeli government with its own illiberal tendencies, while Palestinian aspirations were mostly pushed to the side. Not surprisingly, then, human rights and political freedoms receded in relations with countries from Egypt to the United Arab Emirates. Biden also did little to halt the strangulation of democracy in Tunisia—just as he had decided, effectively, to abandon Afghanistan’s endangered democracy in 2021.

Indeed, if 2022 was a year of soaring rhetoric, 2023 was a year of awkward accommodation. References to the “battle between democracy and autocracy” became scarcer in Biden’s speeches, as the administration made big plays that defied that description of the world. Key human rights-related positions at the White House and the State Department sat vacant. The administration rolled back sanctions on Venezuela—an initiative described publicly as a bid to secure freer and fairer elections, but one that was mostly an effort to get an oppressive regime to stop exporting refugees and start exporting more oil. And when a junta toppled the elected government of Niger, U.S. officials waited for more than two months to call the coup a coup, for fear of triggering the cutoff of U.S. aid and thereby pushing the new regime into Moscow’s arms. Such compromises have always been part of foreign policy. But today, they testify to key dynamics U.S. officials must confront.

THE DECISIVE DECADE

First is the cruel math of Eurasian geopolitics. Advanced democracies possess a preponderance of power globally, but in every critical region, holding the frontline requires a more eclectic ensemble.

Poland has had its domestic problems; it is also the logistical linchpin of the coalition backing Ukraine. Turkey is politically illiberal and, often, unhelpful; nonetheless, it holds the intersection of two continents and two seas. In South and Southeast Asia, the primary barrier to Chinese hegemony is a line of less-than-ideal partners running from India to Indonesia. In the Middle East, a picky superpower will be a lonely superpower. Democratic solidarity is great, but geography is stubborn. Across Eurasia, Washington needs illiberal friends to confine its illiberal foes.

The ideological battlefield has also shifted in adverse ways. During the Cold War, anticommunism served as ideological glue between a democratic superpower and its autocratic allies, because the latter knew they were finished if the Soviet Union ever triumphed. Now, however, U.S. enemies feature a form of autocracy less existentially threatening to other nondemocracies: strongmen in the Persian Gulf, or in Hungary and Turkey, arguably have more in common with Xi and Putin than they do with Biden. The gap between “good” and “bad” authoritarians

High-stakes rivalries carry countries, and leaders, to places they never sought to go.

is narrower than it once was—which makes the United States work harder, and pay more, to keep illiberal partners imperfectly onside.

Desperate times also call for morally dexterous measures. When Washington faced no serious strategic challengers after the Cold War, it paid a smaller penalty for foregrounding its values. As the margin of safety shrinks, the tradeoffs between power and principle grow. Right now, war—or the threat of it—menaces East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Biden

says the 2020s will be the “decisive decade” for the world. As Winston Churchill quipped in 1941, “If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.” When threats are dire, democracies will do what it takes to rally coalitions and keep the enemy from breaking through. Thus, a central irony of Washington’s approach to competition is that the same challenges that activate its ideological energy make it harder to keep U.S. diplomacy pure.

So far, the moral compromises of U.S. policy today are modest compared with those of World War II or the Cold War, in part because the constraints on unsavory methods are stronger than they were when Hitler and Stalin stalked the earth. But rules and norms can change as a country’s circumstances do. So Biden and his successors may soon face a daunting reality: high-stakes rivalries carry countries, and leaders, to places they never sought to go.

When the Cold War started, few officials imagined that Washington would conduct covert interventions from Afghanistan to Angola. Just three years ago, hardly anyone predicted that the United States would soon fight a proxy war meant to bleed Putin’s army to death in Ukraine. As the present competitions intensify, the tactics used to wage them could become more extreme.

Washington could find itself covertly trying to tip the balance in elections in some crucial swing state if the alternative is seeing that country shift hard toward Moscow or Beijing. It could use coercion to keep Latin America's military facilities and other critical infrastructure out of Chinese hands. And if the United States is already ambivalent about acknowledging coups in out-of-the-way countries, perhaps it would excuse far greater atrocities committed by a more important partner in a more important place.

Those who doubt that Washington will resort to dirty tricks have short memories and limited imaginations. If today's competitions will truly shape the fate of humanity, why wouldn't a vigilant superpower do almost anything to come out on top?

DON'T LOSE YOURSELF

There's no reason to be unduly embarrassed about this. A country that lacks the self-confidence to defend its interests will lack the power to achieve any great purpose in global affairs. Put differently, the damage the United States does to its values by engaging dubious allies, and engaging in dubious behavior, is surely less than the damage that would be done if a hyperaggressive Russia or neototalitarian China spread its influence across Eurasia and beyond. As during the Cold War, the United States can eventually repay the moral debts it incurs in a lengthy struggle—if it successfully sustains a system in which democracy thrives because its fiercest enemies are suppressed.

It would be dangerous to adopt a pure end-justifies-the-means mentality, however, because there is always a point at which foul means corrupt fair ends. Even short of that, serial amorality will prove politically corrosive: a country whose population has rallied to defend its values as well as its interests will not forever support a strategy that seems to cast those values aside. And ultimately, the greatest flaw of such a strategy is that it forfeits a potent U.S. advantage.

During World War II, as the historian Richard Overy has argued, the Allied cause was widely seen to be more just and humane than the Axis cause, which is one reason the former alliance attracted so many more countries than the latter. In the Cold War, the sense that the United States stood, however imperfectly, for fundamental rights and liberties the Kremlin suppressed helped Washington appeal to other democratic societies—and even to dissidents within the Soviet bloc. The tactics of great-power competition must not obscure the central

issue of that competition. If the world comes to see today's rivalries as slugfests devoid of larger moral meaning, the United States will lose the asymmetry of legitimacy that has served it well.

This is not some hypothetical dilemma. Since October 2023, Biden has rightly framed the Israel-Hamas war as a struggle between a flawed democracy and a tyrannical enemy seeking its destruction. There is strong justification, moral and strategic, for backing a U.S. ally against a vicious proxy of a U.S. enemy, Iran. Moreover, there is no serious ethical comparison between a terrorist group that rapes, tortures, kidnaps, and kills civilians and a country that mostly tries, within the limits war imposes, to protect them.

Yet rightly or wrongly, large swaths of the global South view the war as a testament to American double standards: opposing occupation and appropriation of foreign territory by Russia but not by Israel, valuing the lives and liberties of some victims more than those of others. Russian and Chinese propagandists are amplifying these messages to drive a wedge between Washington and the developing world. This is why the Biden administration has tried, and sometimes struggled, to balance support for Israel with efforts to mitigate the harm the conflict brings—and why the war may presage renewed U.S. focus on the peace process with the Palestinians, as unpromising as that currently seems. The lesson here is that the merits of an issue may be disputed, but for a superpower that wears its values on its sleeve, the costs of perceived hypocrisy are very real.

RULES FOR RIVALRY

Succeeding in this round of rivalry will thus require calibrating the moral compromises inherent in foreign policy by finding an ethos that is sufficiently ruthless and realistic at the same time. Although there is no precise formula for this—the appropriateness of any action depends on its context—some guiding principles can help.

First, morality is a compass, not a straitjacket. For political sustainability and strategic self-interest, American statecraft should point toward a world consistent with its values. But the United States cannot paralyze itself by trying to fully embody those values in every tactical decision. Nor—even at a moment when its own democracy faces internal threats—should it insist on purifying itself at home before exerting constructive influence abroad. If it does so, the system will be shaped by regimes that are more ruthless—and less shackled by their own imperfections.

The United States should also avoid the fallacy of the false alternative. It must evaluate choices, and partners, against the plausible possibilities, not against the utopian ideal. The realistic alternative to maintaining ties to a military regime in Africa may be watching as murderous Russian mercenaries fill the void. The realistic alternative to engaging Modi's India may be seeing South Asia fall further under the shadow of a China that assiduously exports illiberalism. Similarly, proximity to a Saudi regime that carves up its critics is deeply uncomfortable. But the realistic alternative to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is probably a regime that remains quite repressive—and is far less committed to empowering women, curbing religious zealots, and otherwise making the country a more open, tolerant place. In a world of lousy options, the crucial question is often: Lousy compared with what?

Another guiding principle: good things don't all come at once. Cold War policymakers sometimes justified coup making and support for repressive regimes on grounds that preventing Third World countries from going communist then preserved the possibility that they might go democratic later. That logic was suspiciously convenient—and, in many cases, correct. Countries in Latin America and other developing regions did eventually experience political openings as they reached higher levels of development, and democratic values radiated outward from the West.

Today, unseemly bargains can sometimes lead to better outcomes. By not breaking the U.S.-Philippine alliance during Duterte's drug war, Washington sustained the relationship until a more cooperative, less draconian government emerged. By staying close to a Polish government with some worrying tendencies, the United States bought time until, late last year, that country's voters elected a coalition promising to strengthen its democratic institutions. The same argument could be made for staying engaged with other democracies where autocratic tendencies are pronounced but electoral mechanisms remain intact—Hungary, India, and Turkey, to name a few. More broadly, liberalism is most likely to flourish in a system led by a democracy. So simply forestalling the ascent of powerful autocracies may eventually help democratic values spread into once inhospitable places.

Similarly, the United States should remember that taking the broad view is as vital as taking the long view. Support for democracy and human rights is not an all-or-nothing proposition. As Biden's statecraft has shown, transactional deals with dictators can complement a strategy that stresses democratic cooperation at its core. Honoring

American values, moreover, is more than a matter of hectoring repressive regimes. A foreign policy that raises international living standards through trade, addresses global problems such as food insecurity, and holds the line against great-power war serves the cause of human dignity very well. A strategy that emphasizes such efforts may actually be more appealing to countries, including developing democracies from Brazil to Indonesia, that resist democracy-versus-autocracy framing because they don't want any part of a Manichean fight.

Morality is a compass, not a straitjacket.

Of course, these principles can seem like a recipe for rationalization—a way of excusing the grossest behavior by claiming it serves a greater cause. Another important principle, then, revives Hamilton's dictum that the means must be proportioned to the mischief.

The greater the compromise, the greater the payoff it provides—or the damage it avoids—must be.

By this standard, the case for cooperation with an India or a Poland is clear-cut. These countries are troubled but mostly admirable democracies that play critical roles in raging competitions. Until the world contains only liberal democracies, Washington can hardly avoid seeking blemished friends.

The United States should, however, be more cautious about courting countries that regularly engage in the very practices it deems most corrosive to the liberal order: systematic torture or murder of their people, coercion of their neighbors, or export of repression across borders, to name a few. A Saudi Arabia, for instance, that periodically engages in some of these practices is a troublesome partner. A Saudi Arabia that flagrantly and consistently commits such acts risks destroying the moral and diplomatic basis of its relationship with the United States. American officials should be more hesitant still to distort or destabilize the politics of other countries, especially other democracies, for strategic gain. If Washington is going to get back into the coup business in Latin America or Southeast Asia, the bad outcomes to be prevented must be truly severe—a major, potentially lasting shift in a key regional balance of power, perhaps—to justify policies so manifestly in tension with the causes the United States claims to defend.

Mitigating the harm to those causes means heeding a further principle: marginal improvement matters. Washington will not convince leaders in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, or Vietnam to commit political suicide by abandoning their domestic model. But leverage works both ways in

these relationships. Countries on the firing line need a superpower patron just as much as it needs them. U.S. officials can use that leverage to discourage extraterritorial repression, seek the release of political prisoners, make elections a bit freer and fairer, or otherwise obtain modest but meaningful changes. Doing so may be the price of keeping these relationships intact, by convincing proponents of human rights and democracy in Congress that the White House has not forgotten such issues altogether.

This relates to an additional principle: the United States must be scrupulously honest with itself. American officials need to recognize that illiberal allies will be selective or unreliable allies because their domestic models put them at odds with important norms of the liberal order—and because they tend to generate resentment that may eventually cause an explosion. In the same vein, the problem with laws that mandate aid cutoffs to coup plotters is that they encourage self-deception. In cases in which Washington fears the strategic fallout from a break in relations, U.S. officials are motivated to pretend that a coup has not occurred. The better approach, in line with reforms approved by Congress in December 2022, is a framework that allows presidents to waive such cutoffs on national security grounds—but forces them to acknowledge and justify that choice. The work of making moral tradeoffs in foreign policy begins with admitting those tradeoffs exist.

Some of these principles are in tension with others, which means their application in specific cases must always be a matter of judgment. But the issue of reconciling opposites relates to a final principle: soaring idealism and brutal realism can coexist. During the 1970s, moral debates ruptured the Cold War consensus. During the 1980s, U.S. President Ronald Reagan adequately repaired—but never fully restored—that consensus by combining flexibility of tactics with clarity of purpose.

Reagan supported awful dictators, murderous militaries, and thug-gish “freedom fighters” in the Third World, sometimes through ploys—such as the Iran-contra scandal—that were dodgy or simply illegal. Yet he also backed democratic movements from Chile to South Korea; he paired rhetorical condemnations of the Kremlin with ringing affirmations of Western ideals. The takeaway is that rough measures may be more tolerable if they are part of a larger package that emphasizes, in word and deed, the values that must anchor the United States’ approach to the world. Some will see this as heightening the hypocrisy. In reality, it is the best way to preserve the balance—political, moral, and strategic—that a democratic superpower requires. 🌐

Kissinger and the True Meaning of Détente

Reinventing a Cold War Strategy for the Contest With China

NIALL FERGUSON

Few words are more closely associated with the late Henry Kissinger than “détente.” The term was first used in diplomacy in the early 1900s, when the French ambassador to Germany tried—and failed—to better his country’s deteriorating relationship with Berlin, and in 1912, when British diplomats attempted the same thing. But détente became internationally famous only in the late 1960s and 1970s, when Kissinger, first as U.S. national security adviser and then also as U.S. secretary of state, pioneered what would become his signature policy: the easing of tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Détente should not be confused with *amitié*. It was not about striking up a friendship with Moscow but about reducing the risks that a cold war would become a hot one. “The United States and the Soviet Union are ideological rivals,” Kissinger explained in his memoirs.

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“Détente cannot change that. The nuclear age compels us to coexist. Rhetorical crusades cannot change that, either.” For Kissinger, détente was a middle way between the aggression that had led to World War I, “when Europe, despite the existence of a military balance, drifted into a war no one wanted,” and the appeasement that he believed had led to World War II, “when the democracies failed to understand the designs of a totalitarian aggressor.”

Détente should
not be confused
with *amitié*.

To pursue détente, Kissinger sought to engage the Soviets on a variety of issues, including arms control and trade. He strove to establish “linkage,” another keyword of the era, between things the Soviets appeared to want (for example, better access to American technology) and things the United States knew it wanted (for example, assistance in extricating itself from Vietnam). At the same time, Kissinger was prepared to be combative whenever he discerned that the Soviets were working to expand their sphere of influence, from the Middle East to southern Africa. In other words, and as Kissinger himself put it, détente meant embracing “both deterrence and coexistence, both containment and an effort to relax tensions.”

If that pragmatic sentiment resonates five decades later, it is because policymakers in Washington appear to have reached a similar conclusion about China, the country with which U.S. President Joe Biden and his national security team seem ready to attempt their own version of détente. “We have to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict,” Biden told the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in California in November. “We also have a responsibility to our people and the world to work together when we see it in our interest to do so.” Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, made a similar point in his essay in these pages last year. “The contest is truly global, but not zero-sum,” he wrote. “The shared challenges the two sides face are unprecedented.” To paraphrase Kissinger, the United States and China are major rivals. But the nuclear age and climate change, not to mention artificial intelligence, compel them to coexist.

If détente is making a comeback in all but name, then why did it go out of fashion? In the wake of Kissinger’s death, in November 2023, his critics on the left have not been slow to repeat their old list of indictments, ranging from the bombing of civilians in Cambodia

to supporting dictators in Chile, Pakistan, and elsewhere. For the left, Kissinger personified a cold-blooded realpolitik that subordinated human rights in the Third World to containment. This was the aspect of détente to which U.S. President Jimmy Carter objected. But much less has been heard lately of the conservative critique of Kissinger, which claimed that Kissinger's policy was tantamount to appeasement. As governor of California, Ronald Reagan spent the 1970s blasting détente as a "one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its aims." He taunted Kissinger for acquiescing as the Soviets cynically exploited détente, such as when they and their Cuban allies gained the upper hand in postcolonial Angola. During his first run for president, in 1976, Reagan repeatedly pledged to scrap the policy if elected. "Under Messrs. Kissinger and Ford," he declared in March of that year, "this nation has become number two in military power in a world where it is dangerous—if not fatal—to be second best."

Reagan was hardly an outlier. By the time he spoke, hawks across the government were fed up with Kissinger's approach. Republicans commonly complained that, in the words of New Jersey Senator Clifford Case, "the gains made in détente have accrued to the Soviet side." Across the aisle, Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia enraged Kissinger by accusing him of having "put great trust in Communist Russia" and, through détente, "embracing" Moscow. The American military, meanwhile, suggested that to pursue détente was to admit defeat. In 1976, Elmo Zumwalt, who had recently retired as head of the U.S. Navy, argued that Kissinger believed the United States had "passed its historic high point like so many earlier civilizations." Just as appeasement, which had started out as a respectable term, fell into disrepute in 1938, détente became a dirty word—and it did so even before Kissinger left office.

Yet 1970s détente was unlike 1930s appeasement, both in the way it functioned and in the results it produced. Unlike the British and French attempt to buy off Adolf Hitler with territorial concessions, Kissinger and his presidents strove to contain their adversary's expansion. And unlike appeasement, détente successfully avoided a world war. Writing in the mid-1980s, the political scientist Harvey Starr counted a marked increase in the ratio of cooperative to conflictual acts in U.S.-Soviet relations during the Nixon administration. The number of state-based conflicts was lower in the Kissinger years (1969 to 1977) than in the years after and right before.

Half a century later, as Washington adjusts to the realities of a new cold war, *détente* could again be derailed by hawks. Republican politicians love to portray their opponents as soft on China, just as their predecessors portrayed their opponents as soft on the Soviets in the 1970s. Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton, for example, has claimed that Biden is “coddling and appeasing the Chinese communists.” Former President Donald Trump’s campaign has accused Biden of “weakness” that “continues to invite aggression” against Taiwan.

These charges are not surprising; it is always tempting for Republicans to summon the spirit of Reagan and rerun his critique of *détente*. But there is a danger that both parties are misunderstanding the lessons of the 1970s. In advocating an uncompromising containment of China, Republicans may be overestimating the United States’ ability to prevail in the event of a confrontation. In shying away from escalation, the Biden administration may be underestimating the importance of deterrence as a component of *détente*. The essence of Kissinger’s strategy was that it combined engagement and containment in a way that was well advised given the state of the American economy and American public opinion in the 1970s, or what the Soviets liked to call the “constellation of forces.” A similar combination is needed today, especially when the constellation of forces is a good deal more favorable for Beijing than it ever was for Moscow.

ON THE BRINK

These days, the more sophisticated of Kissinger’s academic critics don’t complain that the Soviets got more out of *détente* than the United States did. Instead, they argue that Kissinger repeatedly made the mistake of seeing every issue through the lens of the Cold War and treating every crisis as if it were decisive to the struggle against Moscow. As the historian Jussi Hanhimäki has written in a book-length broadside, Kissinger took it “as a given that containing Soviet power—if not communist ideology—should be the central goal of American foreign policy.”

This critique reflects the efforts historians have made in recent years to focus on the sufferings of people who lived in the countries caught in the Cold War crossfire. But it underestimates just how threatening the Soviet Union was to the United States in the Third World. Whatever the crafty Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin

might have said to Kissinger, the Kremlin did not regard détente as anything other than cover for its strategy to gain the advantage over Washington. As a 1971 report to the Politburo made clear, the Soviet Union wanted the United States to “conduct its international affairs in a way that did not create a danger of direct confrontation,” but only because doing so could make Washington “recognize the need for the West to realize the interests of the USSR.” To achieve this objective, the report called on the Politburo “to continue to use

the U.S. government’s objective interest in maintaining contacts and holding negotiations with the USSR.”

There was
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to coexistence,”
Kissinger said
in 1975.

Kissinger was not privy to this document, but it would not have surprised him. He had no illusions about the game being played by Dobrynin’s masters. After all, the Soviets also stated publicly in 1975 that détente did not preclude their continued “support of the

national liberation struggle” against “the social-political status quo.” As Kissinger told the columnist Joe Alsop in 1970, “If the Soviets think an agreement on nuclear parity will serve their interests, they are perfectly capable of reaching for such an agreement with one hand, while trying to cut our gizzards out with the other hand.”

Nevertheless, although Kissinger knew that the Kremlin had ulterior motives, he still advanced détente for one simple reason: the conservative alternative, a return to the brinkmanship of the 1950s and 1960s, risked nuclear Armageddon. There was “no alternative to coexistence,” Kissinger told an audience in Minneapolis in 1975. Both the Soviet Union and the United States “have the capacity to destroy civilized life.” Détente was, therefore, a moral imperative. “We have an historic obligation,” Kissinger argued the following year, “to engage the Soviet Union and to push back the shadow of nuclear catastrophe.”

These concerns did not make Kissinger an advocate of nuclear disarmament. Having risen to prominence as a public intellectual with a book titled *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, he remained as interested in the possibility of a limited nuclear war as he was horrified by the prospect of an all-out one. In the spring of 1974, Kissinger even requested that the Joint Chiefs of Staff formulate a limited nuclear response to a hypothetical Soviet invasion of Iran.

But when he was briefed on the draft plan a few weeks later, he was appalled. The Pentagon proposed firing some 200 nuclear weapons at Soviet military installations near the Iranian border. “Are you out of your minds?” Kissinger shouted. “This is a limited option?” When the generals returned with a plan to use only an atomic mine and two nuclear weapons to blow up the two roads from Soviet territory into Iran, he was incredulous. “What kind of nuclear attack is this?” he asked. A U.S. president who used so few weapons would be regarded in the Kremlin as “chicken.” The problem, as he well knew, was that there could never be certainty that the Soviets would respond in a limited way to any kind of American nuclear strike.

Kissinger’s views on nuclear arms rankled his conservative critics, particularly those in the Pentagon. They were especially infuriated by how Kissinger approached the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, which began in November 1969 and paved the way for the first major U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement. In September 1975, the Defense Intelligence Agency circulated a ten-page intelligence estimate asserting that the Soviet Union was cynically cheating on its SALT commitments to gain nuclear dominance. The debate flared again in the last days of the Ford administration, when reports by the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency suggested that Moscow was seeking superiority, not parity, when it came to nuclear weapons. Government officials claimed that Kissinger knew this but had chosen to ignore it.

These criticisms were not entirely wrong. The Soviets had already achieved parity in the raw numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles by the late 1960s and had a huge lead in megatonnage by 1970. Some of these ICBMs carried large, multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, which could fire a cluster of warheads at more than one target. But the United States retained a five-to-one advantage in submarine-launched ballistic missiles in 1977. The U.S. advantage in bomber-carried nuclear weapons was even greater: 11 to one. And Moscow never came anywhere close to acquiring enough ballistic missiles to carry out a strike against U.S. nuclear assets that would have made it impossible for Washington to respond with its own nuclear attack. In fact, interviews with senior Soviet officers after the Cold War revealed that by the early 1970s, the military leadership had dismissed the notion that the Soviet Union could win a nuclear war. The subsequent growth of the country’s nuclear arsenal was mainly the result of inertia on the part of the military-industrial complex.

To a degree, Kissinger shared his Soviet counterparts' perspective. His view since the 1950s had been that an all-out nuclear world war was too catastrophic for anyone to win. The details of the size and quality of the two superpowers' nuclear arsenals therefore interested him much less than the ways in which the diplomacy of *détente* could reduce the risk of Armageddon. He also believed that Soviet nuclear parity would ultimately prove unsustainable, given that the Soviet Union's economy was much smaller than that of the United States. "The economic and technological base which underlies Western military strength remains overwhelmingly superior in size and capacity for innovation," Kissinger said in a 1976 speech. He added, "We have nothing to fear from competition: If there is a military competition, we have the strength to defend our interests. If there is an economic competition, we won it long ago."

LOSE THE BATTLE, WIN THE WAR

Conservatives objected to Kissinger for reasons beyond his seeming tolerance of Soviet nuclear parity. Hawks also argued that Kissinger was too ready to accept the unjust character of the Soviet system—the obverse of liberals' complaint that he was too ready to tolerate the unjust character of right-wing dictatorships. This issue came to the fore over Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration and the treatment of Soviet political dissidents, such as the author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. When Solzhenitsyn visited the United States in the 1970s (having been kicked out of the Soviet Union), Kissinger infuriated conservatives by advising President Gerald Ford not to meet with him.

Solzhenitsyn became one of Kissinger's most implacable opponents. "A peace that tolerates any ferocious forms of violence and any massive doses of it against millions of people," the novelist thundered in 1975, "has no moral loftiness even in the nuclear age." He and other conservative critics argued that through *détente*, Kissinger had merely enabled the expansion of Soviet communism. The fall of Saigon in 1975, the descent of Cambodia into the hell of Pol Pot's communist dictatorship, the Cuban-Soviet intervention in Angola's postcolonial conflict—these and other geopolitical setbacks seemed to vindicate their claim. "I believe in the peace of which Mr. Ford speaks, as much as any man," Reagan declared in 1976, as he campaigned against Ford in the Republican presidential primary. "But in places such as Angola, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the peace they have come to know is the



Train-track diplomacy: Kissinger and Ford negotiating arms control with Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev and others near Vladivostok, Russia, November 1974

peace of the grave. All I can see is what other nations the world over see: collapse of the American will and the retreat of American power.”

Unlike the allegation of Soviet nuclear superiority, Kissinger never denied that Soviet expansionism in the Third World posed a threat to détente and U.S. power. “Time is running out; continuation of an interventionist policy must inevitably threaten other relationships,” he said in a speech in November 1975. “We will be flexible and cooperative in settling conflicts. . . . But we will never permit détente to turn into a subterfuge of unilateral advantage.” Yet the reality was that in the absence of congressional support—whether for the defense of South Vietnam or the defense of Angola—the Ford administration had little choice but to accept Soviet military expansion, or at least the victories of Soviet proxies. “Our domestic disputes,” Kissinger said in December 1975, “are depriving us of both the ability to provide incentives for [Soviet] moderation such as in the restrictions on the trade act, as well as of the ability to resist military moves by the Soviet Union as in Angola.”

It can, of course, be debated to what extent Kissinger was right to claim that with continued congressional support for U.S. aid, South Vietnam and even Angola might have been saved from communist

control. But there is no doubt Kissinger cared about stopping the spread of Soviet systems. “The necessity for détente as we conceive it does not reflect approbation of the Soviet domestic structure,” he said in 1974. “The United States has always looked with sympathy, with great appreciation, at the expression of freedom of thought in all societies.” If Kissinger declined to embrace Solzhenitsyn, it was not because Kissinger was tolerant of (much less secretly sympathetic to) the Soviet model. It was because he believed that Washington could accomplish more by maintaining working relations with Moscow.

And in this, he was surely right. By easing tensions both in Europe and across the rest of the world, détente helped improve the lives of at least some people under communist rule. Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union rose in the period when Kissinger was firmly in charge of détente. After Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington and other congressional hawks sought to publicly pressure Moscow into releasing more Jews by holding up a U.S.-Soviet trade deal, emigration went down. Kissinger’s conservative critics were vehemently opposed to the United States’ signing the Helsinki Accords in the summer of 1975, arguing that they represented a ratification of Soviet postwar conquests in Europe. But by getting the Soviet Union’s leaders to commit to respect certain basic civil rights of their citizens as part of the accords—a commitment they had no intention of honoring—the deal ultimately eroded the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe.

None of these facts could save Kissinger’s governmental career. As soon as Ford was out, so was his secretary of state, never to return to high office. But Kissinger’s core strategic concept continued to bear fruit for years to come, including under the principal critics of détente: Carter and Reagan. Carter had criticized Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger for being insufficiently compassionate in their realism, but his own national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, persuaded him to get tough with Moscow. By the end of 1979, Carter was compelled to warn the Soviets to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan or face “serious consequences.” Reagan, for his part, ended up adopting détente as his own policy in all but name—and indeed went beyond what Kissinger did to ease tensions. In his pursuit of rapprochement, Reagan agreed to reduce Washington’s nuclear arsenal by a far larger amount than even Kissinger thought prudent. The “Kissinger era” did not end when he left the government in January 1977.

Although since forgotten, this truth was recognized by Kissinger's more observant contemporaries. The conservative commentator William Safire, for example, noted how quickly the Reagan administration was penetrated by "Kissingerians" and "détenteniks," even if Kissinger himself was kept at bay. In fact, the Reagan administration became so accommodating that it was now Kissinger's turn to accuse Reagan of being overly soft, such as in his response to the imposition of martial law in Poland. Kissinger opposed plans for a pipeline to transport natural gas from the Soviet Union to Western Europe on the grounds that it would make the West "much more subject to political manipulation than it is even today." (This warning, it turned out, was prescient.) And in 1987, Nixon and Kissinger took to the op-ed page of the *Los Angeles Times* to warn that Reagan's readiness to make a deal with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, in which both states would get rid of all their intermediate-range nuclear weapons, was going too far. To such criticisms, Secretary of State George Shultz gave a revealing response: "We're beyond détente now."

DÉTENTE 2.0

Considering the troubles the United States was facing by the start of 1969, détente as Kissinger conceived of it made sense. Unable to defeat North Vietnam, afflicted by stagflation, and deeply divided over everything from race relations to women's rights, Washington could not play hardball with Moscow. Indeed, the U.S. economy in the 1970s was in no condition to sustain increased defense spending overall. (Détente had a fiscal rationale, too, although Kissinger seldom mentioned it.) Détente did not mean—as Kissinger's critics alleged—embracing, trusting, or appeasing the Soviets. Nor did it mean allowing them to attain nuclear superiority, permanent control over Eastern Europe, or an empire in the Third World. What it meant was recognizing the limits of U.S. power, reducing the risk of thermonuclear war by employing a combination of carrots and sticks, and buying time for the United States to recover.

It worked. True, Kissinger did not secure the "decent interval" between the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam and the South's conquest by the North, an interlude he had hoped would be long enough to limit the damage to Washington's credibility and reputation. But détente allowed the United States to regroup domestically and to stabilize its Cold War strategy. The U.S. economy soon innovated in ways that the Soviet Union never could, creating economic

and technological assets that enabled Washington's Cold War victory. Détente also gave the Soviets the rope with which to hang themselves. Emboldened by their successes in Southeast Asia and southern Africa, they mounted a series of mistaken and costly interventions in the less developed world, culminating in their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Given détente's rarely acknowledged success in these terms, it is worth asking if there are lessons the United States can learn today that are relevant to its competition with China. Kissinger certainly believed

A new détente
would not mean
appeasing China.

so. While speaking in Beijing in 2019, he declared that the United States and China were already "in the foothills of a cold war." In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, he upgraded that to "the mountain passes." And a year before his death, he warned that the new cold war would be more dangerous

than the first one because of advances in technology, such as artificial intelligence, that threaten to make weapons not only faster and more accurate but also potentially autonomous. He called on both superpowers to cooperate whenever possible to limit the existential dangers of this new cold war—and, in particular, to avoid a potentially cataclysmic showdown over the contested status of Taiwan.

As during the 1970s, plenty of experts criticize this approach in the current debate over U.S. policy toward China. Elbridge Colby, the most thoughtful of the new generation of conservative strategists, has exhorted the Biden administration to adopt a "strategy of denial" to deter China from militarily challenging a status quo in which Taiwan enjoys *de facto* autonomy and a thriving democracy. At times, the Biden administration has itself seemed to call into question the half-century Taiwan policy of strategic ambiguity, in which the United States leaves unclear whether it will use military force to defend the island. And there is almost a bipartisan consensus that the previous era of engagement with Beijing was a mistake, predicated on the erroneous assumption that increased trade with China would magically liberalize its political system.

Yet there is no good reason why the superpowers of our time, like their predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s, should endure 20 years of brinkmanship before having the détente phase of their cold war. Détente 2.0 would surely be preferable to running a new version of the Cuban missile crisis over Taiwan, but with the roles reversed:

the communist state blockading the nearby contested island and the United States having to run the blockade, with all the attendant risks. That is certainly what Kissinger believed in the last year of his long life. It was the main motivation for his final visit to Beijing shortly after his 100th birthday.

Like détente 1.0, a new détente would not mean appeasing China, much less expecting the country to change. It would mean, once again, engaging in myriad negotiations: on arms control (urgently needed as China frantically builds up its forces in every domain); on trade; on technology transfers, climate change, and artificial intelligence; and on space. Like SALT, these negotiations would be protracted and tedious—and perhaps even inconclusive. But they would be the “meeting jaw to jaw” that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill generally preferred to war. As for Taiwan, the superpowers could do worse than to dust off their old promise, hammered out by Kissinger, to agree to disagree.

Détente, of course, does not work miracles. In the 1970s, it was both oversold and overbought. The policy unquestionably provided the United States with time, but it was a chess strategy that perhaps required too many callous sacrifices of lesser pieces on the board. As one Soviet analyst, puzzled by U.S. opposition to his country’s intervention in Angola, remarked, “You Americans tried to sell détente like detergent and claimed that it would do everything a detergent could do.”

Critics ultimately succeeded in poisoning the term. In March 1976, Ford banned its use in his reelection campaign. But there was never a workable replacement. Asked then if he had an alternative term, Kissinger gave a characteristically wry response. “I’ve been dancing around myself to find one,” he said. “Easing of tensions, relaxation of tensions. We may well wind up with the old word again.”

Today, the Biden administration has settled for its own word: “de-risking.” It is not French, but it is also barely English. Although the starting point of this cold war is different because of the much greater economic interdependence between today’s superpowers, the optimal strategy may turn out to be essentially the same as before. If the new détente is to be criticized, then the critics should not misrepresent it the way Kissinger’s détente was so often misrepresented by his many foes—lest they find themselves, like Reagan before, doing essentially the same when they are in the Situation Room. 🌐

The United States' Missed Opportunity in Latin America

Economic Security Begins Closer to Home

SHANNON K. O'NEIL

When policymakers consider national security, they tend to think first of military capabilities: the weaponry and ammunition a country possesses, the state of its armed forces, its border defenses, its surveillance and cybersecurity. Since 2020, however, U.S. national security strategy has taken a sharply commercial turn. The COVID-19 pandemic and its huge disruptions of economies made strategists more conscious of supply chains' fragility. Where, exactly, are all the chips and ball bearings that go into weapons manufactured?

The pandemic also illuminated just how much U.S. companies depend on China in the multistep manufacturing processes that bring products to consumers, including items crucial for national security and for the transition to green energy. China currently processes 85 percent of the critical minerals that go into high-tech devices. China also boasts

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77 percent of the world's battery-manufacturing capacity and makes more than half the electric vehicles sold worldwide. Beijing makes no secret of its intent to displace Washington as the motor that drives the world's economies—or of its willingness to use subsidies, espionage, and coercion to achieve this end.

Since U.S. President Joe Biden took office in early 2021, his administration has worked to try to diminish the threat China's supply chain dominance poses to the United States. In his first 100 days, he ordered a sweeping analysis of the supply chains for four areas vital to U.S. security and economic stability: critical minerals, large-capacity batteries, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals. The review found that the minerals that power Americans' mobile phones and computers mostly come from China, as do a good portion of the active ingredients that go into 120 of the most basic medicines. The analysis showed how reliant the U.S. electric vehicle, solar panel, and wind turbine industries are on Chinese factories.

Biden has sought to help U.S. companies fill these supply-chain gaps. He has aggressively pursued "friend shoring," establishing working groups with European countries to address drug shortages and secure critical minerals, as well as coordinating with the European Union on supply chain, technology, data, and investment policies. His administration has dedicated even more energy to fortifying economic alliances in Asia, launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework—which focuses heavily on supply chains—and inviting Japan and South Korea to collaborate on an early-warning system to predict supply chain disruptions.

These far-flung efforts, however, badly neglect solutions in the United States' own backyard: the countries of Latin America. The region is rich in the critical minerals the United States needs. Many Latin American countries already boast sophisticated pharmaceutical industries. Others have technically sophisticated, economically competitive, and geographically proximate workforces that could assemble, test, and package microchips made in U.S.-based fabrication plants. American car makers already rely on Mexico, and incorporating Latin America more fully into electric vehicle manufacturing would make the industry more competitive by drawing on different labor markets and tapping into a fuller range of subsidies provided by the Inflation Reduction Act.

U.S. leaders consistently overrate the worth of securing alliances next door to China and overestimate Europe's commercial prospects. Neither Europe nor Asia can provide substantial or sustainable solutions to the threats to U.S. supply chains. The United States and Europe can certainly

benefit from unifying the way they set technology standards, screen their foreign investments, and move toward more environmentally friendly and labor-friendly sourcing of all kinds of goods. But Europe will never become a strong source of critical minerals or an affordable supplier of inputs to semiconductors or electric vehicles. Other than Australia, few U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific have significant critical mineral reserves. And it will be enormously hard to pry Asian electric vehicle, semiconductor, and pharmaceutical supply chains free of Chinese influence.

In terms of geographical proximity, Latin America, by contrast, is a Goldilocks option for U.S. manufacturers. It is not so close to the United States that moving production there would dangerously concentrate risk from natural or manmade disasters, but it is not so far that it creates complicated long-distance logistics problems. The United States has a great deal to gain broadly from helping Latin American countries strengthen their economies. Most of those countries are democracies, and economic growth and democratic consolidation in the region would create new investment opportunities and middle-class consumers for U.S. companies. And Latin America is the one region in the world with which the United States has an existing trade and market advantage, having already inked free trade agreements with 11 countries there.

Yet the United States is failing to engage Latin America's nations commercially or strategically, missing an opportunity to shore up national security and wasting built-in geopolitical advantages. Indeed, the United States cannot afford to overlook the opportunities Latin America offers. China already recognizes Latin America's potential. It is swooping in fast, expanding its trade with the region from \$12 billion in 2000 to nearly \$500 billion in 2022. Its mining and refining companies are moving to lock up access to the region's natural resources.

When it comes to the countries south of the U.S. border, some American leaders may simply feel that good fences make good neighbors. Taking that stance would be a big, counterproductive mistake. If the United States fails to integrate Latin America substantially into U.S. supply chains and keeps looking farther afield for economic allies, it will only help bring more Chinese influence closer to its doorstep.

ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Eighty percent of the U.S. supply of critical minerals comes from abroad, and the United States relies especially heavily on China for materials used in battery production such as nickel, manganese, and graphite.

Sixty percent of the microchips—and 90 percent of the most advanced kind of semiconductor chips—vital to both Americans' daily communications and U.S. national defense are manufactured in a nation under perpetual Chinese threat, Taiwan. Over 70 percent of the facilities that make the advanced ingredients on which the U.S. pharmaceutical industry relies are located abroad, and the United States is running short of more medications than at any other point in nearly a decade. China has become the United States' biggest provider of many antibiotics, blood thinners, and chemotherapy and diabetes drugs, as well as the main source for the active ingredients in pharmaceuticals manufactured in India, a top source of imported U.S. medications.

To shore up U.S. supply chains, the Biden administration has placed big bets on boosting domestic capacity and on better integrating Europe and Asia into U.S. manufacturing. The 2022 CHIPS and Science Act allocated tens of billions of dollars to build up U.S. domestic semiconductor production. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) offered electric-vehicle manufacturers subsidies of up to \$7,500 per car if most of the inputs are made in the United States or in countries with which Washington has free-trade agreements. The U.S. Department of Energy recently launched investments into more than two dozen critical minerals and materials projects across the United States, including lithium mines and refineries. And in November 2023, Biden announced a major initiative to encourage domestic pharmaceutical production, rebooting the pandemic-era authorization President Donald Trump gave the U.S. Defense Department to produce crucial medications. The pharmaceutical supply chain “is going to start here in America,” Biden vowed.

The Biden administration's security and resilience efforts, however, are bound to fall short. Indeed, they already do. Most of the money earmarked for domestic semiconductor production has gone toward the capital- and tech-intensive manufacture of chips in fabrication plants. But U.S. national security depends on controlling a fuller supply chain—from chip design to assembly, testing, and packaging. The vast majority of these steps still take place in Asia, particularly in China. New Arizona- and Texas-based fabrication plants will continue to have to send their chips back to geopolitical rivals for completion. Full back-end

Latin America offers the United States its best hope to diversify its vulnerable supply chains.

chip manufacturing is unlikely ever to take place solely in the United States: the final chips would be too costly to be commercially viable.

In terms of electric vehicles, no U.S. ally in Europe or Asia will be able to undo China's control of the critical minerals these vehicles require. They don't have the natural resources, and environmental regulations and costs make large-scale refining in these regions less competitive. And few of these nations qualify for the IRA's subsidies as they have not ratified free-trade agreements with the United States.

Even with subsidies, U.S. domestic electric vehicle production faces stiff competition given the technological advances and economies of scale of China's heavily subsidized rival models. When it comes to refining chemicals and manufacturing anodes, cathodes, and battery cells, the United States lags behind China. In early 2023, when Ford unveiled a plan to build a new \$3.5 billion electric-vehicle battery factory in Michigan, it indicated it would bring Chinese engineers to the plant and license Chinese technology rather than develop its own.

Despite U.S. efforts, Asian countries' integration with China will likely only deepen in the coming years. In September 2020, 15 Asian countries—including China, as well as the major U.S. allies Japan and South Korea—signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which intends to coordinate production across Asian economies, eliminating tariffs, streamlining customs, and unifying rules of origin requirements. Over time, products made throughout Asia will likely have more, not fewer, Chinese inputs, especially if China gets its wish to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. When Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement's predecessor, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, he incentivized the countries that stuck with the agreement to build supply chains that cut out the United States.

THE MISSING LINK

Latin America offers the best hope the United States has to diversify and relocate its vulnerable, highly consequential supply chains for critical minerals, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and large-capacity batteries—all four of the supply chains that Biden's administration identified as most crucial to U.S. security and prosperity. Latin America has ample reserves of half the over four dozen minerals Biden deemed critical. The region has a particular abundance of the minerals needed to make batteries: it is estimated to hold 60 percent of the world's lithium reserves, 23 percent of the world's graphite, and over 15 percent of its

vehicles. Mexico can provide a further lift to the United States' ambition to build out resilient electric vehicle supply chains: its factories are already pillars of the North American car industry, and electric vehicle components manufactured in Mexico or Canada are eligible for the IRA's full set of subsidies.

Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama are well positioned to take the place of Asian countries in testing, packaging, and other less capital-intensive and technologically intensive semiconductor steps: investments and initial facilities and pilot training programs are already underway in these countries. And to quickly boost resilience in its pharmaceutical supply, the United States need not look further than the Western Hemisphere. The region already produces tens of billions of dollars' worth of vaccines, active pharmaceutical ingredients, and consumer-ready medications every year and hosts sophisticated research and development institutes: Brazil's Butantan Institute and Oswaldo Cruz Foundation are among the 15 largest vaccine manufacturers in the world.

Mexico already produces a variety of medicines and medical devices, exporting \$800 million in pharmaceuticals to the United States each year. Even smaller producers such as Argentina and Uruguay make over 30 percent of the drugs they consume. These manufacturing bases could become robust alternative suppliers.

With the right investments in training and infrastructure, within a decade, American companies could be sourcing all the lithium they need from a vibrant Latin American "lithium triangle"—Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile—and partnering with busy factories in Mexico to produce electric vehicle batteries, plastic casings, and chargers. When U.S. patients ask their doctors where their children's mumps, measles, and rubella shots come from, the answer could be Brazil. American smartphones could feature chip technology tested and packaged in Panama. Most important, many more stages of the production cycles for America's most critical national security technologies could unfold close to U.S. borders.

FLAWS IN THE OINTMENT

Latin America already has outsize access to the U.S. consumer economy. The United States is the region's largest trading partner, with more than \$1.1 trillion in goods and services exchanged each year. It is also Latin America's biggest outside investor, contributing nearly 40 percent of all the foreign direct investment the region receives. Latin America's political culture makes it a natural collaborator, too.

Latin America is where democracy and development meet: over 550 million citizens there continue to use the ballot box to resolve their differences and address their grievances. Public opinion in the region generally regards the United States better than its geopolitical rivals: recent surveys suggest that strong majorities of Argentines, Brazilians, Colombians, and Mexicans hold a positive view of the United States, outpacing any warmth of feeling for China and Russia. Four decades of polls collated in 2022 by the Centre for the Future of Democracy show that the United States has recently become more popular in Latin America, unlike in the rest of the developing world.

So why is the United States neglecting to engage Latin America commercially or strategically? The CHIPS and Science Act is underwriting studies of Costa Rica's and Panama's ability to contribute to the semiconductor supply chain. And U.S. officials are working to beef up Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) funding to support American companies' bids for investment-ready projects in the region. But this does not reflect the ambition the United States needs.

The infrastructure deficit in Latin America is monumental. Transportation is expensive within and between Latin American countries thanks to a lack of paved roads, railway lines, deep commercial ports, and flights. Bureaucratic red tape adds to businesses' expenses in the region. Many new industries require expertise that Latin American workforces still lack. Latin American nations must also seize opportunities themselves. Local governments will need to invest in infrastructure, education, and the rule of law to better attract U.S. and other international companies. They will need to think strategically about the niches they can best fill in supply chains, differentiating themselves and specializing in specific components rather than trying to do it all.

But a stronger U.S.-Latin American economic-security alliance would not just be nice to have: for both places, it is an urgent need. China has recently transformed its presence in Latin America to play an important, even dominant, role in many of the region's economies—a development that seriously threatens both Latin American and U.S. interests.

OPPORTUNITY COST

Over the last two decades, China has recognized opportunities in Latin America that the United States has overlooked. It has assiduously courted Latin American governments by making loans, at times coercing them to withdraw diplomatic recognition from Taiwan. China is now the largest

trading partner for Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay and the second largest trading partner for a score of other nations, accounting for nearly 20 percent of Latin America's total trade. Beijing has also become a significant banker in the region. China is now one of the only sources of outside financing available to Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Beijing has curtailed its international lending since 2020, but it still comes through in emergencies: in 2023 alone, China stepped in twice to offer currency swaps to help Argentina meet its International Monetary Fund repayments during a volatile election season.

With the right investments, U.S. companies could source all the lithium they need from Latin America.

Through its Belt and Road Initiative and other commercial forays, China has also become a big funder and builder of Latin American infrastructure. Its banks finance the mostly Chinese companies now building highways, ports, hydropower dams, solar power plants, and electricity grids in over 20 countries. It bankrolls energy and mining projects across the region, including an \$8 billion nuclear power plant in Argentina and a nearly \$10 billion copper mine in Peru. During the first

two decades of the twenty-first century, these growing trade, financial, and infrastructure ties filled many Latin American governments' coffers and brought in much-needed capital.

Yet China's growing role in the region has not been an unalloyed good. As Latin America's trade with China ballooned, many Latin American economies simultaneously became less diverse, less sophisticated, and less equal. China's economic activity in the Americas is lopsided: between 2015 and 2019, just five commodities—iron ore, copper ore, refined copper, soy, and crude oil—accounted for nearly 70 percent of Latin America's exports to China. China then sold finished goods back to the region, undercutting local manufacturers.

Chinese investments tell a similarly ambiguous story. Beijing's foreign direct investment in the continent remains somewhat limited, at just six percent of the foreign capital that has flowed into the region over the last 20 years. This investment was concentrated primarily in natural resources, energy, and mining, only recently shifting a bit toward utilities and power generation.

The loans that China provides are often opaque and onerous. They can feature high interest rates and provisions for immediate repayment

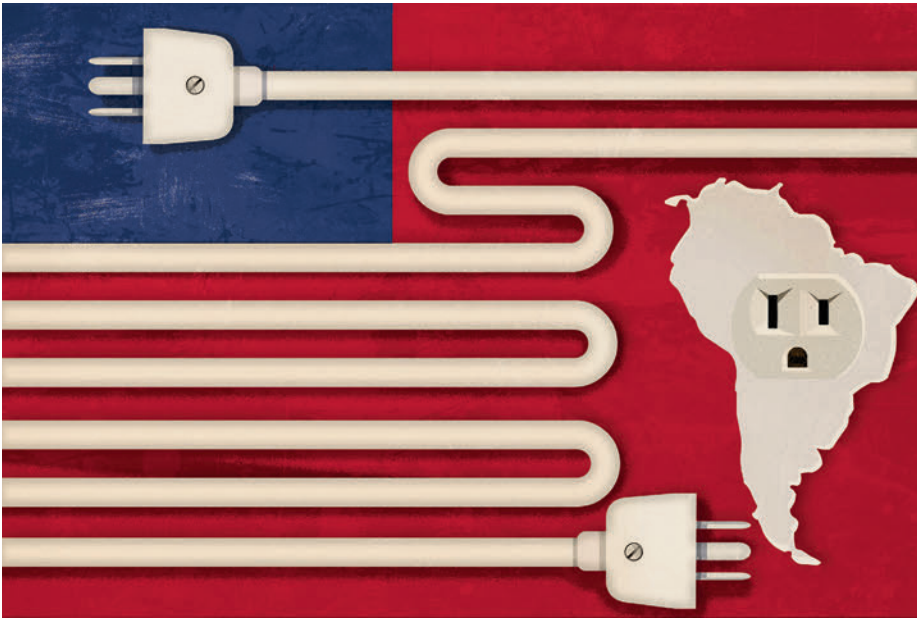
if China or its companies feel slighted. The loans are often secured with natural resources as collateral at fixed and disadvantageous rates: between 2009 and 2021, when Ecuador had to send more than a billion barrels of oil to China to service some \$20 billion in loans, it sacrificed nearly \$5 billion it could have received on the open market. Many Chinese lenders to Latin America subordinate other creditors by demanding that they receive payments first in the event of a default, stymieing multilateral solutions to unsustainable sovereign debt loads. Chinese mining and other infrastructure projects are not known for their transparency—or for their adherence to domestic or international labor or environmental standards. Indeed, local communities and NGOs in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru are fighting Chinese companies, citing deforestation, water pollution, environmental degradation, and poor working conditions in their numerous legal complaints.

And China has used its growing importance to the region to pressure Latin American nations. In 2020, aligning himself with U.S. President Donald Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro intimated that Huawei would be excluded from Brazil's 5G network. China then threatened to withhold COVID-19 vaccines from the country, and Bolsonaro had to relent.

FRIEND WITH BENEFITS

Since 2014, Latin America has lost its economic luster. Growth has lagged behind other emerging markets: Latin American economies have grown, on average, less than one percent over the last decade, far less than Africa, eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia. This sluggish performance has many drivers: COVID-19 arguably hit Latin America harder than any other region, and many governments there have struggled to ensure their populations' basic safety. Tens of millions of Latin Americans have lost their middle-class foothold as gains in fighting poverty and inequality in the first part of the twenty-first century have largely reversed.

But China has also played a role in this reversal of fortunes. China's expanding economic importance to Latin America is, in fact, part of why many of the region's nations have struggled to move up the value chain. Commodities now make up more, not less, of the region's exports than they did in 2000, dangerously concentrating economies that already lacked diversity. Latin American countries, along with countries in Africa, have suffered premature deindustrialization as their manufacturing sectors shrank in size and economic importance before their economies matured.



To be fair, the history of commercial engagements between the United States and the region has not always been pretty, either. Countries such as Argentina and Bolivia continue to perceive U.S. efforts with particular suspicion owing to the many damaging U.S. interventions throughout the region in the twentieth century. More recently, in the 1990s, IBM bribed Argentine government employees for contracts to modernize the computer systems in the country's largest government-owned bank, and in 2003, Walmart paid off zoning officials in Mexico to place a superstore next to the historic pyramids of Teotihuacán.

But expansive enforcement of the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act has vastly reduced the amount of bribery involved in deals with U.S. companies: both IBM and Walmart were punished. And given the disclosures that U.S.-based public companies make to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission—as well as the myriad climate, labor, and governance promises that U.S. executives and company boards make to their shareholders and consumers—U.S. business operations and practices abroad tend to be more transparent, accountable, and mutually beneficial than commercial arrangements with companies not subject to these safeguards and legal requirements.

The economic relations that Washington pursues with Latin America already differ sharply from those that Beijing has built. Latin America's exports to the United States are more diverse and lean toward more

sophisticated and more value-added products; the majority are in machinery and transportation. When U.S. companies invest in Latin America, they tend to put money into higher-value-added sectors such as manufacturing, financial services, and information technologies and services. This helps create more stable and better-paying jobs and supports educational advancements. And Western firms, unlike Chinese ones, often bring much-needed technology and intellectual property into the region. In July 2023, McKinsey estimated that nearly 90 percent of Latin America's outside knowledge-based capital has come from Canada, the United States, and the European Union. Overall, engaging more closely with the United States offers Latin American countries a better path toward inclusive economic growth than does engaging with China.

BETTER TOGETHER

U.S. leaders must wake up to Latin America's potential. The January 2023 Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity was a start: 11 Latin American and Caribbean countries signed on to a U.S.-led initiative to boost trade, investment, and integrate regulations across the Western Hemisphere. In November of that year, APEP unveiled an agenda to expand and strengthen regional supply chains for clean energy, medical supplies, and semiconductors. It announced new financing mechanisms from the IDB and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to build trade and energy infrastructure, \$5 million in new USAID support to Western Hemisphere entrepreneurs, and \$89 million in additional outlays for migrant-receiving nations such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

These initiatives are positive steps. But much more must be done to unlock Latin America's great promise. First, the United States needs to change the rules and practices that structure lending. The DFC is largely prohibited from lending to the higher-income countries that would be vital to building out successful Western Hemisphere supply chains. The IDB, meanwhile, leans toward blue-chip investments to maintain its triple-A bond rating. But for APEP to work, it will have to invest in riskier ventures that create and expand new industries and build the supply chains they entail. Through an act of Congress, the United States should give the IDB a substantial capital increase to help APEP fulfill its mission.

Access to financing is just one hurdle. If U.S. companies want to compete with China on infrastructure or on other government contracts in Latin America, they need to be provided with more transparent

ground rules. As a whole, Latin American countries rank below their Asian and Western European counterparts on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and in measures of rule of law. U.S. government agencies should provide technical assistance and expertise to their local counterparts to draft public tenders with clear and transparent legal guarantees and anticorruption safeguards.

Hemispheric supply-chain ecosystems cannot be developed through a handful of biannual meetings of heads of state. This complex commercial agenda needs a mandate and a dedicated staff to drive coordination, collaboration, and implementation. APEP must establish a secretariat akin to that of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, which boasts a staff of over 50 at its Singapore headquarters. Standing committees, working groups, and task forces are funded by established member annual dues; APEP could do the same.

China has recognized opportunities in Latin America that the United States has overlooked.

U.S.-tied regional supply chains will not survive if they are not commercially competitive.

Unifying and harmonizing rules of origin across the United States' Western Hemisphere free-trade agreements would reduce costs. More than that, however, the United States needs to revive its interest in free trade as an international diplomatic and commercial tool. Even dedicated U.S. allies cannot substantially benefit the United States if they still face tariffs and cumbersome regulatory hurdles. As a first step, the Biden administration and the U.S. Congress should move to include all South American critical mineral producers in the IRA subsidy program, which currently covers only the United States' free-trade partners.

The United States' security depends on Latin America's broader social stability. Organized crime—powered by not just drug trafficking but also trafficking in migrants, kidnapping, and extortion—threatens the region's fragile democratic development and terrorizes populations. Too often, the ill-gotten gains of Latin American crime networks flow through the U.S. financial system unimpeded. The U.S. Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network needs more staff, and it needs to expand its attention beyond a narrow focus on antiterrorism. Moreover, Washington must support police forces and court systems in Latin America by providing equipment, intelligence, and training, as well as backing the local watchdogs that help keep governments and others honest.

Organized crime not only suppresses economic growth in Latin America. Cartels help kill tens of thousands of Americans who die from drug overdoses every year, far more than the terrorist networks that now dominate the Treasury's portfolios. The United States must work harder to curtail its own contribution to this security crisis by blunting its demand for illegal drugs. Crime lords would have fewer markets without American consumers. More funding for expanded drug-use prevention and rehabilitation programs is not just a social good: it is a top U.S. economic and national security priority.

If Washington better understood the gains it could make by integrating Latin America more thoroughly into U.S. supply chains, it might also find it easier to address the hopelessly gridlocked, ideologically charged issue of immigration. Over 20 million people in the Western Hemisphere have been forcibly driven from their homes by violence, repression, extreme weather, and economic desperation. That accounts for 20 percent of displaced people worldwide, even though Latin America is home to less than ten percent of the world's population. Many of these sojourners are trying to cross the U.S.-Mexican border. But Americans often do not realize that their country is not alone in receiving migrants: of the more than seven million Venezuelans who have fled their country since 2015, eight in ten live elsewhere in Latin America. Costa Rica is home to over half of all Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers.

The United States must drop its siege mentality on immigration and start to understand it as a complex regional problem. If they work in concert, Western Hemisphere governments can more easily expand programs for humanitarian relief and housing, schools, and social services. They will also be better able to fund bigger policy shifts such as helping farmers in Central America plant more weather-resistant crops and providing seed capital for migrant-led business ventures.

The same commercial investments that could address U.S. national security weaknesses could also help stem the forces now pushing millions of migrants to leave their home countries and pulling young people into organized crime. If Latin American nations prosper, their citizens will have more reasons to plan for futures at home. Latin America's combination of proximity, bounty, and democratic bona fides make its countries better suppliers, producers, customers, and partners for the United States than nations in any other place in the world. Latin America has so much of what the United States needs—and vice versa. 🌐

After Free Trade

Trump's Legacy and the Future of the Global Economy

Factory to the World

ROBERT E. LIGHTHIZER

Any review that calls the book in question “captivating” and “clear-eyed” and that describes its author as the “most consequential U.S. trade representative of the last 30 years” cannot be all bad, and Gordon Hanson’s review of my book, *No Trade Is Free*, is no exception. I admire his scholarship on the impact of import competition on American communities, which I cite in the book. I only wish he could further undock himself from academic rigidity and allow current global economic realities to challenge old dogma.

No Trade Is Free lays out a vision for U.S. trade policy and details its implementation during the Trump administration. I believe trade policy should help working-class Americans find and maintain good-paying jobs. But

for decades, it has instead centered on price optimization, efficiency, and corporate profits. The result has been the loss of millions of jobs, the destruction of thousands of communities, and the accumulation of trillions of dollars of trade deficits. This policy has made the country weaker and poorer.

The book also raises the alarm about the threat that the Chinese Communist Party poses to the United States. China is an increasingly aggressive, totalitarian, and hostile state that believes it should be number one in the world. It intimidates the U.S. military in international waters and space and challenges American diplomats around the world. It steals U.S. technology, engages in continual espionage, funnels fentanyl past U.S. borders, and effectively funds two proxy wars against the United States—backing Russia’s efforts in Ukraine and providing oil revenues to Iran that end up with Hamas. Worst of all, China has for decades waged an economic war that pulls in trillions of dollars of American wealth through trade surpluses. The Trump administration took on this challenge and set U.S. relations with China on a new course.

ROBERT E. LIGHTHIZER served as U.S. Trade Representative from 2017 to 2021 and as Deputy United States Trade Representative from 1983 to 1985.

EXISTENTIAL THREAT

Curiously, however, Hanson's review barely mentions the China-related aspects of my book. Indeed, China's alarming rise has nothing to do with free trade or such fine notions as comparative advantage. Hanson's oversight is important because every economic theory must be judged by this dangerous twenty-first-century reality—and every policy must be measured against this existential threat.

Hanson also makes several incorrect claims about my book. Perhaps most unfairly, he alleges that I take “liberties in interpreting the history of U.S. trade policy.” He claims that I ignore the role Republicans have played in encouraging free trade, but I do not. I clearly state, for instance, that the leaders of both parties pushed for the North American Free Trade Agreement and for “most favored nation” treatment for China. The book actually agrees with its critic that, as he writes, “the era of hyperglobalization was a genuinely bipartisan creation.” Hanson claims I “bizarrely” suggest that U.S. trade policy took a radical turn in the 1990s. He ignores the fact that the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the creation of the World Trade Organization, and the granting of permanent “most favored nation” status to China—the trifecta of globalism—all occurred in the span of eight years. Indeed, Hanson begins his review by suggesting that “the era of hyperglobalization started in 1995, with the creation of the World Trade Organization.” One might think that he agrees with my bizarre interpretation.

Hanson states that I believe trade agreements should be judged by their effect on the trade deficit alone, but as I write in *No Trade Is Free*, under Trump, “the goal was increasing the number of high-quality jobs.” Hanson criticizes me for wanting trade deals to increase exports but not imports. Yet that is exactly how every administration has sold trade deals to Congress and the public. If the objective was otherwise, why negotiate a deal? Any country can unilaterally increase imports. But of course, few do.

Hanson accuses me of neglecting the U.S. trade surplus in services, but the reality is those surpluses offset only a fifth of the \$1.2 trillion goods deficit. They are important but insufficient to power the U.S. economy and create enough high-paying jobs for American workers. He says that the Reagan-era limits on Japanese car imports were a failure, but it was precisely because of this policy that Japanese car companies brought their manufacturing to the United States and now employ thousands of American workers.

Hanson agrees that raising tariffs will reduce imports, but he asserts that “they also tend to reduce exports, because factories then focus on making goods for domestic consumers.” Surely, that is only true if one assumes the United States has full employment and is operating at full industrial capacity. Neither of those conditions holds true. Tariffs could also lead to new manufacturing.

Hanson repeats the trope that Trump's China tariffs increased prices, but the United States had less than two percent inflation during the president's tenure. He also makes the free

traders' argument that the trade deficit expanded during the Trump years. In fact, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the deficit with the world was down in four of the previous quarters, and the deficit with China was down in the previous five straight quarters. But that all changed when the pandemic closed the economy and forced the release of trillions of dollars in stimulus. It takes time to right the ship, but the Trump administration had corrected its trajectory.

MORE THAN ECONOMICS

Hanson goes most astray, however, when he argues that focusing on the restoration of American manufacturing is misguided because "the United States has little comparative advantage in most areas of manufacturing." Hanson contends that "the future of American prosperity lies in the service sector, not in the furnaces and assembly lines of the past." But this is a false choice: the country can and should have both.

Comparative advantages are not necessarily inherent in a country, as he assumes. They can be created, usually through industrial policy, subsidies, and trade restrictions. South Korea is competitive when it comes to making steel, but it does not enjoy cheap power, iron ore, or other natural advantages in this sector. Its comparative advantage is entirely the result of government policy. The same can be said of Taiwan and semiconductors. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company today has a comparative advantage, but it was created by subsidies and tax breaks. The airplane manufacturer Airbus is very competitive, but that is entirely

because four European countries got together, spent billions in subsidies, and created a world-class company. The same, of course, could be said historically about many manufacturing sectors in the United States, as well as in Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Indeed, it is difficult to find an example of a great manufacturing economy that did not create much of its comparative advantage through state intervention.

Further, manufacturing is about more than economics. It is about the kind of country that Americans want. The allocation of scarce resources, price optimization, and efficiency—things that preoccupy economists—are not as important as issues of family stability, strong communities, income equity, and worker pride and satisfaction.

About two-thirds of American workers do not have a college degree. For many in this group, a manufacturing job, or one created by it, is a ticket to the middle class. These jobs generally pay better and offer more benefits than jobs in service sectors, such as health care, tourism, and hospitality. As Hanson himself notes, when manufacturing workers lose their jobs, "they tend to suffer a permanent decline in earnings relative to those who keep their positions," and when enough manufacturing jobs vanish, "entire regions suffer."

Maintaining a vigorous manufacturing sector is important for other reasons, too. First, there are obvious national security implications in relying on other countries, particularly hostile ones, for the United States' defense and related needs. The pandemic offered a glimpse of these dangers. Once a war begins, it is too late to build manufacturing capacity.

Second, despite only accounting for around 11 percent of GDP, manufacturing drives 70 percent of American R & D investment; it employs as many scientists, engineers, and other so-called super-STEM workers as the much larger health-care industry and more than any other sector; and it accounts for 35 percent of annual increases in U.S. productivity. In fact, for every manufacturing job created, seven to 12 jobs are created elsewhere in the American economy. Manufacturing firms are also important customers for many of the high-value-added service providers economists so cherish.

Finally, let's return to the question of China. The United States will struggle in a postindustrial world when its lethal adversary, bent on its demise, is the dominant manufacturer. Do the proponents of Hanson's view really understand the nature of the threat China poses? These are the concerns that must shape a new economic theory. I appreciate Hanson's review and hope that he and other top economists update economic theories to prioritize U.S. workers and communities and, most important, factor into their thinking the existential threat that is communist China.

Hanson Replies

As the possibility of Donald Trump returning to the White House grows, it is all the more important to pay attention to his top advisers, who are surely preparing an agenda for a second term.

Robert Lighthizer, who played an outsize role as U.S. trade representative in Trump's first term, is likely an influential voice on all matters related to trade and industrial policy. His reply to my review, like his book, is replete with insight. Yet it also contains several tendentious arguments that are worth putting under the microscope.

Lighthizer suggests that I, and presumably other economists studying globalization, should "undock [myself] from academic rigidity and allow current global economic realities to challenge old dogma." I heartily agree. Indeed, those of us who first documented the profoundly adverse impacts of import competition from China on American workers were received poorly by think tanks, prominent academics, and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page for casting free trade in a purportedly bad light. Such research helped reveal the dark side of globalization. Now, the public policy debate revolves around what to do about the downsides of free trade. As U.S. trade representative, Lighthizer concluded that the answer was to confront China, abandon the World Trade Organization, and raise tariffs on U.S. imports. But he was right about only the first of these three solutions.

Lighthizer argues that academics and think tankers have not taken the economic threat from China seriously enough. Here again, I agree. My review praises Lighthizer for calling attention to China's many trade travesties. He is both scathing and thorough in cataloging China's economic policy sins. But it is fair to ask whether U.S. efforts to punish China have worked. The United

States is now six years into a trade war with China, which Trump began and U.S. President Joe Biden has eagerly continued. Rather than bowing to U.S. pressure, China seems ever more emboldened to aggressively pursue its nationalistic trade agenda. It is also fair to ask whether U.S. opposition to China would have been more effective had Trump acted in concert with U.S. allies rather than imposing tariffs on some of the United States' most reliable trading partners, thereby wasting political capital. To date, the go-it-alone approach to China has borne little fruit. As Lighthizer prepares Trump for a possible redo of the presidency, he should reckon with the ineffectiveness of recent U.S. trade policy on China.

Core to Lighthizer's reading of history is how he understands the origins of comparative advantage, a subject that may seem arcane but is at the heart of debates about U.S. industrial policy. A country or region has a comparative advantage in an industry if it can produce the associated goods more cheaply than its competitors. If market forces are left to themselves, comparative advantage tends to determine who exports what. Lighthizer suggests that comparative advantage is created and not inherited, which is partly true. Economists distinguish between the "first-nature advantages" of regions, which include the supplies of natural resources that fuel their initial economic development—think of how Pittsburgh, with its ready access to coal and iron ore, came to dominate the steel industry—and "second-nature advantages," which regions acquire through experience and experimentation—think of Detroit's use of

Pittsburgh's steel to make cars. Breaking with decades of GOP economic doctrine, Lighthizer contends that governments can readily conjure up second-nature advantages, citing Taiwan's success in semiconductors as an example. In his telling, it was "subsidies and tax breaks" that turned the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company into the world's dominant chip producer. But the more likely cause was Taiwan's massive investments in higher education in engineering. These investments directed the island's technological progress generally toward electronics, with TSMC's specific success being something of an accident. Getting industrial policy right depends crucially on whether governments should focus on cultivating industries, which requires identifying future TSMCs before they have become successful, or target talents, which means investing widely in human capital and then letting the chips, so to speak, fall where they may. Many economists have come around to supporting the second type of industrial policy, but not so much the first. Let's hope for the sake of the American worker that Lighthizer closely follows the debates on the origins of comparative advantage and the limits of industrial policy. 🌐

Who's Afraid of Freedom?

The Fight for Liberalism's Future

HELENA ROSENBLATT

The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism

BY JOHN GRAY. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023, 192 pp.

Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times

BY SAMUEL MOYN. Yale University Press, 2023, 240 pp.

It has become trite to say that liberalism is in crisis. As long ago as 1997, in an article in these pages, Fareed Zakaria warned of the rising threat of “illiberal democracy” around the world. Since then, countless essays, articles, and books have tried to explain the growing threats to the liberal world order posed by populism, authoritarianism, fundamentalism, and nationalism. Scholars have also devoted a great deal of thought to the human dislocations—be they economic, political, demographic, cultural, or environmental—that seem to have given rise to these threats.

In the last ten years or so, another theme has emerged. A small but vocal group of thinkers claim that the source of the crisis lies within liberalism itself. Often referred to as “postliberals,” those

in this camp argue that liberal conceptions of the social and political order are fatally flawed. Liberalism, they say, is responsible for many of the ills that afflict the world today, including rampant globalization, the destruction of communal bonds, rising economic insecurity, environmental degradation, and other perceived defects of twenty-first-century society.

Now, the British political philosopher John Gray and the Yale intellectual historian Samuel Moyn, two academics turned public intellectuals, have both weighed in on what they see as the self-inflicted decline of the liberal project. Although they agree that liberal democracy has, in some sense, failed, what they mean by liberalism and what they see as its prospects diverge sharply. In *The*

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New Leviathans, Gray contends that liberalism is a fundamentally erroneous creed built on dangerous myths and illusions. Rather than bringing freedom, it has led to unfettered government power that has brought much of the world to the brink of totalitarianism—not only in Vladimir Putin’s Russia and Xi Jinping’s China but also in advanced Western democracies.

By contrast, in *Liberalism Against Itself*, Moyn argues that liberal thought is fundamentally sound, based as it is on ideals that are both laudable and realizable. As Moyn sees it, the present crisis has been caused not by liberalism but by its betrayal, by none other than the architects of the liberal order themselves. Abandoning their core values and principles, he argues, liberalism’s champions have become timid and anxious—more concerned with fending off their enemies than winning new converts. Where Gray sees liberal states growing into ever more controlling monsters, Moyn finds them reduced and enfeebled, having presided over the tragic dismantling of the welfare state.

THE NEW THOUGHT POLICE

The pessimism of *The New Leviathans* should not come as a surprise. Long known for his criticism of liberalism and gloomy forebodings, Gray posits that the contemporary liberal order was constructed around the delusion that “where markets spread, freedom would follow”—that market capitalism and liberal values were destined to triumph everywhere. Instead, he writes, these forces were simply a temporary “political experiment” that has “run its course” and left nothing

but disaster in its wake. The future is bleak, he asserts. Societies will not be able to arrest climate change or prevent environmental destruction. New technologies will not save civilization. The English economist Thomas Malthus’s dire eighteenth-century predictions about overpopulation may yet be proved right. Western capitalism, Gray says, is “programmed to fail.”

Perhaps most disastrous of all, Gray argues, market forces, and the resulting connection between wealth and political leverage, are making our states more, not less, totalitarian. “Instead of China becoming more like the West,” he writes, “the West has become more like China.” Moreover, there is no reason to think that in the future, liberal governments will be any more successful than other forms of political order. Instead, he foresees “disparate regimes interacting with one another in a condition of global anarchy.”

For Gray, liberalism is based on faulty premises. Liberals flatter themselves when they assert that humans are better than animals. They are not. Humans persecute for pleasure. Liberal dreams of making the world a better place are just that: dreams, and hazardous ones at that. The idea of humanity, Gray writes, is a “dangerous fiction” that allows some people to be identified as less human than others and can provide a justification for eliminating them. The notion that history is a story of progress is another self-flattering illusion. He singles out the political theorist Francis Fukuyama and the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker for special rebuke for their assumptions about society’s inexorable advancement.

But the liberal myth Gray most wants to shatter is that people in the West live in free societies. He acknowledges that for much of the modern period, liberal states set out to extend freedom and safeguard against tyranny. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, these same states increasingly “cast off” traditional restraints on power in the pursuit of material progress, cultural conformity, and national security. “Like the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century,” he writes, liberal states today “have become engineers of souls.”

If governments have become totalitarian, so has society. Gray sees pervasive efforts in Western countries to control thought and language, and he is especially agitated by what he calls the “woke religion” on college campuses across the United States today. Indeed, his distress over “wokeism” seems to feed both his fear of totalitarianism and his penchant for hyperbole. The American university, he writes, has become “the model for an inquisitorial regime.” Wokeism and identity politics, he continues, are the products of “a lumpen intelligentsia that is economically superfluous” yet eager to become society’s guardians.

The New Leviathans is studded with occasional insights and curious bits of information. Gray writes that Putin admires an obscure nineteenth-century Russian thinker named Konstantin Leontyev, who revered feudalism and wanted the tsar to impose an “autocratic socialism” on Russia. Gray, in fact, devotes more than 70 pages to Russian or Bolshevik topics whose purpose, one surmises, is to remind us how random and full of horrors life is and to make clear that liberal society

is headed toward totalitarianism. After all, tsarist Russia had its own “lumpen intelligentsia” that turned against the society that nurtured it, and look what happened there.

What any of this history really has to do with liberalism, however, is left unexplained. Gray also does not make clear what he means by liberalism. At the beginning of the book, he lists four key liberal principles he identified in 1986: that individuals have moral primacy over any social collectivity; that all people have equal moral worth; that moral values are universal for all humans and take precedence over specific cultural forms; and that all social and political arrangements can be improved. But Gray does not acknowledge that these principles can mean different things to different people at different times. Today, there are people who call themselves “classical liberals,” “social liberals,” “liberal socialists,” or just plain “liberals.” Although they may share a number of beliefs, the policies they support can vary radically. Which variety of liberalism is proto-totalitarian? For Gray, as for many other postliberals, liberalism seems to mean whatever he wants it to mean.

BAD AUTHORITY

Gray’s jaundiced view of the liberal tradition partly explains his odd use of the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Each chapter of *The New Leviathans* begins with a quotation from *Leviathan*, Hobbes’s major treatise on state power, as if to provide the reader with a kernel of truth and an ominous warning about what is to come.



Culture wars: protesting a far-right campus speaker in Berkeley, California, September 2017

Among liberals, Gray writes, Hobbes is “the only one, perhaps, still worth reading.” Hobbes is worth reading, it seems, because of his exceedingly dark view of human nature, a view Gray shares. Hobbes famously referred to the state of nature as a state of war, in which life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Men, he reasoned, would willingly submit to an absolute sovereign—they would form a social contract to give up their liberty in exchange for safety—to escape such an existence. In other words, government with unlimited power is necessary for society to flourish.

Through Hobbes’s eyes, Gray invites readers to see for themselves where the world is headed. He insists that no matter what liberals may say, they actually fear freedom and, to relieve them of its burdens, seek protection from the state. Supporters of liberalism will thus inevitably create a pow-

erful state, one that will devolve into totalitarianism. By calling Hobbes the only liberal worth reading, Gray implies that liberals are really closet totalitarians—and know it.

But Gray is wrong here. Hobbes was no liberal. Although twentieth-century political philosophers often recognized Hobbes, along with John Locke a generation later, as one of the founding fathers of liberalism, this Anglo-centric tradition ignores the actual language and ideas that both men used, as well as the stark differences in their conceptions of liberality. Notably, *Leviathan* was published over 150 years before there was anything called “liberalism”; and no self-identified liberal has ever recognized Hobbes as a founder, or even a member, of the liberal canon. Had Gray begun his book with a true early liberal thinker, he would have been obliged to tell a different story.

Consider the French Swiss political theorist Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). One of the first to identify as a liberal and be called one in his own lifetime, Constant rejected the concepts of the state of nature and the social contract as too abstract for practical use. He had an optimistic, although never naive, view of human nature. Like his fellow nineteenth-century liberals, he believed humans were capable of peaceful self-government in the best interest of all. These early thinkers fought to make Hobbesian authoritarianism impossible by establishing the rule of law and constitutionally limited government, with safeguards in place to protect individual freedoms. Although Gray recognizes this to a certain extent—and even admits that emerging democracies initially showed that “Hobbes was mistaken”—he blames liberalism for supposedly abandoning its original intentions by creating omnipotent states in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

By taking on nineteenth-century liberalism more directly, Gray would have seen that, from the very beginning, liberals concerned themselves with threats posed not only by an all-powerful state but also by society, whether through an unfair economy, an oppressive religion, or the many impediments to individual advancement and fulfillment, including stultifying social mores. Rather than fearing freedom, as Gray says, nineteenth-century liberals, as well as their successors, fought to secure and expand it. To blame liberalism for restricting individual rights and liberty makes no sense at all. But for Gray, not even Hobbes is pessimistic

enough. “There is no final deliverance from the state of nature,” Gray writes. In the end, he topples the only liberal he thinks is still worth reading.

PARADISE LOST

Moyn agrees that there is a problem with liberalism, but the similarities with Gray’s account end there. A scholar best known for his iconoclastic history of human rights—arguing that the late-twentieth-century human rights movement largely failed—Moyn nevertheless believes that humans are not doomed and that liberalism is repairable. In *Liberalism Against Itself*, he argues that liberal thought in its original form is not the cause of the current crisis. In his telling, nineteenth-century liberals were optimists about human nature and believed in human beings’ ability to improve themselves and society. And until the mid-twentieth century, he writes, liberals were committed to “free and equal self-creation” and strove to establish the conditions for human flourishing. Over time, these conditions came to include universal suffrage and the welfare state, as well as individual empowerment and market freedom.

But then, in Moyn’s account, a group of Cold War liberals reconceived liberalism beyond recognition. Having experienced World War II and the extremes of Nazism and Stalinism, they embraced views of human nature that were much less hopeful. These thinkers worried that by embracing ideals of emancipation and continual improvement, liberalism could devolve into totalitarianism. As a result, Cold War liberals became

“anxious” and “minimalist,” adopting a negative view of liberty in which freedom was defined as noninterference by the state. According to Moyn, they shrank their aspirations for human progress, and liberalism eventually “collapsed into neoliberalism and neoconservatism.”

Moyn devotes separate chapters to representative Cold War liberals, including the Oxford political theorist Isaiah Berlin, the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper, the American historian of ideas Gertrude Himmelfarb, the German Jewish émigré political theorist Hannah Arendt, and the American literary critic Lionel Trilling. Along the way, he introduces others, including the libertarian Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Moyn takes special interest in Judith Shklar, a political theorist who taught at Harvard through much of the Cold War and whose work shows how liberalism became downgraded, its ambitions diminished. Thus, in her 1957 book, *After Utopia*, she lamented a new liberal order that had abandoned many of its original Enlightenment precepts. Yet by the later decades of her career, she, too, viewed liberalism as, in Moyn’s words, “less a basis for the construction of a free community of equals and more as a means of harm reduction.”

“Cold War liberalism was a catastrophe,” Moyn writes. By overreacting to the Soviet threat, it failed to produce a liberal society “worthy of the name.” The world is living with the consequences. Even if these thinkers did not oppose the welfare state, Moyn argues, their rejection of liberal

idealism set the stage for spiraling inequality and the assault on welfare in the generations that followed. Rather than challenging this tradition after the fall of communism, Moyn sees a new generation of writers and theorists extending Cold War liberalism to a range of new perceived threats to democracy, from Islamist extremism to the MAGA right to what he calls “‘woke’ tyranny.” This later generation, he writes, has continually failed to make clear the qualities that might give liberalism “enthusiastic backing” in the first place.

Notably, Moyn’s account of what happened to liberalism is diametrically opposed to Gray’s. In Moyn’s view, Cold War liberals and their contemporary successors have weakened the state, not, as Gray insists, made it grow. One is even tempted to read Moyn’s book as a response to Gray. Moyn disagrees with those who insist that liberalism is “poised on the precipice.” He believes that it is precisely this kind of catastrophism that has led people astray and made them afraid, fatalistic, and despondent when action is needed. It is such thinking that has caused liberalism to take a wrong turn.

CRISIS OR CATALYST?

Even skeptics and critics must admit that *Liberalism Against Itself* is clearly written and argued. Moyn does not make the mistake of anchoring liberalism in the thought of an antiliberal such as Hobbes. Instead, he draws on the ideas of true liberals such as Constant and his younger contemporaries John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. Moyn also brings to light something that is often left out

of histories of liberalism, namely its moral optimism and what could even be called its moral agenda. A central purpose of nineteenth-century liberalism was to create the conditions that would allow people to grow intellectually and morally.

But Moyn picks and chooses the principles of early liberalism with which he agrees. He favors a socialistic form of liberalism, but there was another, libertarian form that he leaves out. It is something of a simplification to say that nineteenth-century liberals saw the state as a “device of human liberation.” Some of them, such as the British idealist philosopher T.H. Green and the French politician Léon Bourgeois, did, but others, such as the British philosopher and social scientist Herbert Spencer and the French economist Frédéric Bastiat, did not. These latter thinkers, who would be called “classical” or “orthodox” liberals, also believed in progress and emancipation and were optimistic about the future, but they had less confidence in the state.

The New Leviathans, unlike *Liberalism Against Itself*, is a sad book, one that suggests there is no way out of the present predicament. As Gray sees it, to try to save liberalism—or what he calls “the moth-eaten musical brocade of progressive hope”—would be pointless. Instead, Western democracies should simply lower their sights and “adjust.” Moyn rejects such fatalism. People have important choices to make about how they should live their lives and what kind of society they wish to live in. He thinks it is time to reinvent liberalism, not bury it.

Liberalism has faced multiple crises throughout its history. It was even born

in crisis, the crisis of the French Revolution. It has faced formidable enemies before and has reinvented itself several times, as well. It can certainly do so again. Exactly how it should do so is up to a new generation of thinkers, policymakers, politicians, and, ultimately, voters themselves to decide. They are more likely to find success, however, if they aspire to a vision of liberalism in which a well-governed society does not come at the expense of individual liberty but rather serves to further it. 🌐

REVIEW ESSAY

How Iraq Happened

Washington's Fateful Misreading of Saddam

GIDEON ROSE

*The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, the CIA, and the
Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq*

BY STEVE COLL. Penguin Press, 2024, 576 pp.

Sometimes foreign policy lies downstream from technology. When navies ran on wind, the lumber that could produce sailing ships was a prized natural resource. The arrival of steam power turned mines and coaling stations into crucial strategic assets. Then the switch from steam to oil made petroleum deposits treasures beyond measure.

The oil riches of the Middle East were first discovered in 1908, and soon the region was essential to the global economy. At first, order in the area was maintained by the United Kingdom, the dominant colonial power, but in the decades after World War II, the United States took over the role. In the 1970s, Washington tried farming out the job of regional security to local contractors, relying

on Iran and Saudi Arabia to keep oil supplies flowing. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution flipped Tehran from friend to enemy, however, Washington put its hopes in a balance of power, manipulating aid to both Iraq and Iran during their brutal war to prevent either country from dominating the Persian Gulf. But this strategy collapsed in 1990, when Iraq seized Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia.

At this point, the George H. W. Bush administration stepped in to manage the situation directly, leading an international coalition to reverse Iraq's aggression and restore Kuwait's sovereignty. But Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, managed to survive the war and regain control of most of his country. So the administration backed into a policy of sanctions and

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containment, which its successors continued for a decade.

Then came the 9/11 attacks. In their wake, the George W. Bush administration decided to solve not only the terrorism problem but the Iraq one as well, choosing to conquer the country and forcibly eliminate Saddam's regime. The conquering part went largely as planned, but the aftermath proved chaotic. Liberation turned into occupation; local uncertainty turned into insurgency and then civil war. U.S. troops ended up staying in Iraq and fighting one foe or another there for almost two decades.

So disastrous was the Iraq war, in fact, so costly and unforced an error, that in retrospect it seems the hinge of the entire post-Cold War era, the moment when American hegemony switched from successful to problematic, welcomed to resisted. Two decades on, the unipolar moment has faded, along with dreams of a better Middle East and American appetite for active international engagement. What remains is the puzzle of how such an epically self-destructive fiasco could have happened in the first place.

When prewar claims about the state of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs turned out not to be true, many came to believe some other agenda had driven Washington's actions—familial revenge, say, or ideological zeal, or a desire to profit from Iraqi resources. Recent historiography has debunked those theories, showing that Bush administration officials really did think containment was falling apart and really did fear what Iraq might do afterward. What they did not know and would not have believed—

because nobody would have—was the truth. Saddam's regime had destroyed almost all its WMD programs in the early 1990s but continued for a decade longer to give every indication of having kept much of them, immolating itself in the process.

This is the strange tale told by the journalist Steve Coll in *The Achilles Trap*, a history of Saddam's unconventional weapons programs and American attempts to end them. Based largely on captured Iraqi records and interviews with former officials, the book is clear, readable, and meticulous, and it does a good job of presenting the view from Baghdad—not only documenting what happened but also helping explain the seemingly inexplicable. Saddam's behavior after the Gulf War was dangerously provocative and irrational. After 9/11, a traumatized new administration in Washington brought its own psychological issues to the table. And in 2003, their mutual misunderstandings spiraled down into catastrophe. The Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu wrote of the crucial need for strategists to “know the enemy and know yourself.” The Iraq war shows what happens when neither side knows either.

RASHOMON IN THE DESERT

Coll presents a lively narrative packed with eye-catching details. Readers learn, for example, that Khairallah Tulfah—Saddam's uncle and mentor—summarized the family philosophy in a work titled *Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies*. Saddam himself was a hit man in his 20s and a prolific novelist in his 60s. He thought people's loyalty could

be judged by eavesdropping on their children and checking where his picture was displayed in their homes. His sons, Uday and Qusay, were monsters, and his son-in-law Hussein Kamel bragged that he had forced one disgraced subordinate to drink gasoline and then shot him in the stomach to see whether he would explode.

Many of Coll's stories illustrate important truths about national political cultures. In the 1990s, Saddam bribed Russian, French, Chinese, and UN officials to gain their support, and his foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, could not understand why the UN's chief weapons inspector, the Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus, would not get with the program. "We could open an account in Switzerland for you—for instance, five hundred thousand dollars," Aziz told Ekeus. (That's not how things were done in Sweden, Ekeus replied.) One Iraqi biological weapons program started as a unit assigned to protect Saddam from being poisoned, something Aziz considered entirely normal. "You know as well as I do," he told a UN inspector, "that every government in the world has a section of their state security organization devoted to the testing of the food of the leadership."

American officials, meanwhile, repeatedly came up with hare-brained secret interventions that rarely achieved anything worthwhile, with their typical course summed up by the plaque one intelligence officer had on his wall listing "The Six Phases of a CIA Covert Action Program": "euphoria, confusion, disillusionment, search for the guilty, punishment of the innocent, distinction for the uninvolved."

The result was a dialogue of the deaf, with little comprehension of either side by the other. In the 1980s, for example, the Reagan administration provided extensive military support to the Iraqi government to help it hold its own in the Iran-Iraq War, even as Baghdad gassed tens of thousands of its own people. But at the same time, the administration worked with Israel to provide military support to Iran in hopes of gaining the release of American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, using the proceeds of the arms sales to support anticommunist rebels in Nicaragua. When this intrigue came to light, Saddam was bitter but not surprised, telling his team that the Iran-contra affair was an Israeli-sponsored conspiracy to destroy him. "I mean, Zionism—come on, comrades—do I have to repeat that every time?"

Coll observes that "what many Americans understood as staggering incompetence in their nation's foreign policy, Saddam interpreted as manipulative genius." Similar screwups would occur again and again over the years, with each side perennially overinterpreting the other's behavior while explaining away its own. You could write an entire textbook on the fundamental attribution error from this case alone.

THE MISSING WEAPONS

The Achilles Trap spends a lot of time on covert operations but little on the debates that went on inside each administration over how to handle Iraq. The author's own views emerge in occasional speculation that more sincere American attempts at direct

dialogue might have eased tensions, but such hopes are belied by the story of invincible ignorance he tells so well. Saddam emerges from this book as a paranoid, self-deluded megalomaniac, someone almost impossible to deal with constructively. Ekeus put the problem squarely: "Saddam Hussein has a very limited point of view. He deals largely with a small set of people, virtually all Iraqis." His thinking, Ekeus added, was "bizarre and screwed up."

These traits emerged in the actions the Iraqi government took during the 1990s, which are even more astonishing now that the full story is known. Having largely reconstituted his domestic position following the Gulf War, Saddam had no regrets about anything and was determined to wait out his enemies, regain his military strength and full freedom of action, and continue taking on the world. He recognized that being caught with WMD would be problematic, and so in mid-1991, he got rid of most of his programs—but without telling anybody about it or keeping records of what had been done. "We didn't know what was destroyed and what was not," the leader of the Iraqi nuclear program later said. "It was all a big mess."

Having thus guaranteed utter confusion, and while continuing to deny any charges against him that had not already been proved, Saddam then acted as if everybody should have understood what had happened. In Coll's words:

He assumed that an all-powerful C.I.A. already knew that he had no nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. . . . Since

America knew the truth but nonetheless faked claims that he was still hiding illicit arms, he reasoned, what did this imply? It meant that the Zionists and spies lined up against him were using the WMD issue cynically to advance their conspiracy to oust him from power. He saw no reason to play their game or deal with their prying inspectors.

Yet Coll shows that even high-ranking Iraqi officials were unsure about the state of their country's WMD programs. At one meeting before the invasion in 2003, for example, Ali Hassan al-Majid—the notorious "Chemical Ali" who oversaw the gassing of Iraq's Kurds in the 1980s—asked bluntly, "Do we have WMD?" "Don't you know?" Saddam asked in reply. "No," said Ali. "No," Saddam told him. But even then, in the face of an impending American attack predicated on the existence of such weapons, the Iraqis inexplicably made no real attempt to come clean.

FROM CONTAINMENT TO ROLLBACK

It would be easy to read Coll's book as support for the argument that the cause of the Iraq war was the rising threat Saddam seemed to pose and the fear that this instilled in Washington. *The Achilles Trap* paints the Iraqi leader as an unrepentant serial aggressor determined to rebuild his military power. Several of those in the West who advocated for lifting sanctions, meanwhile, were on his payroll, making their arguments suspect. Even without the faked evidence peddled by charlatans such as the Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, there were ample grounds for believing that someday Saddam would once

again plunge his strategically critical region into conflict.

And yet all this had been true for years, so it cannot explain why early in the new century, the United States decided to change course and deal with the threat through preventive war. Nor did 9/11 have to lead to such an outcome, since what happened that day had nothing to do with Iraq. What produced the war was the underlying challenge of maintaining Gulf security, combined with Saddam's bizarre behavior, combined with the psychological impact of 9/11 on a handful of idiosyncratic, unconstrained American officials.

Had Al Gore won the U.S. presidency in 2000 instead of George W. Bush, there might well have been another war between the United States and Iraq, given Saddam's regional ambitions and the United States' determination to thwart them. But it would have been a replay of the Gulf War, with Saddam doing something outrageous and Gore mobilizing a coalition to respond. The Clinton administration did not like the messy containment policy it inherited from its predecessor, but it could never find a better alternative. As vice president, Gore was on the hawkish side of the Clinton administration's Iraq debates, but he never came close to advocating an unprovoked invasion, and there is no reason to think he would ever have launched one as president.

A similar scenario would have played out had George W. Bush appointed different Republican national security grandees to key positions in his administration, such as Brent Scowcroft and Robert Gates instead of Vice

President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, or had chosen to empower different ones among those he did appoint, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell. Yet even with Bush elected and his administration stocked with hard-liners, there was no move to attack until 9/11, which ended up setting the administration on a path to war not just in Afghanistan but in Iraq as well.

During the Clinton administration, independent radical Islamist terrorist groups had emerged as an increasingly worrisome threat. They bombed the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, and the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000. During the presidential transition, outgoing Clinton officials told their incoming Bush counterparts that such groups constituted the most urgent threat the country faced, but the Bush team discounted such warnings—along with those of its own, increasingly frantic intelligence officials—because it believed that rogue states posed much greater dangers.

When al Qaeda struck New York and Washington on 9/11, therefore, the administration's senior figures were devastated by grief, anger, and guilt. "I was not on point," Bush said. "We missed it," Cheney agreed. Still, truly accepting responsibility was too much to bear. That would have meant confronting the uncomfortable fact that others had not missed it and should now be listened to rather than ignored. To escape the humiliation of deferring to their critics and the cognitive dissonance produced by seeing themselves

as incompetent failures, Bush and his senior advisers reframed the situation. Rather than trying to learn why they had been wrong about this attack, they looked for future ones they could prevent and in so doing recast themselves as prescient heroes. “Your response isn’t to go back and beat yourself up about 9/11,” National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice would put it. “It’s to try to never let it happen again.”

From this perspective, Iraq represented not only a danger but also an opportunity. The country was strong enough to pose a threat but weak enough to be conquerable, and if not involved in 9/11, then at least plausibly imaginable as the source of materiel for another mass-casualty attack. Toppling Saddam would remove the threat, make a statement, and settle old business all at once. Two weeks after the catastrophe, accordingly, Bush asked Rumsfeld to review war planning for Iraq. By the end of 2001, Tommy Franks, the head of the U.S. military’s Central Command, had delivered a blueprint for an invasion. And by mid-2002, Bush had decided to strike unless Saddam indisputably confirmed his disarmament.

TO BAGHDAD AND BEYOND

Other administrations had dreamed of being rid of Saddam, but none had gone to war for it, because none wanted the responsibility of managing his country afterward. As Cheney said in 1994, in defense of the U.S. decision to not topple Saddam during the Gulf War, “Once you got to Iraq and took it over, took down Saddam Hussein’s government, then what are you going to put in its place? . . . It’s a quagmire.” The George W. Bush

administration got around that problem by ignoring it. Its war plan lacked an ending—and so, unsurprisingly, the war never really ended, with the conflict lurching from one battle to another for years to come.

It is now clear that several people were responsible for that glaring omission. A weak national security adviser didn’t coordinate administration policy. A rogue secretary of defense demanded control over postwar planning, got it, and then didn’t do any worthy of the name. An overmatched theater commander never thought beyond the operational level of war. But the buck has to stop at the incurious commander in chief, who didn’t think through the foreseeable consequences of the decisions he was making.

Last year, in his book *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, the diplomatic historian Melvyn Leffler went over ground similar to Coll’s, giving the view from Washington and defending the Bush administration from its conspiracy-minded critics. But even he offered a damning indictment. “Bush disliked heated arguments, and, therefore, did not invite systematic scrutiny of the policies he was inclined to pursue,” Leffler wrote, adding “He was unable to grasp the magnitude of the enterprise he was embracing, the risks that inhered in it, and the costs that would be incurred.”

Why an entire government full of officials who knew better meekly executed an obviously bad plan is a separate question. When that kind of thing happens in dictatorships like Saddam’s Iraq or Vladimir Putin’s Russia, observers naturally assume it is because of the terrible costs of dissent.

The American invasion of Iraq shows that no such coercion is necessary; bureaucratic deference to authority and routine careerism can keep people in line just fine.

Two sets of lessons emerge from this sorry spectacle, one about process and the other about policy. These days, well-run organizations understand how psychology can affect performance, and they try to keep their personnel grounded, self-aware, and mindful. The New York Yankees, for example, employ behavioral scientists in the front office and station a staff psychologist in the locker room, who is the first person every player sees on entering and the last on leaving. The White House Situation Room could do something similar, in hopes of improving debate there, by removing the participants' cognitive and emotional blinders.

There should actually be debates there, moreover, with senior officials freely discussing the relative merits of multiple policy alternatives. One of the most telling facts about the decision to go to war in Iraq is the lack of any meeting where such a decision was made. At no time did the administration force itself to officially state the war's objectives and the strategy for achieving them—a failure that allowed the huge gaps in its planning to remain unnoticed and unchallenged. Good process does not necessarily lead to good policies, but it can help weed out obviously bad ones, which is something.

Even Zen masters following best management practices, however, would have found it challenging to deal with Saddam. The Hussein family named one of its secret investment vehicles

Montana Management, allegedly as a tribute to the antihero of the 1983 movie *Scarface*. Like Al Pacino's self-destructive character, Saddam and his sons were destined to meet violent ends; the only question was when and how. In December 2003, Saddam was captured in a hole on a farm near Tikrit, and he died on a scaffold three years later. Uday and Qusay had been tracked down in Mosul in July 2003, turned in by the owner of their hideout for a \$30 million reward. U.S. troops surrounded the villa and ordered the inhabitants to surrender. Shots from inside wounded four soldiers, precipitating a three-hour firefight involving grenades, heavy machine guns, and helicopter-fired rockets. Finally, a barrage of antitank missiles destroyed the strong room in which the former future rulers of Iraq were barricaded. It was not recorded whether they shouted, "Say hello to my little friend."

President Bill Clinton once told his staff that he found Iraq "the most difficult of problems because it is devoid of a sensible policy response." Once Saddam survived the Gulf War, it was reasonable for the United States to try to contain him without getting sucked into another full-scale conflict. But that approach was costly, risky, and hard to sustain. The George W. Bush administration refused to accept that such an unsatisfying course was the least bad option available and blindly plunged into the abyss. Had leaders in either Baghdad or Washington behaved less recklessly, the war would not have happened. But the challenge of protecting the global economy from Baghdad's own Tony Montana would have remained. 🌐

How Israel Fights

And Why Military Prowess Doesn't Guarantee Strategic Success

SHASHANK JOSHI

The Art of Military Innovation: Lessons From the Israel Defense Forces

BY EDWARD N. LUTTWAK AND EITAN SHAMIR

Harvard University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

On a hot, dry afternoon, a wave of aircraft surges into the sky. They are hunting the enemy's surface-to-air missile batteries. The SAM batteries scoot around every ten minutes—aerial surveillance photos taken earlier in the day are useless. But the attackers have a solution. They send in decoy drones, simulating the radar cross section of jets, prompting the SAM operators to turn on their radars. As they light up, another set of drones beams back real-time video footage. The video is sent to a cutting-edge command-and-control computer that knows which attacking plane—100 are airborne at the peak of the battle—is where and armed with what. This orchestra of air power, conducted by an algorithm, smashes the SAMs.

The scene is not from the pages of military science fiction, nor is it from the war in Ukraine. Instead, this lopsided battle, known as Operation Mole Cricket 19, took place between Israel and Syria more than 40 years ago, in the early days of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. For Edward Luttwak and Eitan Shamir, the authors of *The Art of Military Innovation*, the battle exemplifies the sort of military inventiveness at which Israel excels.

Luttwak is an eccentric 81-year-old strategist who consults for governments and has written books on the grand strategy of the Roman Empire, an irreverent guide to launching a coup, and several tomes on warfare. This most recent book's acknowledgments nod to his picaresque career: he thanks various Israeli generals, one of whom helped him

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wander the Sinai front in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, another who let him tag along in the invasion of Lebanon, and a third whom he cryptically describes as having invited him “to participate in the design of a special operations unit.” Shamir runs the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, a think tank in Israel.

It is awkward timing for a book extolling Israeli military prowess. On October 7, Israel’s armed forces were caught by surprise, suffering a terrorist attack that resulted in the bloodiest day for Israel since its independence in 1948 and the bloodiest for Jews anywhere since the Holocaust. In an assault led by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, around 1,200 people were killed, including 332 Israeli soldiers, and some 240 were taken hostage, including an estimated 18 soldiers. The resulting war has had mixed results for Israel. Hamas has been weakened but not destroyed. The group has enjoyed a surge of popularity among Palestinians in the West Bank, and much of Gaza lies in ruins.

Yet despite its failures on October 7, Israel’s military has punched above its weight since its founding. Luttwak and Shamir chalk up the success of the Israel Defense Forces to its ability to innovate, explained not only by operating in an environment of constant peril but also by its relaxed culture and streamlined structure. The authors give too much credence to innovation and technology, however, and understate three aspects of war. One is the interplay between technology and tactics: the IDF’s secret weapon has been its ability to adapt swiftly on the battlefield when crisis strikes. The second is that Israel’s apparent superiority in weaponry and intelligence has sometimes bred complacency

about the intentions and capacity of its adversaries—a complacency that was exposed, brutally, on October 7. A third, and one admittedly beyond the purview of this book, is that tactical and operational innovation—designing a superb tank, building a new missile-defense system at breakneck speed, or discovering novel ways to use these weapons—alone cannot win a war.

LEAN, MEAN,
FIGHTING MACHINE

Luttwak and Shamir’s basic proposition is simple. In 1962, Israel had a largely agricultural economy, virtually no electrical or mechanical industry, and a population less than half that of Sicily. By 1973, it had developed the world’s first sea-skimming missile and used it to sink 19 Egyptian and Syrian vessels. Less than a decade later came the computerized aerial blitzkrieg over Lebanon. These were not one-offs. Israel developed world-class tanks, pioneering tank-protection methods, and air defense systems that are the envy of the world. Israel has sold arms to China, India, and the United States, and officers from many of the world’s militaries flock to Israeli training centers.

The secret of this success, according to Luttwak and Shamir’s engaging and eclectic book, begins with the IDF’s egalitarianism. One of the first things that foreign military officers notice about the IDF is its laid-back culture. Most officers, other than defense attachés abroad, wear field dress rather than gold-braided uniforms. Soldiers address officers by their first names, and saluting is unusual. Women fill roles such as combat instructor that are normally performed in other armies by what the authors call “ultra-

open to the future,” according to the authors. In combat, junior commanders can take the initiative without meddling from phalanxes of staff officers at higher levels. During the IDF’s first large-scale offensive, in 1948, the IDF general staff ordered Yigal Allon, the frontline commander, to drive out Egyptian forces; the instructions they gave him fit on a single page.

The structure and history of Israel’s military have also contributed to its success. Israel’s armed forces emerged in 1948 from the two major Jewish militias that had fought the British and the Arabs. Instead of re-creating the model of Western militaries, with separate—and feuding—armies, navies, and air forces, the fledgling IDF opted for a single service with one commander. One benefit was that funds for research and development were not diluted among separate branches that, as in the United States, might otherwise have designed and built the same weapons in parallel.

The absence of a standalone air force—Israel instead had a lesser “air command,” now an “air and space arm,” subordinate to the general staff—was particularly important. In other countries, pilots have resisted the notion that they ought to be removed from cockpits in favor of remotely piloted or uncrewed aircraft, which allow for smaller airframes, longer flights, and riskier missions. Israel, then a poor country of a few million people, pioneered the use of drones in the 1970s. Eighteen years later, during the first Gulf War, a conflict in which technology had a starring role, the United States had no drones, the authors point out, other than those that the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps imported from Israel.

MOVE FAST AND WIN WARS

These cultural factors play out in a context of constant threat. Since its establishment, Israel has fought five large conventional wars, including the present one in Gaza, and many smaller campaigns between them. The specter of war accelerates innovation. Consider the case of the Iron Dome missile defense system. During the October 7 attack and in the months since, Hamas has launched more than 10,000 rockets into Israeli territory. But only a handful of people have died in those strikes, thanks in large part to Iron Dome, which tracks incoming rockets, works out where they will land, and intercepts those that are headed for built-up areas or other valuable targets.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah compelled Israel to develop this system after the militants fired 4,000 rockets at Israel in 2006. “As happened repeatedly and on all sides during the second world war,” write Luttwak and Shamir, “groups of engineers and scientists personally committed to an urgent national mission that might avert the deaths of loved ones achieved a critical mass of dynamic creativity otherwise not only unattainable but unimaginable.” Most missile projects take 15 to 20 years to reach fruition, so developing such a sophisticated system in such a short time—Israel managed to create Iron Dome in four years, from 2007 to 2011, albeit with significant financial help from the U.S. government—was “unheard of,” they write, given that the system’s radar, software, and interceptor missiles were all entirely new.

Iron Dome also illustrates how the line between bottom-up initiative and outright insubordination is often

blurred. Danny Gold, the head of an IDF weapons agency in the early years of the twenty-first century, pushed ahead with the design and manufacture of the system despite instructions not to, which were rooted in intense skepticism in the IDF about whether it would be economical. According to Luttwak and Shamir, Israel's state auditor saw it as a case of "sustained, piratical insubordination, budgetary misappropriation, and administrative irregularity on the largest scale." But after Iron Dome was completed, Gold was promoted and honored by the state. Another case in point: in the 1973 war, an IDF commander named Ariel Sharon disobeyed orders by leading his troops across the Suez Canal and into Egyptian territory. But when his operation was later deemed to be a success, he was forgiven and celebrated—and eventually became prime minister.

Persistent danger has also encouraged Israel to improvise. In the 1940s, Jewish militias (and later the IDF) were starved of weapons from abroad. But they managed to get their hands on 3,000 ten-ton U.S. "half-tracks"—lightly armored vehicles with wheels at the front and tank-like tracks at the back. Some carried troops. Others had Czechoslovakian guns bolted on. The United States retired its half-tracks as soon as it could, but Israel was still using them in Lebanon in the 1980s. The IDF similarly recycled Soviet tanks it captured in its wars against its Arab neighbors, raising an entire division out of such second-hand kit, allowing it to keep up with far larger Arab armies. Bigger, better-resourced, and more complacent militaries would not have bothered.

SENSE, NOT SENSORS

Luttwak and Shamir believe that technological innovation is the key to military success. Big "macroinnovations," as they call them, "not merely new and improved versions of what already existed, but weapons or techniques that did not exist at all until then," such as the digitized drone-enabled assault in 1982, can be revolutionary because they catch an enemy by surprise before it has time to prepare a response—what the authors refer to as a "countermeasure holiday."

But their own argument shows that what matters is not the invention of new gadgets but how they are combined and used. The United States had pilotless aircraft before Israel did, long before the attack on Syrian SAMs, but it was Israel that turned U.S. target-practice drones into revolutionary decoys in 1973. A similar story took place ahead of World War II. The United Kingdom had tanks first, but it was Germany that exploited them to the fullest. And Germany's blitzkrieg against France in May 1940 was devastating not because tanks, aircraft, and artillery were novel weapons but because they had been stitched together in what would come to be called "combined arms" tactics.

The precise relationship between technology and warfare lies at the heart of many of the most important debates in military science over the past 50 years. In the 1990s, American thinkers argued that a "revolution in military affairs" was underway, in which new sensors, precision-guided weapons, and computer networks to connect the two would enable a new sort of blitzkrieg, one demonstrated by the U.S. victory over Iraq in 1991.

But some scholars have questioned the primacy of technology in such military outcomes. In a seminal book, *Military Power*, the political scientist Stephen Biddle argues that what really mattered was tactics. Well-drilled armies built around small, cohesive units capable of using the terrain for cover and concealment could still survive in the face of modern weaponry. Biddle points to the example of al Qaeda's ability to evade massive U.S. bombardment in Afghanistan's eastern Shah-i-Kot Valley and Arma mountains in March 2002. One dug-in al Qaeda command post was ringed by five craters caused by large U.S. precision-guided bombs. Its garrison survived and had to be cleared out by infantry.

The war in Ukraine has given a twist to that debate. The technologies of the revolution in military affairs have, in one sense, fulfilled their promise. Sensors are better than ever and have proliferated widely—Ukraine has access to radar satellites, capable of spotting Russian tanks in woodland, that most large military powers could only have dreamed of 25 years ago. Artificial intelligence is fusing data such as electronic emissions detected by satellites and mobile phone signals to find high-value targets, including Russian generals and Hamas leaders.

Yet in Ukraine, at least, the result has not been a fluid war of shock and awe. The frontlines seem viscous. Ukraine's counteroffensive last year resulted in paltry territorial gains. In October 2023, Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top general, gave his own diagnosis for this state of affairs. "Just like in the First World War, we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate," he said. "We see everything the enemy is doing

and they see everything we are doing. In order for us to break this deadlock we need something new, like . . . gunpowder."

The problem is that this is a dangerously deterministic way of looking at technology. Zaluzhny was right in suggesting that new—perhaps hitherto undiscovered—means of clearing mines, jamming drones, or locating Russian artillery batteries would smooth the path out of the stalemate. But as Biddle has pointed out in these pages, the same technological environment can produce dramatically different outcomes. In World War I, Germany's initial invasion of Belgium and France made huge progress despite the existence of the same machine guns and artillery that later produced the Battle of the Somme in 1916, in which the Allies advanced a mere seven miles at the cost of more than one million casualties on all sides. Later, in its spring offensive of 1918, Germany took 4,000 square miles of ground without using tanks.

RISK AND RETURNS

Luttwak and Shamir argue that the culture of the IDF has encouraged bold and daring tactics, often involving tremendous risks. That is partly because smaller armies facing larger foes must rely on guile over brawn. It is also to do with which skills are rewarded. "In the IDF the commando element . . . is not peripheral," they write, "because many senior officers are promoted from the commando units." Israel's prime minister and defense minister are former special forces officers. The IDF's chief of staff, as well as his predecessor, were both paratroopers.

Israel's early leaders, experimenting with armored warfare, opted to

send troops to West Germany's military schools—not without some reluctance—rather than British ones because they believed they had more to learn from a military that had managed dynamic maneuvers in the deserts of North Africa during World War II, an environment similar to the Negev desert, as opposed to a military that, in the IDF's estimation, had relied on firepower, attrition, and superior numbers.

Many of Israel's greatest military triumphs have indeed come from audacious tactics such as the aerial bolt from the blue in 1967 and Sharon's dash across the canal six years later. But the same attributes that produced such successes have also contributed to Israeli vulnerabilities. In October 1973, Israel convinced itself that Egypt would not launch an attack. That was, in large part, a political misjudgment, but one rooted in deeper pathologies. Israeli military intelligence, AMAN, failed to predict not just the war but also Egypt's innovative tactics and the training that had occurred since its defeat in 1967. "A common factor behind all these failings," writes the journalist Abraham Rabinovich, in his book on the war, "was the contempt for Arab arms born of that earlier war, a contempt that spawned indolent thinking."

The question, one left unaddressed by Luttwak and Shamir, is whether technology reinforced that complacency. In 1973, AMAN experts believed they would be able to provide a warning four to six days before the beginning of war, thanks to battery-powered signals-intelligence devices planted in the sand outside Cairo and in the hills west of Suez City. But these sensors were switched on too late and did not alert Israeli officials to the coming assault.

Luttwak and Shamir argue that the debacle of 1973 reinforced the IDF's culture of egalitarianism. In Unit 8200, Israel's equivalent of the U.S. National Security Agency, even rookies are free to contact senior officers regardless of the chain of command. AMAN established a "devil's advocate" department that reports directly to the head of military intelligence. Yet there is now copious evidence that such dissenting channels failed in the months before October 7, when Israeli sentries and junior intelligence officers picked up many signs of an impending Hamas attack, such as exercises to blow up the border fence and enter kibbutzim, only for their warnings to be dismissed as "imaginary scenarios."

It is too early to say conclusively why senior officers were so resistant to evidence for a likely attack. Intelligence failures are complex, but many of the factors at work in the lead-up to October 7 likely echo those that afflicted the IDF in 1973: a rigid political conception of what the enemy would or would not do, a systematic underestimation of the enemy's competence to conduct a military raid deep into Israel, and a conviction that high-tech means of surveillance and defense, such as vibration sensors and border cameras strung along the perimeter with Gaza, would be adequate.

Indeed, focusing on Israel's successes can distract from what really matters: the response to failures. Israel's armor corps was shocked in 1973 by the onslaught it faced from new Soviet antitank weapons and Arab tanks. The IDF eventually realized that its tanks were vulnerable by themselves, so it placed mortars on them to fire at locations where antitank squads might be hiding and used smoke

to obscure their own positions. Tank losses fell quickly. Israel's success was not in having the best weapons or the boldest commanders—welcome as these are—but in swift adaptation under fire.

For all that, even world-beating innovation and adaptation will get an army only so far. Israel's offensive in Gaza exemplifies many of the strengths that Luttwak and Shamir highlight. Israel has deployed cutting-edge drones, one of the world's most advanced armored personnel carriers (the Eitan), and an artificial intelligence system (Gospel) capable of identifying at least 100 potential targets per day—all capabilities that would be envied by larger and better-resourced armies.

These technologies have doubtless helped the IDF advance deep into Gaza, kill over 9,000 Hamas fighters, and keep its own casualties down to fewer than three Israeli soldiers killed per day, a remarkably low tally by the standards of grueling urban warfare. But wars are fought for political reasons, and waging them well is not just about winning battles, which Israel has always done proficiently, but translating those victories into political outcomes, which it has not.

Innovation is not enough to root out and destroy an enemy that has spent almost two decades burrowing in and under dense urban areas. Nor does it help to persuade Israel's Arab neighbors to underwrite the reconstruction of postwar Gaza and participate in its governance. Luttwak and Shamir rightly praise the IDF for "striving to surprise the enemy by novel schemes of action, inevitably by accepting major and sometimes extravagant risks." If only Israel's political leaders were willing to take the same bold leaps into the unknown. 🌐

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The Real Roots of Xi Jinping Thought

Chinese Political Philosophers' Long Struggle With Modernity

RANA MITTER

The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought

BY WANG HUI. EDITED BY MICHAEL GIBBS HILL.

Harvard University Press, 2023, 1,088 pp.

In 2023, Hunan TV, China's second-most-watched television channel, unveiled a series called *When Marx Met Confucius*. The conceit was literal: actors playing the two thinkers—Confucius dressed in a tan robe and Karl Marx in a black suit and a leonine white wig—met at the Yuelu Academy, a thousand-year-old school renowned for its role in developing Confucian philosophy. Over five episodes, Marx and Confucius discussed the nature of politics, arriving at the conclusion that Confucianism and Marxism are compatible—or that Marx may have subconsciously drawn his theories from a Confucian well. In one episode, Marx noted that he and his companion “share a commitment to [political] stability,” adding that “in reality, I myself was Chinese for a long

time,” suggesting that his thinking had always been harmonious with traditional Chinese worldviews.

The series was backed by the Chinese Communist Party and formed part of President Xi Jinping's sweeping political project to reconceptualize his country's ideological identity. Since taking office in 2012, Xi has made it imperative for Chinese people to understand his interpretation of Chinese ideology, which he calls “Xi Jinping Thought.” Bureaucrats, tycoons, and pop stars have been required to endorse it; students now learn it in school; CCP members must use a smartphone app that regularly communicates its precepts. Key to Xi's thought is pairing Marxism with Confucianism: in October 2023, he declared that today's China should

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consider Marxism its “soul” and “fine traditional Chinese culture as the root.”

Xi’s efforts to redefine China’s ideological underpinnings feel increasingly urgent as a slowdown in growth has fed doubts among investors and public distrust at home. He leads a country whose economic might is far more respected than its form of government: China has now won a place among the world’s major economies but remains an aspirant within the international order. To the frustration of Xi and other Chinese leaders, Western countries will be reluctant to accept China’s global influence unless China conforms to modern liberal values. But his attempted synthesis of Marx and Confucius has prompted bafflement, even mockery, among observers outside and inside China.

Over the past century, Chinese communist thinkers have tended to believe that a flourishing future demands a complete break from the past. China’s formative early Marxist thinkers, in particular, generally condemned Confucianism, a philosophy that stresses hierarchy, ritual, and a return to an idealized past. Mao Zedong and other Chinese Marxists believed that Confucianism was theoretically incompatible with Marxism, which celebrates revolution and perpetual change, and that its practical influence on politics had made China weak. Confucian thinking, in their view, had generated a moribund bureaucracy that failed to adapt to the challenges of modernity; this renunciation found its ultimate expression during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, when the Chinese Red Guards dynamited the philosopher’s tomb before hanging a naked corpse in front of it.

But erasing the past in a country with so rich a history was always a struggle. It has consistently also seemed to matter to Chinese thinkers, and Chinese people in general, that their country should be seen as responding to political change with methods derived from a recognizably Chinese source. Even as many of China’s early-twentieth-century political theorists condemned Confucianism, other thinkers strove to show that China did not have to imitate Western ideas—be they nationalist, liberal, or Marxist—to modernize. They found a road map for a different but potentially effective kind of modernization within the universe of traditional Chinese ideas.

In *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, his magnum opus, Wang Hui, a scholar of Chinese language and literature at Tsinghua University, returns to the late-nineteenth-century thinkers who worked to reshape Chinese philosophy. First published in Chinese in 2004, it appeared last year in a new English edition, the work of several translators under the direction of Michael Gibbs Hill. Although the translation clocks in at over 1,000 pages, it represents just over half of the four-volume Chinese original. Wang analyzes the connections between political theory and more concrete issues of governance over a millennium of Chinese history. But he notes that “explanations of modern China cannot avoid the question of how to interpret” the Qing dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1912. Wang’s deep exploration of the work of a group of late Qing thinkers implies that China’s embrace of Marxism did not, in fact, arise from a wholesale rejection of

Confucianism. Chinese Marxism may have had the space to emerge precisely because these late thinkers sought to apply Confucian thought to the challenges of modernity.

The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought is densely detailed, but a fine introduction by Hill helps situate the English-language reader. And the text brilliantly reveals a China that has always been lively and pluralist in its political thought. That picture is at odds with the typical perception held by outside observers—and even some Chinese historians—that Chinese thought has been monolithic and prone to sudden ruptures.

In one sense, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* makes Xi's attempted synthesis of Marxism and Confucianism seem less implausible. It has a history; serious thinkers have tried it before. Many writers have suggested that Xi's "ideological work" does not or cannot have any relevance to ordinary Chinese people, who increasingly struggle with material problems such as making hefty mortgage payments or providing health care for their elders. But China's anomie is also a crisis of national identity. And implicitly, Wang's book suggests that efforts to redefine the country's ideology could help address that crisis.

But Wang's analysis also reveals where the CCP is going astray. The party expresses its new ideology in simplistic, brassy terms, drawing on unsubtle readings of classics and disallowing critiques. The thinkers who argued for Confucianism's relevance at the turn of the twentieth century believed that a key to that relevance was letting thinkers debate Chinese philosophy's very nature.

PHILOSOPHERS AND KINGS

Wang, one of contemporary China's most influential intellectuals, has frequently written about the period after the communist revolution. A participant in the 1989 student movement for democratic reforms, he became a leading member of what others have called China's "New Left" in the 1990s. In his 2010 book, *The End of the Revolution*, he criticized China's turn toward marketization in the 1990s.

In *The Rise of Chinese Thought*, however, Wang does not deal explicitly with any aspect of China's turbulent twentieth-century history. Mao makes just one appearance. In this work, Wang is more interested in earlier Chinese thinkers who had already wrestled with the challenges posed by modernity, arguing that when China changed, it did so by drawing on internal resources. (The later volumes, not translated in Hill's edition, do move into the early twentieth century.)

Wang's study begins in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1386–1644) dynasties with neo-Confucianism, a school of thought that adapted traditional Confucianism in the face of challenges by Taoism and Buddhism. His analysis gains its strongest contemporary salience when he discusses a strain of thought that emerged toward the end of the Qing dynasty. At the height of the Qing era, China doubled its population and ran immensely successful military campaigns that expanded its territory. Europeans sought to buy and copy its distinctive art and porcelain. But by the end of the nineteenth century, economic failures and a defeat at the hands of



the British in the Opium Wars had brought China to a point of existential crisis. After China was forced to sign humiliating treaties with a host of rising powers including Japan, Russia, and the United States, it appeared as if it might simply be unfit to flourish in the modern era.

One potential conclusion was that Chinese traditions were antiquated and had to be jettisoned in favor of Western ideas, including nationalism and Marxism. Wang argues that the problem that bedeviled the late Qing empire was not just a geopolitical one in which other states had secured material advantages over China. It was a crisis of worldview. Scholars have long asserted that the ways in which Confucianism was applied to nineteenth-century Chinese politics had left the country sclerotic—unable to engage with modern Western

ideologies such as capitalism, liberalism, and nationalism. Confucianism's emphasis on tradition and respect for hierarchy had justified an entrenched, sometimes corrupt bureaucracy that failed to respond deftly to foreign invasions and internal revolts or to maintain sufficient tax revenue to maintain security and infrastructure.

But Wang also suggests that this kind of stagnation is not inherent in Confucianism. In fact, the Confucian thought-world was capacious and flexible. Confucian thinkers often relished encounters with foreign ideas, incorporating or synthesizing them to adapt China to new historical conditions. Notably, toward the end of the nineteenth century, thinkers in the “New Text” movement—so called because it drew on texts written in a new script unveiled by the ancient Han dynasty—explored ways in which

their own Confucian cultural universe might reshape itself when confronted by Western ideas.

Modernity did not, Wang argues, present them with an unanswerable challenge, setting up a clash between the old and the new. Instead, the New Text thinkers proposed that translating Confucian rites or principles into laws could accomplish a “grand reunification” of those principles with the new demands posed by globalization and Western imperialism. The New Text thinkers wanted to find ways to push back against the debilitating influence of government corruption. Wang describes how the prominent New Text thinker Wei Yuan challenged Chinese leaders’ presumption that Confucianism demanded they strictly privilege ideas and strategies that had arisen from within China. He sought to dissolve the distinction between “inside” and “outside”; that allowed him to argue for military modernization that incorporated Western innovations, including new measures for defending China’s frontiers and the construction of a shipyard and arsenal in southern China. Thinkers such as Kang Youwei discovered modernizing elements within Confucianism, arguing that a proper interpretation revealed it to have components that could parallel or meet the energy of Western modernizing ideas. Drawing on Confucian theories, Kang formulated the idea of *datong*, or “great unity,” a day “when everything on earth, great or small, far or near, will be as one.”

Kang saw no distinction between holding a Confucian worldview and advocating a world that dismissed

borders as meaningless. His proposals won him influence, and he played a central role in the 1898 Hundred Days’ Reform movement, which aimed to move China toward a constitutional monarchy resembling Japan’s. Alarmed, China’s conservative ruler, the empress dowager Cixi, ordered his arrest and forced him into exile. But his ideas did not die. The late Qing era was a time of great intellectual ferment, and Chinese thinkers—some in exile in Japan—continued to debate theories such as Kang’s in an array of new journals.

The New Text thinkers’ stance arguably enabled the next generation to be open to Marxism. In 1925, the author Guo Moruo wrote about Marx “entering the Confucian temple” in a short story that partly inspired Hunan TV’s new series. In a 1939 text titled “How to Be a Good Communist,” Liu Shaoqi, a central figure in the Chinese communist revolution, referred to communist “virtues,” a phrasing more Confucian than materialist.

CRISIS OF FAITH

The Rise of Chinese Thought is, in one sense, historical scholarship. But its account of the intellectual world of the late Qing dynasty shines a sharp light on China today. One of the central propositions advanced by the late Qing thinkers was that China needed not merely to find a way out of the crisis facing China at that time but also to embed the solution in pre-modern Chinese cultural forms. The situation facing the late Qing thinkers might not appear remotely similar to that of today’s China. When they were writing, China was deeply mired

in fiscal crisis and beset by internal rebellions; many of its rural areas were deeply impoverished, and its sovereignty had been hugely compromised by foreign invasions and the imposition of biased treaties. China now boasts immense economic and military strength. There are no meaningful threats to its national sovereignty.

But like many countries on the rise today, China does not feel a sense of ownership over the world's international norms, which were largely created by the West in the twentieth century. Chinese elites believe that these norms and their universalist intellectual premises have largely been imposed on China. And despite China's strength, it is increasingly afflicted by a sense of crisis. This sentiment is partly a reaction to material circumstances. China's urban youth unemployment, now estimated at 20 percent or higher, and a growing rural-urban inequality are rooted in economics. So, too, is the difficulty that Chinese families now have in meeting their mortgage payments or coping with inadequate health care and pensions.

China's sense of anomie is also sociological, however, especially for young people. It cannot be resolved by economic fixes alone. The recent era of spectacular economic growth generated a self-concept among Chinese citizens: China is a daring, rising power, and being Chinese means being on the cutting edge. The core of that understanding is now being challenged. China's astonishing growth trajectory appears to have crested, leaving not only people's bank accounts hollowed out but their sense of identity, as well.

Today, the word that many Chinese professionals often use to describe themselves is "depressed." In a culture in which acknowledging mental health problems is profoundly stigmatized, 35 percent of respondents to a 2020 national survey said they were experiencing distress, anxiety, or depression. On social media, young Chinese people express disillusionment and disaffection, declaring that they are "lying flat" (*tangping*) or "rotting away" (*bailan*). The COVID-19 lockdown period eroded trust in the state.

More and more, young Chinese professionals in business, academia, and the media are confronted with restrictions that they find baffling. (For instance, many Chinese students are eager to study abroad, but many are also told that if they do, their rise in the Chinese bureaucracy will be hampered.) As China's population starts to age, young people are becoming aware that the costs of looking after elderly parents will fall heavily on their shoulders.

Such developments do not make life in China intolerable, as it was for the late-Qing dynasty thinkers. But they do make it unsatisfying. China may be able to go on creating solid economic growth. "Solid but not spectacular," however, is unexciting. "Weak and fragile" would be worse.

Many Western observers point to Japan as a warning to China about what happens when a property bubble collapses and a country enters a period of aging. Yet Japan remains a powerful global economy with an important regional role and a reputation for being one of the best places

in the world to live. China may well be able to follow Japan's track by adjusting its domestic economy to create new service-sector jobs and concentrating on elder care. Such a China could be a decent place to live. But it would not provide the heroic energy that underpins a rising power.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

In this context, it makes a bit more sense that Xi has begun trying to present a refreshed ideology that fuses a Marxist view of society with a Confucian one. Marxism promotes self-criticism, and when applied to real politics has tended to lead to purges. These are phenomena Xi wishes to avoid at a fragile political moment. On the surface, his synthesis may appear to be just an effort to defend himself and the party against criticism, since Confucianism prioritizes stability and respect for authority.

Wang's study, however, implicitly suggests that Confucianism and Marxism may not be inherently incompatible. His analysis has immense relevance for China today, even if he does not address contemporary China directly. His work shows that the effort to use traditional Chinese philosophy to face emerging challenges has a precedent. Recently, I spoke to a student enrolled in a prominent school of Marxism-Leninism in China. "What does Marxism mean to you?" I asked her. She explained that studying Marxism offered her a way of reflecting on her personal development. Marxism, she said, gave her profound peace of mind.

I was intrigued, I told her. What she described sounded more like

Confucianism than Marxism to me. Perhaps she had simply absorbed some of Xi's growing emphasis on traditional culture. But perhaps, intuitively, it seemed to her that elements of the two philosophies were compatible—and it was comforting to her to feel that her own culture had some answers to her generation's dispiriting sense of uncertainty and driftlessness.

If a sincere effort at a Marxism-Confucianism fusion could get off the ground, it might help address this anomie by allowing China to hold two ideas at once. A Marxist worldview anticipates a future that continues to be shaped by dramatic changes and convulsive confrontations with, for instance, the challenges of a clean energy transition, U.S. hegemony, or the liberal international order. A worldview informed by Confucianism can accommodate the idea that China will need more calm, predictability, and stability in the future—and that direct military confrontations would likely undercut China's own interests.

Chinese political thought retains liveliness and diversity: it is a work in progress. In 2019, Bai Tongdong, a philosopher at Fudan University in Shanghai, published a book called *Against Political Equality*. Despite the provocative title, the work is a strong defense of liberalism, arguing that some forms of nondemocratic rule, such as a meritocracy based on Confucian values, could better preserve liberal values than democracy can. Other Chinese thinkers who are often considered realists also wrestle with classical ideas; in his 2011 book *Ancient Chinese Thought*,

Modern Chinese Power, for instance, the international relations scholar Yan Xuetong draws on premodern Chinese thinking to interpret the contemporary global order.

Given the precedents over centuries of Chinese philosophy for the kind of synthesis Xi is attempting, it is curious that he relies so heavily on very ancient sources. A television series reconciling Confucianism with modernity could easily have been longer and richer: Kang, the New Text thinker, might have appeared to discuss Confucius's role as a reformer. The maverick twentieth-century thinker Liang Shuming could have debated Mao about what, precisely, constitutes "socialism with Chinese characteristics." In fact, these two thinkers did conduct a lively debate about just that, in 1946. But to acknowledge the New Text thinkers in particular might be dangerous because they valued internal debate and plurality of thought.

Xi's effort to synthesize Confucius and Marx is not invalid, as an exercise. It is worth lingering, however, on the fact that Wang's original Chinese text was published in 2004. Only two decades ago, China's intellectual environment was very different. Academics were freer to debate various political alternatives, and the media could risk more pointed political commentary. Chinese identity is still multiple, not monolithic, and Chinese thought has always best contributed to China's flourishing when it has been free and disputatious, not closed and sterile. This is the aspect of Chinese tradition that today's CCP cannot afford to ignore. 🗣️

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Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires

BY ROCHELLE TERMAN. Princeton University Press, 2023, 216 pp.

Human rights have grown in importance in world politics, but their enforcement remains notoriously erratic and selective. Terman breaks important ground in illuminating when, how, and under what conditions states engage in “naming and shaming” other countries to punish them for human rights transgressions. Terman’s key insight is that geopolitics matters: leaders wield shaming as a weapon in pursuit of power, status, and legitimacy. States are more likely to go after the violations of adversaries than those of friends and allies because they are more interested in inflicting reputational damage on opponents than in addressing the violations themselves. Similarly, leaders are more reluctant to reproach a vio-

lator when strategic interests are at stake. Many Muslim states, for instance, have refused to condemn China’s abuse of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang because they fear undermining important trade relations. The book shows that countries accused of bad behavior rarely mend their ways and that in some cases, shaming can backfire and prompt the further erosion of human rights. Terman does not deny the importance of upholding human rights standards, but she does demonstrate quite elegantly that politics and state interests lurk at every turn.

Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind Across Three Eras

BY BARRY BUZAN. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 522 pp.

With characteristic ambition and erudition, Buzan tells the sweeping story of the rise and evolution of modern global society. Over the last two decades, Buzan has been a leading figure urging scholars of international relations to move beyond Western-centric approaches to forge a truly global discipline. For Buzan,

this means turning to global history, exploring the large forces and dynamics that have shaped and transformed human societies over millennia. The book builds on the so-called English School that conceives of the international system as a “world society” in which states and peoples craft institutions to manage conflict and the unfolding challenges of modernity. Buzan explores the ways in which economics, technology, and politics shape and transform basic human institutions such as war, sovereignty, state formation, religion, diplomacy, nationalism, development, and environmental stewardship. The strength of Buzan’s approach is its universality, weaving the complex evolution of modern society into a single story. He ominously speculates that today’s cascading environmental crises could bring to an end modern civilization and the quest for human betterment.

Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics
EDITED BY ROBERT JERVIS, DIANE N. LABROSSE, STACIE E. GODDARD, AND JOSHUA ROVNER. Columbia University Press, 2023, 544 pp.

This lively volume brings together 45 historians and international relations theorists to assess the impact of the Trump presidency on the U.S.-led liberal international order. In a sharp break with the past, Donald Trump came to office seemingly committed to tearing down the U.S. postwar system, withdrawing from multilateral agreements and the Iran nuclear deal, attempting to

withdraw from the World Health Organization, and dismissing NATO and other alliances as outdated. The essayists in this volume are generally critical of Trump’s “America first” foreign policy but offer a great diversity of views on its long-term consequences. Some writers are struck by the resilience of U.S. alliances and partnerships, whereas others see abiding damage to the country’s credibility as a global leader. Many of the chapters argue that the “Trump effect” is as much a consequence as a cause of global disorder. The international relations scholar Emma Ashford sees Trump’s moves as part of a longer shift in the orientation of the U.S. foreign policy establishment from the liberal internationalism of the 1990s to a contemporary fixation on great-power rivalry. Other authors argue that, ultimately, Trump’s policies were unsuccessful in achieving their proclaimed objectives and that a majority of Americans still support the country’s historical role as a global liberal leader. But the historian Jeremy Adelman offers a trenchant warning: Trump may have failed, but deep forces are at work in the world that will prevent the United States from treating the disruption of his presidency as a mere aberration.

Liberty and Equality

BY RAYMOND ARON. TRANSLATED BY SAMUEL GARRETT ZEITLIN. Princeton University Press, 2023, 120 pp.

In this new translation of Raymond Aron’s last university lecture, delivered in 1978, France’s most renowned

Cold War–era liberal thinker grandly reflects on the concept of liberty in Western societies. Over his lifetime, Aron was a hardheaded defender of liberal values in the face of fascist and totalitarian ideological challengers. In his view, Western liberalism was a brilliant but precarious achievement, built around an unstable core of principles: freedom, tolerance, moderation, fairness, and equality. In this valedictory speech, Aron argues that liberty is the essential feature of Western democracy. He maps various types of liberties. Individual liberties include freedom of choice and opinion and the expectation of personal safety. Political liberties include the right to vote, protest, and assemble. Social liberties involve widely shared access to opportunity and the right to organize. Paradoxically, liberties are valued as protections against the dangers of state power, but these same liberties must ultimately be guaranteed by the state. Aron ends his lecture by posing a question still relevant today: Liberty within open societies allows people to pursue their own paths, but how can these free societies remain stable and legitimate unless they simultaneously find ways to renew their sense of shared purpose and their understanding of the responsibilities of citizens?

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

Milton Friedman:

The Last Conservative

BY JENNIFER BURNS. Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 2023, 592 pp.

Although there are already several biographies of the economist Milton Friedman, not to mention Friedman's own memoirs—written with his wife and scholarly collaborator, Rose Friedman—Burns adds color and light in this first critical biography of the man to be grounded in the archives, including personal papers. As Burns's fluid prose makes clear, Friedman's contributions to economics were fundamental: they included the permanent income theory of consumption, his monetary interpretation of the causes of the Great Depression, and the fixed money-growth rule to control inflation, to mention only a few. Friedman was more than a theoretical and empirical economist, however. He had an equally influential incarnation as a public intellectual and political gadfly, advancing arguments for school vouchers, an all-volunteer army, and a universal basic income. He lauded the efficiency of markets in books, magazine columns, and television series and criticized government intervention in the economy as infringing on individual liberty and discouraging personal responsibility. His ideas had a significant influence on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,

U.S. President Ronald Reagan, and the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, among others. Burns's book is not just a definitive biography of an influential economist but also an account of the development of economics as a discipline and a tool of public policy over the twentieth century.

Revitalizing the World Trading System
BY ALAN WM. WOLFF. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 588 pp.

The World Trade Organization is on life support. Former President Donald Trump threatened to withdraw the United States from the WTO and refused to nominate members to its Appellate Body, rendering its dispute-settlement capacity inert. U.S. President Joe Biden also failed to name new WTO judges, and the United States' trading partners have challenged the legality of Biden's signature legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act. Wolff, a former deputy director general of the WTO and former deputy U.S. special trade representative, acknowledges that the revitalization of the body depends on factors beyond its control, including American domestic politics. But he insists that the organization can improve its prospects through reform. The WTO should strengthen its capacity to monitor trade flows and practices. It should exercise greater agenda-setting powers. It can regain its legitimacy by striking a balance between calling out practices inconsistent with global trade norms while also avoiding judicial activism. The United States and the European

Union should spearhead these reform efforts. But left unexplored is the question of whether progress is possible without the active support of the Chinese government, and whether China is prepared to become a responsible stakeholder.

Universal Food Security: How to End Hunger While Protecting the Planet
BY GLENN DENNING. Columbia University Press, 2023, 448 pp.

Nearly four billion people around the world are malnourished, while another 2.5 billion have low-quality diets that cause obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Denning, an agronomist with extensive experience in developing economies, asks how countries can achieve sustainable food security. He carefully examines the essential components of terrestrial food production—including soil, water, seeds, and climate—and shows how they are integrated into what he defines as a “food system.” He then offers a five-pronged strategy for overhauling existing food systems to reach universal food security: “sustainable intensification,” that is, producing additional nutritious food and halting environmental damage; investing in market infrastructure to move food from where it is produced to where it is consumed; reducing waste and spoilage after harvests; encouraging healthy diets; and supporting people for whom healthy diets would otherwise be out of reach. Governments, private companies, farmers' organizations, nonprofits, and the education sector all have roles in this transformation.

The Rise and Fall of the Italian Economy

BY CARLO BASTASIN AND GIANNI TONIOLO. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 188 pp.

The authors describe the development of the Italian economy from the era of gradual modernization following the unification of the country in the nineteenth century to the golden age of growth after World War II and, most recently, the period of economic stagnation and demographic decline that leaves Italy's real GDP per person today lower than it was two decades ago. Bastasin and Toniolo ask whether other advanced economies facing demographic challenges are similarly doomed to this malaise of low growth. The structure of Italian industries compounds the problem: Italy has an abundance of vigorous small- and medium-sized firms but lacks the large global corporations required to meet the competitive challenges of the twenty-first century. Successive governments papered over underlying structural problems by enacting generous social and industrial policies financed by excessive borrowing. The economic consequences materialized in the 1980s, with growth markedly slowing once the country had made the easy gains in catching up to more advanced economies. Uncertainty then spiked with the multifaceted crisis of 1992, when corruption scandals upended politics, currency speculators destabilized the lira, and the sustainability of the government's finances came into doubt. The result was a devastating loss of confidence, creating an

unfavorable climate for investment and inaugurating an economic slump from which Italy has never recovered. The authors conclude that it is too early to tell whether other economies are doomed to follow in Italy's footsteps.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

The Forest Brotherhood: Baltic Resistance Against the Nazis and Soviets
BY DAN KASZETA. Hurst, 2023, 272 pp.

Kaszeta explores little-known campaigns waged by patriots from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania against the invading Nazis during World War II and then against the returning Soviets. They fought the forcible incorporation of their territories into the Soviet Union after World War II, a resistance that continued well into the Cold War even in the face of severe repression. Scholars have struggled to find primary source materials about these struggles and been dissuaded from studying them by often credible Soviet claims that these movements were ultranationalist and collaborated with the Nazis. Kaszeta has done a remarkable job in telling the story, separating myth from fact and providing a rounded picture of the Forest Brotherhood, so called because these rebels tended to hide in forests. Kaszeta shows how these patriots moved from waging haphazard guerrilla warfare to publishing clandestine literature and

keeping the idea of nationhood alive until it became real after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Generals and Admirals, Criminals and Crooks: Dishonorable Leadership in the U.S. Military

BY JEFFREY J. MATTHEWS.

University of Notre Dame Press,
2023, 432 pp.

The U.S. armed forces might pride themselves on the highest standards of leadership, but Matthews demonstrates in a series of disturbing and forensic case studies how military leaders often fall short. In successive chapters, he explores seven forms of unprofessional behavior, including war crimes, insubordination, moral cowardice, toxic leadership, obstruction of justice, sex crimes, and public corruption. Sometimes these failings are lapses in otherwise exemplary careers, such as Colin Powell's role in obscuring the transfer of arms from the U.S. military to the CIA during the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s. Others show the dark side of driven personalities: how General Douglas MacArthur's preening egotism led to his rank insubordination, for example, or how Admiral Hyman Rickover constantly bullied and humiliated his staff in his single-minded pursuit of nuclear power for the U.S. Navy. Yet the most disturbing cases involve a collective institutional failure of leadership. Matthews recounts the details of the bacchanalian Tailhook conference in 1991, which took a tradition of loutish behavior to alarming levels and led to the alleged sexual abuse of 83 women and seven men, and the ongo-

ing investigation into the "Fat Leonard" scandal, in which many officers of the Seventh Fleet accepted money, luxury items, and the services of prostitutes in return for helping a private company secure lucrative contracts, including by sharing classified material.

Fierce Ambition: The Life and Legend of War Correspondent Maggie Higgins

BY JENNET CONANT.

Norton, 2023, 416 pp.

War correspondents have privileged opportunities to observe the course of a conflict and shape the popular understanding of the key events and actors involved. The desire to be first with the big story also means that their profession is an intensely competitive one. In this lively biography of Marguerite "Maggie" Higgins, Conant explores how an ambitious, hardworking woman used all the means at her disposal to get the right assignments. The highlights of her career included reporting on the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in 1945, the Nuremberg trials from 1945 to 1946, the Berlin airlift from 1948 to 1949, and the Korean War in the early 1950s. There, despite being told by a U.S. general that women did not belong on the frontlines, Higgins showed she could more than cope and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1951 on the back of her dispatches. When she got to Vietnam, her hawkish anticommunism put her at odds with a younger generation of more skeptical reporters. Before she saw any need to doubt her own beliefs, she was cut down in 1966, at the age of 45, by a parasitic illness she contracted while covering the war.

The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War

BY DMITRY (DIMA) ADAMSKY.

Stanford University Press, 2023, 226 pp.

Adamsky has a deep knowledge of Russian military literature. In this short and informative book, he explores how the concept of deterrence has been developed by Russian analysts in ways that are quite different from the Western version, reflecting a distinctive cultural tradition that he traces back to tsarist times. Russian deterrence is broader than its Western counterpart, integrating conventional capabilities with nuclear forces and taking in all forms of coercion. In recent decades, it has come to include the information sphere, using bluffing and deception to manipulate the target's view of reality. As Adamsky is well aware, it is one thing for theoreticians to develop a sophisticated and coherent theory but quite another for it to be adopted by the political and military leadership and put successfully into practice. The Russian theory, he suggests, paid insufficient attention to the circumstances in which it could fail and backfire. Ukraine has illuminated the limitations of the Russian approach as much as its potential.

Caspar Weinberger and the U.S. Military Buildup, 1981–1985

BY EDWARD C. KEEFER. Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2023, 768 pp.

Caspar Weinberger was one of the most controversial and consequential U.S. secretaries of defense. This latest volume in an invaluable and always

deeply researched series of Pentagon histories covers Weinberger's role during President Ronald Reagan's first term. He came to the post with no background in defense and with a reputation as a budget-cutter. Yet he publicized, with some exaggeration, a Soviet military buildup to justify the one sought by Reagan for the United States, leading to the administration's Strategic Defense Initiative, a vast proposed missile defense system that sparked great alarm within the ailing Soviet leadership. All the same, Weinberger was wary of getting involved in unnecessary foreign adventures, a sentiment deepened by the ill-fated U.S. peacekeeping expedition in Beirut in 1982. His readiness to take his own distinctive line was exemplified by his determination to ensure that the United Kingdom had full U.S. support in its war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

Did It Happen Here? Perspectives on Fascism in America

EDITED BY DANIEL STEINMETZ-JENKINS. Norton, 2024, 384 pp.

An anthology of classic texts on fascism combined with analyses by contemporary writers on the present situation in the United States, this volume is intended to shed light on what its editor calls "the fascist debate." That debate proceeds on two very different planes. One

is principally an academic argument between comparative political scientists and historians about whether there is any merit to comparing the contemporary era of U.S. politics with the early-twentieth-century rise of fascism in Europe. The more compelling debate concerns where U.S. politics now lies on the political spectrum from truly democratic to pre-fascist or outright fascist. (The book was written and edited before the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in late 2023 referred to his political opponents as “vermin” and accused immigrants of “poisoning the blood” of the country, inviting direct comparisons to the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler.) As is true of most edited volumes, the contributions vary greatly. Enough of them are highly informative and thought-provoking to make the book a valuable read for anyone hoping for more insight into the direction of the country.

The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America

BY NICHOLAS F. JACOBS AND DANIEL M. SHEA. Columbia University Press, 2023, 488 pp.

Based on a hundred years of data compiled by the authors and three large, recent voter surveys, Jacobs and Shea attempt to better understand the decisions of rural voters. For most of American history, no party had a monopoly on the rural vote—except in the Jim Crow South, where the Democrats dominated. The authors find that that started to change in 1980, as rural areas all over the country began to lean toward Republicans. Those who

live in such areas tend to be white and older, less educated, and poorer than the national average, and many of them harbor strong feelings of resentment against elites. But the authors find that their political choices are not primarily motivated by race, age, religion, or ideological conservatism. Jacobs and Shea insist that the principal cause of the urban-rural divide is a more positive, although somewhat nebulous, “place-based, group identity” held by rural voters. It is this “collective sense of shared destiny” based on where they live that has been blown into the “myth” propagated by Republican politicians that rural residents constitute “the real America.” The urban-rural divide has become so stark that it threatens American democracy by erasing political competition based on issues, leaving only room for personality and demagoguery. To reverse the trend, Democrats will have to “show up” and compete for rural votes that are, in the authors’ view, winnable.

The Fourth Turning Is Here: What the Seasons of History Tell Us About How and When This Crisis Will End

BY NEIL HOWE. Simon & Schuster, 2023, 592 pp.

Howe’s widely read earlier book, *The Fourth Turning*, propounded the theory that a cyclical pattern underlies Anglo-American history over the past 500 years, from a cycle of energetic optimism to those of weakening and crisis. This sequel recapitulates the theory at some length, then delves into the current American “winter” (the author pairs each turning with a

season) that Howe believes began with the 2008 global market crash and subsequent recession and will end in the early 2030s. He focuses on the roles of different generations—boomers, Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z—in shaping each turning. Notwithstanding the ambition of the book's thesis and the enormous scope of its supporting material, the writing has a light, almost chatty tone that makes it highly digestible. But to find its argument compelling, the reader will need an open-mindedness to grand, cyclical patterns as determinants of history and a willingness to accept some elasticity in timelines.

The Commander-in-Chief Test: Public Opinion and the Politics of Image-Making in U.S. Foreign Policy

BY JEFFREY A. FRIEDMAN. Cornell University Press, 2023, 234 pp.

Friedman combines quantitative data with archival material on notable foreign policy decisions to examine the connection between public opinion and foreign policy. Spanning 1960 to 2004, the book offers case studies from years in which foreign policy was particularly salient in a national election. He finds that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, voters in those years wanted a candidate who they perceived as a competent commander in chief more than they wanted a candidate whose policy positions they agreed with. Voters assess competence by deciding whether a candidate appears to be a strong, independent leader who will vigorously pursue U.S. interests. This test encourages

candidates and sitting presidents to take hawkish positions and abjure any notion of compromise to indicate that they will stand up to foreign adversaries. Ironically, these positions often conflict with voters' preferences in what Friedman terms an "issue-image tradeoff." Conventional polling on where voters stand on issues therefore misses the point. Friedman concludes that, writ large, over many issues and years, issue-image tradeoffs have led the United States to craft policies that are more unilateral, militaristic policies than what voters actually want—with costly consequences.

If Trump Wins

The Atlantic, January/February 2024, 121 pp.

The Atlantic magazine has produced a valuable special issue that examines in detail the consequences of Donald Trump returning to the presidency in 2025. Two dozen tightly written pieces delve deeply into concerns usually presented as headlines, teasing out second- and third-order consequences. Anne Appelbaum, for instance, looks into the possibility that Trump will withdraw the United States from NATO. Even if carrying through such a move faces legal challenges, "the damage will have been done," she writes, because NATO's most important influence is not "legal or institutional, but psychological." Once the Kremlin (and by extension, Beijing) sees that the United States is no longer firmly committed to collective defense, the alliance will lose its deterrent power. She then traces

the effects that would have on South Korea, Taiwan, and Ukraine and on Europe more broadly. Even close allies such as Israel and Japan would have to reassess their dependence on the United States, and more and more states would have to hedge their bets. Eventually, the appearance of the United States in retreat would also weaken the country's economic influence. Other articles give comparable treatment to specific issues, including threats to the military, to Democratic cities and states, the Department of Justice, abortion, women's rights, efforts to address climate change, and immigration, to name just a few. Even the most well-informed reader can count on learning a great deal from this important contribution.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

The Abuse of Power: Confronting Injustice in Public Life

BY THERESA MAY. Headline, 2023, 352 pp.

The author, who served as British prime minister from 2016 to 2019, is remembered as a stodgy and ineffective “one nation” conservative who failed to secure a parliamentary majority in 2017, forge an agreement on Brexit, and block the rise of her erratic successor, Boris Johnson. Surprisingly, her memoir is a passionate call to defend society from privileged elites who have elevated personal over public interest—a

damning and unsentimental indictment that seems almost socialist in its zeal. Narrow opportunism, she says, explains why the speaker of the House of Commons, hard-core Brexiters, and Northern Irish politicians scotched a reasonable compromise deal on Brexit, why EU negotiators pressed their advantage, and why Johnson ultimately signed a deal that was worse for the United Kingdom. She also lambastes private-sector entities, including social media outlets and pharmaceutical companies, for failing to uphold their end of the social contract. No self-criticism follows. Instead, in the final chapter, May professes a naive faith that all this can only be solved if careerist politicians and state officials adopt an ethic of public service. This position ignores the deeper material and institutional sources of elite power and thus evades the central irony: most of the elite bad actors May criticizes in this book are core constituents of the Conservative Party that she has supported for decades.

Beyond the Wall: A History of East Germany

BY KATJA HOYER. Basic Books, 2023, 496 pp.

In this engaging book, a journalist and historian born in East Germany re-creates the ambivalence of life in the German Democratic Republic. Thirty-five years after East Germany collapsed, the vanished country continues to inspire in Germans a curious combination of loathing and longing. Today, few defend the GDR's use of torture, incarceration, and constant

surveillance to keep a Stalinist police state in power or its decision in 1961 to maintain its viability by walling in its own citizens. Yet many former residents of the GDR nonetheless feel nostalgia for its less stressful lifestyle, lack of commercialism, full employment, gender equality, low cost of living, sense of collective identity, social stability, and, interestingly, upward mobility. They also resent what they perceive as their second-class status in a reunited Germany—a sentiment that may be fueling support for right-wing populism. Although this book has inspired widespread criticism for hinting at a moral equivalence between the shortcomings of East Germany and West Germany during the Cold War era, it nonetheless vividly evokes the ethos of a state and society that have disappeared from the pages of history.

The Rise and Fall of the People's Parties: A History of Democracy in Western Europe Since 1918
BY PEPIJN CORDUWENER. Oxford University Press, 2023, 272 pp.

Contemporary threats to democracies from populist far-right parties, this book argues, are simply the effects of a deeper problem: the decline of the mass centrist parties of the center-right and center-left. In post-war Europe, Christian Democratic and Socialist parties moderated their ideologies to win support outside their traditional political bases—the church and organized labor, respectively. This practice created a broad and stable consensus that upheld liberal democracy, the welfare state, and private

ownership of the means of production. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, environmentalism, human rights advocacy, and gender-based activism began to erode this consensus. Today, the rise of a conservative identitarian backlash among older, more religious, and more rural voters threatens to shatter what is left of the consensus. This book adds little to a half century of sophisticated and detailed historiography and social science grappling with the causes of this change, and it offers no distinctive explanation of its own. But it does provide a readable summary of critical late-twentieth-century political trends up to the edge of the current crisis.

Financialization and Local Statecraft
BY ANDY PIKE. Oxford University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

On average, cities and towns account for over 20 percent of public spending in developed countries. In most places, much of the ordinary person's quality of life depends on investments in schools, police, fire departments, health care, and other services, as well as roads, public spaces, and other local infrastructure. In recent years, many countries have decentralized further, and studies generally show that the more decentralized countries are, the more satisfied their citizens are. Yet the United Kingdom seems an anomaly. Traditionally a very centralized country, it radically slashed subsidies in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, leaving localities to fund themselves through spending cuts, tax increases, privatization, or

financial manipulation. The results of British decentralization have been at best uneven, and at worst harmful. Funding gaps widened, services declined, and speculative financial schemes rushed to fill the breach. Inequality, both within and across jurisdictions, has grown markedly. Today, the British government faces a difficult dilemma: allow urban bankruptcies or reverse policy once again.

Fixing France: How to Repair a Broken Republic

BY NABILA RAMDANI.

PublicAffairs, 2023, 352 pp.

Ramdani, a French journalist who specializes in explaining her country to Anglo-Saxons, offers a lurid litany of well-known complaints about how the contemporary reality fails to match the country's revolutionary ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." French politics has become an elitist preserve of white men from the best schools. French economy and society are unequal and self-dealing. Cities institutionalize neocolonial segregation, with those of immigrant origin banished to dreary suburbs, hemmed in by brutal police and overseen by corrupt officials. Upward mobility is all but impossible, and access to education uneven. France can save itself only by setting aside its commitment to republican ideals and by adopting an explicitly Anglo-Saxon identity-based view and, with it, affirmative action. Perhaps. Yet one wonders if Ramdani would have reached a different conclusion had this screed been leavened by statistical data, which shows that

the 20 percent of the French with the lowest income enjoy more upward mobility than their counterparts in the United Kingdom or the United States (especially if they live in cities), the children of immigrants to France have greater chances to rise than their nonimmigrant counterparts, and France offers a level of universal social support exceeded only by a few of its neighbors.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

Contemporary Cuba: The Post-Castro Era

EDITED BY HOPE BASTIAN, PHILIP BRENNER, JOHN M. KIRK, AND

WILLIAM M. LEOGRANDE. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023, 388 pp.

Pounded mercilessly by U.S. sanctions and grappling with a contracting economy, severe shortages of food and fuel, and massive emigration, Cuban society is unraveling. In this indispensable compendium, 29 leading experts, including many young Cuban scholars, delve deeply into this precipitous disintegration. They blame the wizened, out-of-touch leadership of the Cuban Communist Party and an inefficient, self-serving bureaucracy for slow-walking structural reforms. Economists point to the inherent flaws of central planning and the government's reluctance to partner with an ambitious if incipient private sector. U.S. sanctions have also impeded independent entrepreneurship. Various chapters underscore the

transformative role of social media but also the government's apparent capacity to quash any organized dissent. The novelist Leonardo Padura Fuentes notes widespread "cynicism" and "resignation" at the sight of government officials "wearing fancy linen guayaberas." LeoGrande, a co-editor of the book, starkly warns that "the public's desperation and alienation" could very well reach "a tipping point." The volume avoids speculating on the possibility of a post-socialist transition, but the social scientist Ailynn Torres Santana observes that "the anticommunist and anti-leftist narrative in Cuba is clearly gaining ground."

Motherland: A Memoir

BY PAULA RAMÓN. TRANSLATED
BY JULIA SANCHES AND JENNIFER
SHYUE. Amazon Crossing, 2023, 251 pp.

This engrossing and disquieting memoir threads together the disruptions caused by the experimental socialism imposed on Venezuela by Hugo Chávez, who ruled the country from 1999 until his death in 2013, and the interminable tribulations of the author's disintegrating Venezuelan family. A journalist now residing in California, Ramón vividly portrays the frightening chaos that engulfs daily life in a collapsing country. As social systems crumble, interpersonal trust evaporates, giving rise to a crude, competitive Darwinism. Contrary to the state's official egalitarian ideology, Venezuela is deeply unequal now, favoring those with access to U.S. currency or to government distribution networks. Many disillusioned Venezuelans have

emigrated, but some retain their blind devotion to Chavismo. Venezuela offers a lesson to the world: beware of divisive populist demagogues who prey on deep-seated social resentments and misdirected patriotism and who peddle magical solutions. Also, excessively generous welfare states grounded in the exploitation of natural resources are economically unsustainable and politically explosive. Venezuela's ordeal reverberates in the author's argumentative family: its members' painful dependencies, moral shortcomings, and monetary mismanagement reflect their country's breakdowns.

The Tame and the Wild: People and Animals After 1492

BY MARCY NORTON. Harvard
University Press, 2024, 448 pp.

In her erudite interdisciplinary study, Norton draws attention to the important roles played by animals during the early contacts between European settlers and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Norton discards the traditional "conquistador" interpretation of one-way European domination in favor of a more complicated "entanglement" of cultures. Europeans introduced horses and large attack dogs to the Americas, as well as cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens that were cultivated in large-scale livestock husbandry, which dispossessed the indigenous of their lands. Indigenous cultures exported parrots and monkeys and the notion of cherished household pets to Europe. More important, perhaps, indigenous attitudes regarding the relationships

between humans and the natural world influenced European philosophies. Norton rejects the anthropocentrism that separates humans from animals in the biblical myths; rather, she prefers indigenous epistemological systems in which “animals and plants were relations, not resources.” More radically, she would replace the divisive European categories of “human” and “animal” with indigenous understandings of “wild and tame,” which honor the personhood of all creatures. Consequently, Norton decries contemporary agribusiness practices—but without suggesting how the planet might otherwise feed its eight billion human inhabitants.

The Bird Hotel: A Novel

BY JOYCE MAYNARD. Arcade Publishing, 2023, 432 pp.

This lyrical and finely crafted novel takes place on the shores of the legendary Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, where Maynard has owned a rustic retreat for many years. She confesses that many publishers rejected her novel, which follows a traumatized young American woman seeking redemption, because they feared it was risky for a white American author to write about indigenous people and themes. She proves herself fully capable of creating Maya characters with gentle empathy, neither sensationalizing nor patronizing them. In *The Bird Hotel*, the Guatemalan characters are mostly hard-working, skilled, resilient, and honest, devoted to family and church, but women get pregnant too young and too often, some mothers

abuse alcohol, and a few locals are treacherous scammers. Many youthful emigrants from Guatemala are not running from gang violence or military repression, as some pro-immigration activists in the United States insist they are, but rather leaving in search of economic opportunity. The indigenous communities view the tourists—a mixed bag of yoga aficionados, lost souls, honeymoon couples, and real estate speculators—with curiosity and as a crucial source of income; if the indigenous Guatemalans harbor deep-seated anti-white resentments, such tensions are not apparent in Maynard’s creative imagination.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

The Showman: Inside the Invasion That Shook the World and Made a Leader of Volodymyr Zelensky

BY SIMON SHUSTER. William Morrow, 2024, 384 pp.

Reporting for *Time*, Shuster began to cover Volodymyr Zelensky shortly before his election as president of Ukraine, in 2019, and therefore had unique access to him when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of the country in 2022. In this illuminating and gripping book, he lauds Zelensky’s amazing bravery and improbable transformation from showman to wartime national leader.

He appreciates Zelensky's political savvy in delegating military decisions to his generals and focusing on what he can do best: capturing the attention of the public, now on a global scale. Zelensky's messaging helped Ukraine dominate the news and convince Western leaders to deliver desperately needed military aid to his country. Yet Shuster's book is not just praise: he also points out Zelensky's intolerance of political competition. In 2021, the president shut down the TV channels controlled by his formidable Moscow-backed rival Viktor Medvedchuk. A few months into the war, Zelensky grew suspicious that the incredibly popular military commander Valery Zaluzhny was entertaining his own political ambitions. By late 2023, after the book had been written, tensions between Zelensky and Zaluzhny spilled out into the open.

Soviet Self-Hatred: The Secret Identities of Postsocialism in Contemporary Russia

BY ELIOT BORENSTEIN. Cornell University Press, 2023, 204 pp.

The trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of past Russian imperial glory, Borenstein writes, have generated in Russia a profound sense of displacement, which has given rise to new forms of identity. Based on his exceptional knowledge of contemporary Russian mass culture, Borenstein offers precise and insightful descriptions of new group identities that have emerged in film, fiction, commercials, and other areas of popular culture; these categories, he believes,

are key to understanding contemporary Russian politics and ideology. For example, Russians came up with the term *sovok*—close to the word “Soviet” but literally meaning “dustpan”—to describe somebody hopelessly stuck in Soviet ways, unable to catch up with modern, global, market-oriented Russians, an “embarrassing yokel” to be ridiculed by more sophisticated compatriots. Unlike the *sovok*, who is poor, “New Russians” are rich but they, too, are worthy of derision; their obsessive acquisitiveness combined with an utter lack of taste or culture makes them a laughingstock. A more recent term, *orc*, comes from the loathsome creatures in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Some Russians believe Tolkien conceived the orc as a hateful depiction of Russians. As Russia has grown increasingly unconcerned about pleasing the West, identifying with these ugly orcs has, in some circles, become a matter of perverse pride.

Putinism: Post-Soviet Russian Regime Ideology

BY MIKHAIL SUSLOV. Routledge, 2024, 300 pp.

Contrary to common assertions that President Vladimir Putin's Russia is a Stalinist, fascist, or nonideological state, Suslov argues that the regime boasts a distinct ideology of its own. He traces the development of “Putinism” over the president's more than 20 years in office by studying the work of Russian scholars, intellectuals, political figures, and think tanks. One of the key elements of Putinism is a peculiar kind of “identitarian” conservatism that emphasizes

the unchanging identity and values of the Russian people through the centuries while dismissing as unimportant the political upheavals and transformations of Russia's 1,000-year history. Other elements include populism and chronic anti-Westernism, as well as insistence on Russia's "genuine sovereignty": its political independence, the uniqueness of its historical experience, and its right to determine its destiny. Although he calls this set of ideas "Putinism," Suslov emphasizes that it is not "Putin's ideology" and suggests that these beliefs will likely outlive him and may even appeal to nations outside Russia who feel belittled by and disappointed in the West. Suslov claims that "Putinism" expresses the deep sentiments of many Russians, but his book has too little about ordinary people to illustrate this point.

A Nasty Little War: The Western Intervention Into the Russian Civil War
BY ANNA REID. Basic Books, 2024,
400 pp.

Reid writes about the ill-fated intervention of Western countries, primarily France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, in Russia following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Western forces joined the White Russians in their civil war against the Bolsheviks. Reid's lively narrative is based in large part on diaries, memoirs, and letters home written by Western soldiers, many of whom realized the futility of Western interference long before policymakers did. Support for the Whites was hard to portray as a righteous cause because of the

Whites' involvement in horrific Jewish pogroms. Their atrocities, such as the execution of civilians and prisoners, made them hardly different from the Reds. The rural population shared equally bad experiences of the Reds and the Whites, as both sides in the war confiscated the peasants' livestock and grain. The Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky's talent as a military organizer gradually turned the ragtag collection of volunteer Red militias into a regular conscript army, and by the fall of 1920, the Whites were thoroughly defeated and dislodged from most Russian territory. In their final act, Western interventionists helped evacuate the Whites from Crimea to Constantinople.

The Russia That We Have Lost: Pre-Soviet Past as Anti-Soviet Discourse
BY PAVEL KHAZANOV. University of Wisconsin Press, 2023, 208 pp.

Khazanov's detailed research focuses on the "anti-Soviet discourse on the pre-Soviet past." Based on the work of the late Soviet thinkers, writers, poets, and filmmakers, he discovers that, as early as the 1950s, following Stalin's death, Russian cultural elites sought to valorize, "rejoin," and even identify with imperial Russia. The very regime condemned by Marxist-Leninist ideology appeared to the Russian intelligentsia as a realm of *kulturnost* (culturedness), decency, and normality. As Khazanov emphasizes, the pre-Soviet past appealed to both liberal and conservative Soviet intellectuals. The author's attempt to project this pursuit of reconnecting with pre-Soviet

Russia into more recent times is less convincing. Unlike the Soviet state, which continued, until its collapse, to celebrate the overthrow of tsarist Russia, President Vladimir Putin proclaims the 1,000-year history of Russia as a continuum of impeccable greatness with the Soviet victory in World War II as the pinnacle of Russian glory. Besides, in today's Russia, the empire is embraced as a symbol of formidable force rather than cultural refinement.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Hydrocarbon Citizens: How Oil Transformed People and Politics in the Middle East

BY NIMAH MAZAHERI. Oxford University Press, 2022, 264 pp.

Analysts have long attributed the autocracy that prevails in Middle Eastern oil-producing countries to an “authoritarian bargain”: in return for generous government-sponsored benefits, the people acquiesce to autocracy. Mazaheri finds statistical evidence that this is indeed the case, drawing on data from surveys conducted by the research network Arab Barometer between 2006 and 2019 and two online surveys of citizens of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that he administered in 2018. More interesting, however, are the distinctions among his survey respondents. Both poorer people and better-educated people tend to be less

enthusiastic than others about government policy; older people and women are more appreciative of government largess. It is gratifying to see surveys and quantitative techniques deployed where only a few decades ago legal restrictions and poor data made such methods virtually impossible. One can quibble with this approach—Mazaheri's confidence in the reliability of an online survey might be misplaced when digital surveillance is widespread—but the author is admirably transparent in describing his methodology and analysis, and in doing so supports a nuanced version of the conventional wisdom.

25 Million Sparks: The Untold Story of Refugee Entrepreneurs

BY ANDREW LEON HANNA. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 232 pp.

Sweetly inspirational and aiming to counter the dismal and often dismissive portrayal of refugees around the world, Hanna tells the stories of the small businesses founded by three women in Zaatari, the large Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. After being chased out of Daraa, one of the earliest Syrian towns to revolt against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, the three find themselves housed in cramped trailers, grateful to be alive but disoriented, destitute, and worried about their families and their future. Soon enough, however, Asma opens an afterschool program, Malak opens an art gallery, and Yasmina restarts her bridal services business. They help support their families while finding

dignity and friendship in their newly productive lives. For Hanna, these women also serve as exemplars of the grit and determination of refugees around the world. These are feel-good stories; Hanna breezes over many of the challenges of life in the camp, including the troubles faced by people with disabilities or major medical problems. But the book accomplishes its purpose: it is a salutary reminder of the remarkable resilience of the human spirit under duress.

Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt

BY ANDREW SIMON. Stanford University Press, 2022, 304 pp.

First introduced in the 1960s, cassette tapes quickly outpaced vinyl records as the medium by which spoken words and music were recorded, distributed, and shared. Tapes flooded markets around the world, including Egypt's, in the 1970s. As Simon shows in a book organized to evoke a cassette—the two halves of the volume are called Side A and Side B—the impact was dramatic and long lasting. The arbiters of musical taste in places such as state radio and the Cairo Opera House lost control to small producers of popular “vulgar” music; official narratives such as the putative success of U.S. President Richard Nixon's visit to Cairo in 1974 were subverted by widely circulated recordings of rude (and very funny) songs about the occasion. Although cassettes are no longer widely available in Egypt, having been supplanted everywhere by digital technology, their legacy of

democratizing opinion and expression is still palpable.

Laughter in the Dark: Egypt to the Tune of Change

BY YASMINE EL RASHIDI.

Columbia Global Reports, 2023, 112 pp.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, a local hip-hop genre called *mahraganat* developed, appealing to—and expressing the frustrations of—the nearly two-thirds of 15-to-29-year-olds who are unemployed. Influenced by Western musical fashions, the performers were as varied as their American and European counterparts. Some seemed to bask in living as rich sellouts, and some insisted on presenting a political critique, but all reveled in being condemned by bewildered Egyptian parents. Over time, the musicians also drew the disapproving attention of a government that had limited tolerance for social criticism, much less political antagonism. Within a decade, *mahraganat* was outlawed, and El Rashidi bitterly describes a generation of young people increasingly resorting to aimless hooliganism, alcohol, and drugs to dull a sense of futility and disappointment.

Syria Divided: Patterns of Violence in a Complex Civil War

BY ORA SZEKELY. Columbia University Press, 2023, 296 pp.

In this fascinating examination of the battles that began in 2011 in Syria, Szekeley traces a proliferation of fighting

forces and factions, each with its own narrative justifying participation in the war. As the Syrian regime and its opponents were joined on the battlefield by jihadist groups and Kurdish nationalists, the opposition itself fragmented, and foreign patrons grew more influential. Soon, the array of possible enemies had grown exponentially, and the narratives about who was fighting whom and why grew increasingly convoluted. This chaos, she suggests, shaped the use of violence. No longer was bloodshed merely an instrument or consequence of combat; it also became a public relations device, deliberately drawing attention to partisan stories of valor and fortitude on the battlefield. The films of carefully staged beheadings that were produced and disseminated by the Islamic State had less polished counterparts in arcade-game-like battle videos issued by local factions and “made for tv” segments easily picked up by mainstream media. Perhaps most intriguing were the “thank you” messages sent to international donors by local proxy forces, showing the good uses to which their funds were put in videos of exploding buildings and battlefield carnage—violence carried out not so much to advance a political narrative as to bolster a pitch for further funds.

Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

Some People Need Killing: A Memoir of Murder in My Country

BY PATRICIA EVANGELISTA.

Random House, 2023, 448 pp.

Evangelista has written an intense, emotional lamentation for the thousands of suspected drug pushers, users, and innocent victims—including children—extrajudicially executed by corrupt cops and vigilantes during the rule of Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte from 2016 to 2022. She covered Duterte’s drug war at great personal risk as a reporter for the online news service *Rappler*, whose CEO, Maria Ressa, was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. Evangelista describes the killings in gruesome detail and portrays the grief of the victims’ families. In 2016, as he launched his bloody crackdown, Duterte derided his targets: “Are they human?” he asked. Evangelista shows that they were. Her larger theme is the complicity of the Filipino public in Duterte’s lawlessness. She describes the ecstasy with which crowds welcomed his profanity- and threat-laden speeches at election rallies and the complacency of citizens who were sure that other people, not they, were the targets of his wrath.

Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia

BY CAROLYN WOODS EISENBERG.
Oxford University Press, 2023,
632 pp.

Eisenberg recounts the last phase of the U.S. war in Vietnam with new details and caustic moral clarity, based on declassified papers and transcripts of taped conversations between President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. When Nixon took office in 1969, the antiwar movement led by students and disaffected veterans had created the political imperative to find a way out of Vietnam. Eisenberg writes that Nixon and Kissinger “were prone to self-deception.” Their “Vietnamization” policy sought to cover the drawdown of U.S. troops by handing battle duties to a South Vietnamese army that was not willing to fight. They engineered diplomatic breakthroughs with Beijing and Moscow that produced important results but no substantial help in pressuring Hanoi to negotiate. Nixon ordered the bombing of civilians in North Vietnam and neighboring Cambodia and Laos to force concessions from Hanoi, but the resulting tweaks to the peace deal reached in Paris in 1973 did not change the situation on the ground. It was a fig-leaf agreement that foreseeably led to the fall of the feckless South Vietnamese regime just two years later. Peace was achieved, but not, as the administration claimed, “with honor.”

Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century

BY JOYA CHATTERJI. Yale University Press, 2023, 880 pp.

This historiographic plum pudding is full of delights, ranging from memories of Chatterji’s childhood in a multigenerational compound in Bengal to a deep history of the violent politics of division that separated Pakistan from India in 1947 and Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. With empathy for all the thinkers, leaders, and common people caught up in the torturous events, Chatterji shares her encyclopedic knowledge of ideologies, laws, caste, class, cities, labor, cuisine, gender, sex work, rice cultivation, snake charmers, and even the best South Asian movies. She seeks to challenge the conventional view that “ignoble fratricidal strife” is the leitmotif of South Asian life. Instead, the book demonstrates how much South Asians have always had in common, even as their politicians tried to construct national identities by making enemies of each other’s peoples.

The Administrative Foundations of the Chinese Fiscal State

BY WEI CUI. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 304 pp.

The Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China

BY MINXIN PEI. Harvard University Press, 2024, 336 pp.

The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China

BY YA-WEN LEI. Princeton University Press, 2023, 416 pp.

Three books explore the nexus of technology, governance, and capitalism in China. The country raises most of its taxes not from individuals but from businesses, ranging from street vendors to large enterprises. In a path-breaking study, Cui shows that China's tax system does not depend on enterprises to calculate, report, and pay what they owe. Instead, the government maintains tens of thousands of neighborhood offices staffed by an army of local-level "revenue managers"—more than ten percent of China's civil service—who visit companies to make sure they register and pay. These modern-era tax farmers rarely bother to audit companies' books. Instead, in pursuit of bonuses for meeting revenue targets, they negotiate each business's payment in a process Cui calls "atomistic coercion." The system works: China's tax bureaucracy captures over 20 percent of the country's GDP.

The only Chinese bureaucracy with more staff than the tax system is the

public security apparatus, consisting of two security ministries, the People's Armed Police, militia, the armed forces, almost all other government agencies, and a web of informants. High-tech technologies such as facial recognition play a role, but Pei argues that the key to the system's effectiveness is human labor. Police stations maintain registers of every household; workplace and residential organizations compile information on members; and shop owners, hotels, and printing shops report on customers. As with the tax system, frontline bureaucrats apply the rules in flexible, personalized ways. The police tail, visit, warn, and "invite to tea" so-called "key individuals," such as religious believers, ethnic minorities, political dissidents, petitioners, ex-convicts, and the mentally ill. Work units put pressure on employees who seem likely to make trouble. Pei believes it is surveillance, and not the oft-cited factors of economic growth, nationalism, and the culture of deference, that is "the key to the survival" of the Chinese communist party-state. Such a robust system could fail only if the government's revenue managers failed to raise enough tax money to support it.

Lei shows that surveillance in China today goes beyond the security system. Almost every Chinese institution and individual citizen functions under the nonhuman eye of metrics and algorithms promoted by a technology-infatuated state and usually powered by the tools of the new digital economy. Local governments are tasked with dozens of mandates, assessed against a checklist. Officials

close factories that don't meet the standards for their technological modernization. Bureaucrats seeking promotion need to score at least 80 out of 100 points in a multi-item assessment matrix. Software engineers work overtime to meet performance indicators. Migrant workers accumulate points through skill certifications to qualify for urban resident status and get their children into public schools. Food delivery platform workers race to fulfill on-time targets. Such manifestations of "techno-development" and "scientific management" add to the stress of exam-based college admissions, high youth unemployment, and soaring real estate prices, making China perhaps the world's most intense pressure-cooker society.

Korea: A New History of South and North

BY VICTOR CHA AND RAMON PACHECO PARDO. Yale University Press, 2023, 288 pp.

The harder North and South Korea work to reunify, the more entrenched their separation seems to become. Pyongyang has allowed relations to thaw from time to time in order to receive economic help from the South but pulls back from any real opening, sensing an existential threat to its repressive dynastic regime. The government in Seoul oscillates between hair-trigger deterrence policies and conciliatory "sunshine" policies toward the North. But it has become a wealthy country in the meantime—and a global cultural powerhouse to boot—whose citizens have less and less interest in

integrating with the needy, puritanical North. Cha and Pacheco Pardo offer a sure-footed guide to the two countries' divergent paths and their fraught fraternal relationship. The stalemate is further cemented by the surrounding major powers, who created the division of the peninsula in the first place. The authors determine that unification would serve the interests of the United States and Japan. But Russia and China continue to shore up the North's struggling economy.

Africa

NICOLAS VAN DE WALLE

The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon

BY ADAM SHATZ. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024, 464 pp.

The anticolonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon's life was marked by continual transformation—and was far too short. (He died of leukemia in 1961 at the age of 36.) He moved from a conventional bourgeois upbringing in Martinique to fighting for the Free French Forces in World War II to studying psychiatry in France to being posted in a hospital in Algeria, where he became a fervent supporter of the Algerian revolution, for which he served as a roving ambassador and propagandist until his death. Shatz discusses all this ably, but the book's real triumph is to link Fanon's life to the development of his ideas. Shatz describes in vivid strokes the ferment of the time, from Fanon's encounter

with “negritude”—the affirmation of an essential Black and African culture and identity—in Martinique to his dabbling in the Parisian existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Fanon also sought to adapt his psychiatry practice to address the cruelties of colonialism. Shatz shows well how Fanon’s ideas about race relations, colonialism, and the purpose of violence, for which he now enjoys enormous influence, came directly from these experiences.

War and Society in Colonial Zambia, 1939–1953

BY ALFRED TEMBO. Ohio University Press, 2021, 256 pp.

Making excellent use of neglected Zambian archives, Tembo surveys the impact of World War II on colonial Zambia, or Northern Rhodesia, as it was then called. Readers will find much to appreciate in this carefully argued account, full of interesting information. As the fourth-largest copper producer in the world, the colony would play a substantial role in supporting the Allied war effort. The war never came to Northern Rhodesia, but it shaped the colony, imposing an array of economic restrictions, price controls, and rationing while producing a burgeoning black market and inflationary pressures. The Northern Rhodesian Regiment would fight in East Africa and Asia, and many of its members struggled to reintegrate into Zambian society after the war. Tembo finds little evidence for the conventional wisdom that many veterans came back from the war politicized and ready to contribute to the fledgling independence effort.

That said, the colony could not meet their heightened expectations, and the colonial state treated them much worse than it did the returning white veterans.

Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of United Nations Peace Operations in Africa

BY STIAN KJEKSRUD. Oxford University Press, 2023, 240 pp.

Kjeksrud explores whether UN peacekeeping forces have effectively protected civilians in Africa. He draws from a substantial data set of 200 operations across ten UN peacekeeping missions from 1999 to 2017, to which he appends more focused case studies of operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. UN troops have long had the reputation of being unwilling to engage in combat, but he finds that in Africa they have protected civilians effectively on 76 occasions during the period of his study (to be sure, in 83 out of 200 cases, the UN peacekeeping force was not able to protect a significant share of a local population). Counterintuitively, the size of the operation does not seem to matter—small detachments of peacekeepers can be more successful in protecting civilians than large ones. More important, peacekeeping forces need to be able to “match,” to use his word, the resources and strategic capabilities of the perpetrators of violence. UN forces are thus most effective in preparing to defend civilian populations when they understand the motivations of perpetrators who want to attack civilians.

Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence

BY MICHAEL WAHMAN. Oxford University Press, 2024, 272 pp.

As African elections have become more competitive, the amount of violence associated with them has increased. Political parties maintain their own militias or keep ties to gangs of young men who, come election time, intimidate and attack opponents and voters. Based on recent electoral data from Malawi and Zambia, Wahman observes that much of this violence is regional in nature; parties in both countries are often loose coalitions of local strongmen, each seeking to enforce control over an area. In effect, electoral violence is a form of turf war, aimed at cementing local party strongholds. The more competitive the election, the more violence boils over, with strongholds under greater threat. As a result, Wahman suggests, democracy at the local level withers as electoral violence serves to encourage a local brand of authoritarianism. Wahman develops these arguments insightfully and shows later in the book that they hold true for other countries beyond the scope of his study.

Belonging, Identity, and Conflict in the Central African Republic

BY GINO VLAVONOU. University of Wisconsin Press, 2023, 256 pp.

In the last century or so, many people have migrated within West African countries in search of economic opportunities or greater security. As land pressures have increased over time, these movements have sparked disputes over who has the right to the land. In countries such as Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire, groups have appealed to the idea of "autochthony"—their native belonging to a particular area—to claim an exclusive right to the land, a claim that immigrants, some of whom have been in the same area for decades, have contested. Vlavonou's well-researched study focuses on the struggles related to autochthony in the Central African Republic, where non-Muslim groups claim to be the real natives and have tried to deny that status to Muslim groups, leading to bloody conflict. Although Islam has been spreading from the north of the continent progressively southward over centuries, Vlavonou convincingly argues that many Muslim groups have a legitimate claim to indigeneity. Interestingly, he notes that the country's conflicts have really focused not on land but on identity, with different political elites and warlords all too willing to weaponize autochthony to assert their power. 🌍

Letters to the Editor

New Tech, Old Tactic

To the Editor:

In “ *Hamas’s Asymmetric Advantage*” (January/February 2024), Audrey Kurth Cronin writes that “technology has shrunk the gap between states and terrorists,” allowing nonstate groups to mimic countries’ military operations. She invokes Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel as a case in point. Cronin explains how Hamas used tunnels to evade Israel’s communication systems, commercial drones to overwhelm its defenses, and social media to win global sympathy. She is right that Hamas’s use of cheap technologies provoked Israel to respond in a way that has been widely criticized as disproportionate and unnecessary. But this does not mean that Hamas is catching up with Israel militarily.

Consider commercial drones. Hamas used them to surveil and drop grenades on Israeli defenses and communication towers. But Hamas’s use of drones remains amateurish. Professional militaries link tactical actions to strategic objectives that serve broader political aims. Unlike a professional military’s operations, Hamas’s drone operations were decoupled from a broader plan. Hamas, for example, did not use its

small drone fleet to locate, track, and engage Israeli soldiers responding to the group’s invasion on a large scale. Had Hamas mimicked a military in a meaningful way, pursuing its goal to eradicate Israel, it would have used drone attacks to march to Jerusalem and plant its flag there. At most, Hamas’s drone attacks capitalized on surprise to momentarily disrupt Israel’s situational awareness and strike fear in the hearts of Israelis.

Although Hamas has used technology to commit violence in new ways, it does not have a decisive military advantage in its war with Israel. Cronin concedes as much, noting that Israel has “incomparable conventional military superiority to Hamas.” Hamas is not behaving like a military. It just used new technology for the age-old tactic of terrorism.

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Cronin replies:

Although I thank Lushenko and Carter for their thoughtful response, it does not engage my argument. My article emphasizes Hamas’s asymmetric power in a strategic sense,

not just a military one. I wrote that Hamas does not endeavor to match the Israeli military directly because that would be a self-defeating strategy for any terrorist group. And if Hamas had used drone attacks “to march to Jerusalem and plant its flag there,” the group would have triggered a massive U.S. military intervention.

Those who pursue the “age-old tactic of terrorism” never seek to go toe to toe with state military power. Terrorist groups win by leveraging states’ own strengths against them, as Hamas has effectively done with Israel. That’s a rather strategic approach, as might be taught (and I did teach, for years) at professional military schools, including the U.S. National War College.

Scared Strait

To the Editor:

In “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence” (January/February 2024), Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas Christensen argue that Washington and Taiwan are not doing enough to assure Beijing of their intentions, in the process undermining deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. We agree that deterrence requires threats as well as assurances, and we support their call for strengthening Taiwanese defenses while pursuing increased cross-strait dialogue.

But the authors make several errors that together generate counterproductive policy recommendations. The first and most important error is that they claim that China, the United States, and Taiwan are caught in a so-called security dilemma. Such a scenario transpires

when a defensive-minded state tries to strengthen its own security in a way that inadvertently makes another state feel less secure. That dynamic results in an escalating spiral that leaves both sides primed for war.

China and the United States may be trapped in such a vicious cycle, but China and Taiwan certainly are not. Beijing’s intentions, particularly under its leader, Xi Jinping, are clear and unequivocal: China wants to assert political control over Taiwan. Offering concessions to a determined revisionist such as Beijing will only invite further aggression. Instead, clear redlines reinforced by credible threats of unacceptable pain are needed. Taiwan does not need to assure China. It needs to show strength.

The authors also draw a false equivalence. They make the common but illogical suggestion that political moves by the United States and Taiwan—including visits by senior U.S. officials to Taiwan and rhetorical gaffes by U.S. officials who accidentally describe Taiwan as a country—are somehow as damaging to cross-strait peace as Chinese belligerence. In truth, Beijing is the actor threatening and carrying out military provocations, including large-scale offensive exercises and simulations of blockades, as well as massive air and naval intrusions.

These actions undermine and violate the agreements that frame the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Implying that the United States and Taiwan must shoulder the onus of assurance serves only to legitimize China’s preferred narrative that Beijing is blameless while others are responsible for damaging cross-strait relations. It also loses the plot. The main issue is not errant American or

Taiwanese rhetoric but the mounting threat of very real Chinese violence.

Moreover, Washington has already tried an “assurance first” approach. Decades of economic, political, and even security engagement from the 1990s on failed to mollify Chinese concerns about Taiwan. Instead, these policies set the stage for a militarily powerful China that increasingly violates international security norms.

Of the three parties, China is the least constrained and the most able to renege on its commitments, and it has made the fewest binding agreements. It is therefore incumbent on Beijing to present assurances that it will follow the rules. Without those assurances, the appropriate response is punishment or ostracization. Washington could support more bilateral military coordination with Taiwan, as well as between Taiwan and other regional partners; push for further internationalization of cross-strait security issues; and further clarify that the United States demands a peaceful resolution to Taiwan’s status. Conditional, credible consequences are now essential to encouraging a less bellicose Chinese policy.

The authors’ analytic errors matter: misdiagnosing the problem can lead to inappropriate, perhaps even counterproductive, solutions. In this case, providing more assurances will simply embolden Beijing to continue its threatening behavior.

U.S. policy to date has helped avert a cross-strait conflict and by this measure is a success. But the foundations of Washington’s long-standing approach to cross-strait relations are crumbling in the face of growing Chinese military power and aggression. As a result,

Washington can no longer rely on its existing policies in the hopes that what worked in the past will yield success in the future.

Where there is a security dilemma, assurances can indeed help to assuage tensions while reinforcing deterrence. But when deterrence is needed against a determined and capable rival, assurances that are not reciprocated can quickly become concessions. In the process, a policy intended to de-escalate will serve only to appease.

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Glaser, Chen Weiss, and Christensen reply: Contrary to what Kuo, Hunzeker, and Christopher argue, we did not downplay the increasing threat that Beijing poses to Taiwan. Nor did we advocate an “assurance first” strategy that offers “concessions” to appease Beijing or draw a “false equivalence” in sketching the dangers posed by Beijing, Washington, and Taipei.

In fact, we opened our essay by defining the core problem in the region as Beijing’s increasing threat to Taiwan, and we underlined the importance of strengthening the United States’ and Taiwan’s military posture. We and others have offered such prescriptions in more detail elsewhere. Our article focused on the assurances that must

accompany military enhancements to make deterrence more effective. To label ours an “assurance first” approach is incorrect.

We call for no concessions and instead counsel Washington to bolster the credibility of its long-standing diplomatic positions on relations across the Taiwan Strait. Kuo, Hunzeker, and Christopher seem to think these approaches were either ill advised or are now outdated. In fact, U.S. policy has been remarkably successful at keeping the peace for decades; the new military measures we think are needed for deterrence will be less effective if Beijing believes they are aimed at buttressing a unilateral assertion of independence by Taiwan or restoring formal diplomatic relations or even an alliance between the island and the United States. A moderate posture on cross-strait relations is also essential to allow the United States to establish a more dispersed and resilient military posture in the region. Asian allies and partners, such as Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, will likely be less willing to grant the U.S. military the increased access it needs if Washington or Taipei, rather than Beijing, are seen as undermining stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Kuo, Hunzeker, and Christopher insist that we mischaracterize the situation faced by China, Taiwan, and the United States as a security dilemma.

But deterrent threats always require accompanying assurances, even with actors such as China that threaten to revise the status quo by force, since they, too, can attack out of fear. After all, security dilemmas do not exist in truly friendly, trusting relationships. The United States never needs to assure Canada because it has no reason to threaten Canada.

Our critics do not articulate how U.S. policies should change to ensure effective deterrence. Perhaps they believe the United States should make a formal defense commitment to Taiwan or recognize it diplomatically to prevent conflict. They may believe that Taiwan can safely assert permanent sovereign independence as long as there is sufficient military might in place to dissuade Beijing from attacking. If so, they are hardly alone, but we strongly disagree.

FOR THE RECORD

Because of an editing error, “The Case for Conservative Internationalism” (January/February 2024) incorrectly identified the state that Nikki Haley led; she is a former governor of South Carolina, not North Carolina.

“The Crisis of African Democracy” (January/February 2024) mischaracterized an index published by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. It is released biennially, not annually. 🌐

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July/August 1998

“The Politics of Paralysis II: Peace Now or Hamas Later”

KHALIL SHIKAKI

Five years after Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the first Oslo accord, an agreement that was meant to mark the beginning of the end of decades of conflict, the Palestinian scholar Khalil Shikaki offered a warning: with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government in power and the Palestinian Authority (PA), led by Yasir Arafat, riddled with corruption, Islamist groups were poised to gain power if the peace process failed to deliver two states soon.

If the talks with Israel remain stalemated and the PA remains corrupt, disdainful of civil liberties, and mismanaged, backing for Oslo will continue to dwindle. Arafat's presence at the helm minimizes the risk of such reversals. But if the deadlock of the peace process is coupled with a Palestinian failure at the task of national reconstruction and, crucially, Arafat's departure from the scene, any remaining Palestinian constituency for the peace process will quickly evaporate. The countdown to violent confrontations and regional instability would begin. Inevitably, the young and educated—the most active, idealistic, disillusioned, and uncompromising, and the least burdened with personal responsibilities—would ignite any future violent outbreak. The next few years are crucial.

Above all, one should not write Hamas off. . . . In the spring of 1997, some senior Palestinian officials were wary of holding local elections for fear that the Islamists might win. A memorandum written to Arafat in April 1997 by a senior security official warned of a new Hamas strategy of winning control of local councils and municipalities—the same plan the Islamists used in Algeria. The memorandum cautions that this would be the first step toward the creation of a parallel authority that would eventually usurp the PA. Arafat faces a painful dilemma: if



he limits democracy to thwart Islamist infiltration into local government, he will further alienate one of the peace process' key constituencies, the national bourgeoisie. But the more open Palestinian politics are, the more susceptible they are to permeation by Hamas. 🌐