

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023



JAKE SULLIVAN

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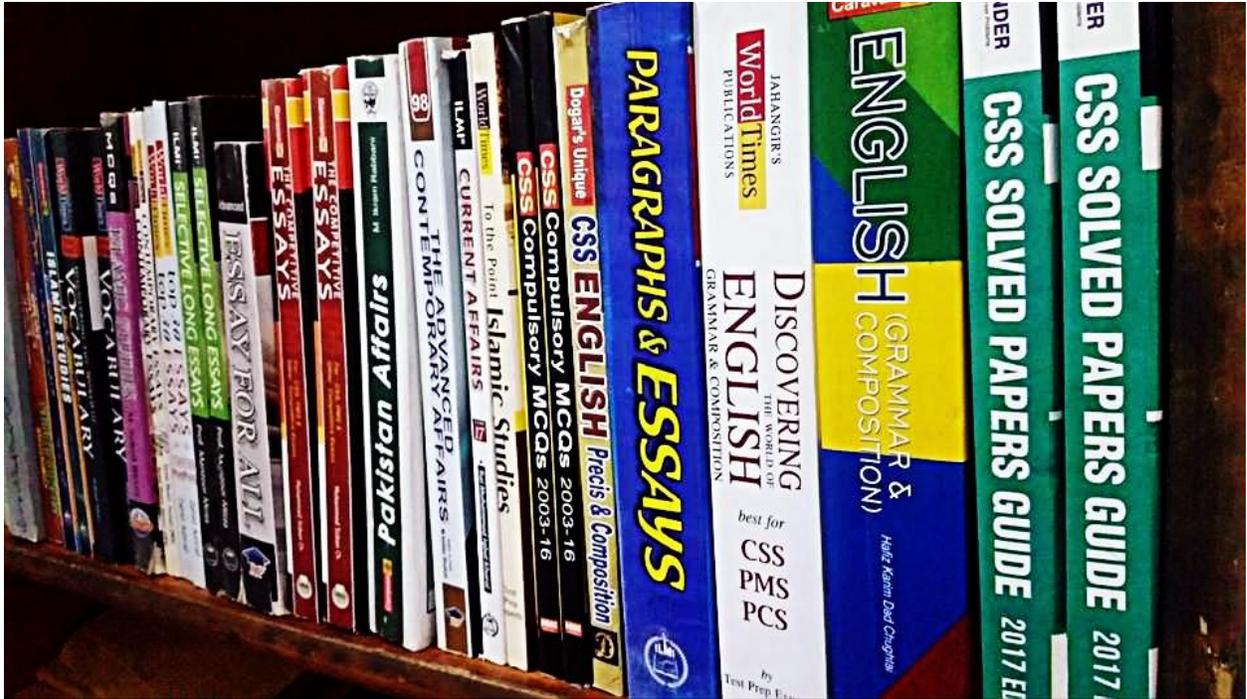
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# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Sadly, we note the death of James F. Hoge, Jr., who edited *Foreign Affairs* from 1992 to 2010. As the magazine's fifth editor, Hoge doubled circulation, increased publication frequency to six times a year, launched our website, and published many of our most influential articles. He deserves enormous credit for setting *Foreign Affairs* on its current course and ensuring its success into its second century.

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"Foreign Affairs... will tolerate wide differences of opinion. Its articles will not represent any consensus of beliefs. What is demanded of them is that they shall be competent and well informed, representing honest opinions seriously held and convincingly expressed... It does not accept responsibility for the views expressed in any article, signed or unsigned, which appear in its pages. What it does accept is the responsibility for giving them a chance to appear there."

Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor  
Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

# The Sources of American Power

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## A Foreign Policy for a Changed World

JAKE SULLIVAN

**N**othing in world politics is inevitable. The underlying elements of national power, such as demography, geography, and natural resources, matter, but history shows that these are not enough to determine which countries will shape the future. It is the strategic decisions countries make that matter most—how they organize themselves internally, what they invest in, whom they choose to align with and who wants to align with them, which wars they fight, which they deter, and which they avoid.

When President Joe Biden took office, he recognized that U.S. foreign policy is at an inflection point, where the decisions Americans make now will have an outsize impact on the future. The United States' underlying strengths are vast, both in absolute terms and relative to other countries. The United States has a growing population, abundant resources, and an open society that attracts talent and investment and spurs innovation and reinvention. Americans should be optimistic about the future.

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JAKE SULLIVAN is U.S. National Security Adviser.

But U.S. foreign policy was developed in an era that is fast becoming a memory, and the question now is whether the country can adjust to the main challenge it faces: competition in an age of interdependence.

The post–Cold War era was a period of great change, but the common thread throughout the 1990s and the years after 9/11 was the absence of intense great-power competition. This was mainly the result of the United States’ military and economic preeminence, although it was widely interpreted as evidence that the world agreed on the basic

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Major public investments are an essential component of foreign policy.

direction of the international order. That post–Cold War era is now definitively over. Strategic competition has intensified and now touches almost every aspect of international politics, not just the military domain. It is complicating the global economy. It is changing how countries deal with shared problems such as climate change and pandemics. And it is posing fundamental questions about what comes next.

Old assumptions and structures must be adapted to meet the challenges the United States will face between now and 2050. In the previous era, there was reluctance to tackle clear market failures that threatened the resilience of the U.S. economy. Since the U.S. military had no peer, and as a response to 9/11, Washington focused on nonstate actors and rogue nations. It did not focus on improving its strategic position and preparing for a new era in which competitors would seek to replicate its military advantages, since that was not the world it faced at the time. Officials also largely assumed that the world would coalesce to tackle common crises, as it did in 2008 with the financial crisis, rather than fragment, as it would do in the face of a once-in-a-century pandemic. Washington too often treated international institutions as set in stone without addressing the ways in which they were exclusive and did not represent the broader international community.

The overall effect was that although the United States remained the world’s preeminent power, some of its most vital muscles atrophied. On top of this, with the election of Donald Trump, the United States had a president who believed that its alliances were a form of geopolitical welfare. The steps he took that damaged those alliances were celebrated by Beijing and Moscow, which correctly saw U.S. alliances as a source of American strength rather than as a liability. Instead of acting to shape the international order, Trump pulled back from it.

This is what President Biden was faced with when he took office. He was determined not just to repair the immediate damage to the United States' alliances and its leadership of the free world but also to pursue the long-term project of modernizing U.S. foreign policy for the challenges of today. This task was brought into stark relief by Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as well as by China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait.

The essence of President Biden's foreign policy is to lay a new foundation of American strength so that the country is best positioned to shape the new era in a way that protects its interests and values and advances the common good. The country's future will be determined by two things: whether it can sustain its core advantages in geopolitical competition and whether it can rally the world to address transnational challenges from climate change and global health to food security and inclusive economic growth.

At a fundamental level, this requires changing the way the United States thinks about power. This administration came to office believing that international power depends on a strong domestic economy and that the strength of the economy is measured not just by its size or efficiency but also by the degree to which it works for all Americans and is free of dangerous dependencies. We understood that American power also rests on its alliances but that these relationships, many of which date back more than seven decades, had to be updated and energized for the challenges of today. We realized that the United States is stronger when its partners are, too, and so we are committed to delivering a better value proposition globally to help countries solve pressing problems that no one country can solve on its own. And we recognized that Washington could no longer afford an undisciplined approach to the use of military force, even as we have mobilized a massive effort to defend Ukraine and stop Russian aggression. The Biden administration understands the new realities of power. And that is why we will leave America stronger than we found it.

#### THE HOME FRONT

After the Cold War, the United States underweighted the importance of investing in economic vibrancy at home. In the decades following World War II, the country had pursued a policy of bold public investment, including in R & D and in strategic sectors. That strategy underpinned its economic success, but over time, the United States

moved away from it. The U.S. government designed trade policies and a tax code that placed insufficient focus on both American workers and the planet. In the exuberance at “the end of history,” many observers asserted that geopolitical rivalries would give way to economic integration, and most believed that new countries brought into the international economic system would adjust their policies to play by the rules. As a result, the U.S. economy developed worrying vulnerabilities. While at an aggregate level it thrived, under the surface, whole communities were hollowed out. The United States ceded the lead in critical manufacturing sectors. It failed to make the necessary investments in its infrastructure. And the middle class took a hit.

President Biden has prioritized investing in innovation and industrial strength at home—what has become known as “Bidenomics.” These public investments are not about picking winners and losers or bringing globalization to an end. They enable rather than replace private investment. And they enhance the United States’ capacity to deliver inclusive growth, build resilience, and protect national security.

The Biden administration has enacted the most far-reaching new investments in decades, including the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act. We are promoting new breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, clean energy, and semiconductors while protecting the United States’ advantages and security through new export controls and investment rules, in partnership with allies. These policies have made a difference. Large-scale investments in semiconductor and clean energy production are up 20-fold since 2019. We now estimate that public and private investment in these sectors will total \$3.5 trillion over the next decade. And construction spending on manufacturing has doubled since the end of 2021.

In recent decades, the United States’ supply chains for critical minerals had become heavily dependent on unpredictable overseas markets, many of which are dominated by China. This is why the administration is working to build resilient, durable supply chains with partners and allies in vital sectors—including semiconductors, medicine and biotechnology, critical minerals, and batteries—so that the United States is not vulnerable to price or supply disruptions. Our approach encompasses minerals that are important to all aspects of national security, understanding that the communications, energy, and computing sectors are as essential as the traditional defense sector. All this has put the

United States in a position to better absorb attempts by external powers to limit American access to critical inputs.

When this administration took office, we found that although the U.S. military is the strongest in the world, its industrial base suffered from a series of unaddressed vulnerabilities. After years of underinvestment, an aging workforce, and supply chain disruptions, important defense sectors had become weaker and less dynamic. The Biden administration is rebuilding those sectors, doing everything from investing in the submarine industrial base to producing more critical munitions so that the United States can make what is necessary to sustain deterrence in competitive regions. We are investing in the U.S. nuclear deterrent to ensure its continued effectiveness as competitors build up their arsenals while signaling openness to future arms control negotiations if competitors are interested. We are also partnering with the most innovative labs and companies to ensure that the United States' superior conventional capabilities take advantage of the latest technologies.

Future administrations may differ from ours on the details of how to harness the domestic sources of national strength. That is a legitimate topic for debate. But in a more competitive world, there can be no doubt that Washington needs to break down the barrier between domestic and foreign policy and that major public investments are an essential component of foreign policy. President Dwight Eisenhower did this in the 1950s. We are doing it again today, but in partnership with the private sector, in coordination with allies, and with a focus on today's cutting-edge technologies.

#### ALL TOGETHER NOW

The United States' alliances and partnerships with other democracies have been its greatest international advantage. They helped create a freer and more stable world. They helped deter aggression or reverse it. And they meant that Washington never had to go it alone. But these alliances were built for a different era. In recent years, the United States was underutilizing or even undermining them.

President Biden was clear from the moment he took office about the importance he attached to U.S. alliances, especially given his predecessor's skepticism of them. But he understood that even those who supported these alliances over the past three decades often overlooked the need to modernize them for competition in an age of interdependence. Accordingly, we have strengthened these alliances and partnerships in material

ways that improve the United States' strategic position and its ability to deal with shared challenges. For example, we have mobilized a global coalition of countries to support Ukraine as it defends itself against an unprovoked war of aggression and to impose costs on Russia. NATO has expanded to include Finland, soon to be followed by Sweden—two historically nonaligned nations. NATO has also adjusted its posture on its eastern flank, deployed a capability to respond to cyberattacks against its members, and invested in its air and missile defenses. And the United States and the EU have dramatically deepened cooperation on economics, energy, technology, and national security.

We are doing something similar in Asia. In August, we held a historic summit at Camp David that cemented a new era of trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea while bringing the United States' bilateral alliances with those countries to new heights. In the face of North Korea's dangerous and illicit nuclear and missile programs, we are working to ensure that the United States' extended deterrence is stronger than ever so that the region remains peaceful and stable. That is why we concluded the Washington Declaration with South Korea and why we're advancing extended trilateral deterrence discussions with Japan, as well.

Through AUKUS—the trilateral security partnership among the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom—we have integrated the three countries' defense industrial bases to produce conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines and increase cooperation on advanced capabilities such as artificial intelligence, autonomous platforms, and electronic warfare. Access to new sites through a defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines strengthens the United States' strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. In September, President Biden traveled to Hanoi to announce that the United States and Vietnam were elevating their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The Quad, which brings together the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, has unleashed new forms of regional cooperation on technology, climate, health, and maritime security. We are also investing in a twenty-first-century partnership between the United States and India—for example, with the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology. And through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, we are deepening trade relationships and negotiating first-of-their-kind agreements on supply chain resilience, the clean energy economy, and anticorruption and tax cooperation with 13 diverse partners in the region.

The administration is strengthening U.S. partnerships outside Asia and across traditional regional seams. Last December, at the first U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit since 2014, the United States made a series of historic commitments, including supporting the African Union's membership in the G-20 and signing a memorandum of understanding with the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat, an effort that would create a combined continent-wide market of 1.3 billion people and \$3.4 trillion. Earlier in 2022, we galvanized hemispheric action on migration through the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection and launched the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, an initiative to drive the Western Hemisphere's economic recovery. We also stood up a new coalition with India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates, known as I2U2. It brings together South Asia, the Middle East, and the United States through joint initiatives on water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security. This September, the United States joined with 31 other countries across North America, South America, Africa, and Europe to create the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation to invest in science and technology, promote the sustainable use of the ocean, and stop climate change. We have formed a new global cyber-partnership, bringing together 47 countries and international organizations to counter the scourge of ransomware.

These are not isolated efforts. They are part of a self-reinforcing latticework of cooperation. The United States' closest partners are fellow democracies, and we will work vigorously to defend democracy across the globe. The Summit for Democracy, which the president first convened in 2021, has created an institutional basis for deepening democracy and advancing governance, anticorruption, and human rights—and getting fellow democracies to own the agenda alongside Washington. But the range of countries supporting Washington's vision of a free, open, prosperous, and secure world is broad and powerful, and it includes those with diverse political systems. We will work with any country prepared to stand up for the principles of the UN Charter even as we shore up transparent and accountable governance and support democratic reformers and human rights defenders.

We are also growing the connective tissue between U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe. The United States is stronger in each region because of its alliances in the other. Allies in the Indo-Pacific are staunch supporters of Ukraine, while allies in Europe are helping the United States support peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

The president's efforts to strengthen alliances are also contributing to the greatest amount of burden sharing in decades. The United States is asking its allies to step up while also offering more itself. Roughly 20 NATO countries are on track to meet the target of spending two percent of their GDPs on defense in 2024, up from just seven countries in 2022. Japan has promised to double its defense budget and is purchasing U.S.-made Tomahawk missiles, which will enhance its deterrence of nuclear-armed competitors in the region. As part of AUKUS, Australia is making the biggest single investment in defense capability in its history while also investing in the U.S. defense industrial base. Germany has become the third-largest supplier of weapons to Ukraine and is weaning itself off Russian energy.

#### A BETTER DEAL

The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that if the United States is unwilling to lead efforts to solve global problems, no one else will step into the breach. In 2020, many world leaders were barely on speaking terms. The G-7 struggled to coalesce when COVID-19 struck. Instead of coordinating closely, countries undertook disparate efforts that made the pandemic more severe than it might otherwise have been. President Biden and his team have always believed that the United States has a crucial role to play in spurring international cooperation, whether on the global economy, health, development, or the environment. But the shocking experience of a global crisis without global leadership seared this into the president's worldview. As we looked at the daunting array of global challenges, we realized that we would not just have to restore U.S. leadership; we would also need to up our game and offer the world, especially the global South, a better value proposition.

Much of the world is not preoccupied with geopolitical contests; most countries want to know that they have partners that can help them address the problems they confront, some of which feel existential. For these countries, the complaint is not that there is too much America but too little. Yes, they say, we see the pitfalls of getting closer to major authoritarian powers, but where is your alternative? President Biden understands this. Where the United States was absent, it is now competitive. Where it was competitive, it is now leading with urgency and purpose. And it is doing that in partnership with other countries, figuring out how to solve pressing problems together.

The United States has maintained its long-standing leadership on global development, sustained its vital investments in health and food security, and remained the leading provider of humanitarian assistance and emergency food aid at a time of unprecedented global need. President Biden is now leading a global effort to raise ambitions even higher. The United States is placing priority on driving progress toward the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It is scaling up multilateral development banks, mobilizing the private sector, and helping countries unlock domestic capital. As a cornerstone of this effort, the administration is modernizing the World Bank so it can address today's challenges with sufficient speed and scale, and we are working with partners to significantly increase the bank's financing, including to low- and middle-income countries. We are also pressing for solutions to help vulnerable countries quickly and transparently address unsustainable debt, freeing up resources for them to invest in their futures rather than make backbreaking debt payments.

In recent years, China's Belt and Road Initiative was dominant, and the United States lagged behind in large-scale infrastructure investment in developing countries. Now, the United States is mobilizing hundreds of billions of dollars in capital through the G-7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment to support physical, digital, clean-energy, and health infrastructure across developing countries.

The United States has led the way on global health. It is investing more than ever to end epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria as public health threats by 2030. It donated almost 700 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to more than 115 countries and nearly half of all global pandemic response funds, and it remains vigilant about emerging threats. It is helping 50 countries prepare, prevent, and respond to the next health emergency. Most people likely have not heard about the recent outbreaks of Marburg virus disease or Ebola, because we learned the lessons of the 2014 West African Ebola epidemic and responded before outbreaks in East, Central, and West Africa went global.

No country can offer a credible value proposition to the world if it is not serious about climate change. The Biden administration inherited a massive gap between ambition and reality when it comes to carbon mitigation. The United States is now driving the global deployment of clean energy technology at scale. For the first time, the country will meet its national commitment under the Paris agreement to reduce net

greenhouse gas emissions and the global commitment to mobilize \$100 billion a year for developing countries to deal with climate change. It has launched joint initiatives such as the Just Energy Transition Partnership with Indonesia, which will accelerate that country's power sector transition with support from public and private sources.

New fit-for-purpose partnerships are not meant to replace existing international institutions. The Biden administration is working to reinforce and reinvigorate those institutions, updating them for the world we face today. In addition to modernizing the World Bank, the president has also proposed giving developing countries a greater say at the International Monetary Fund. The administration will continue to try to reform the World Trade Organization so it can drive the clean energy transition, protect workers, and promote inclusive and sustainable growth while continuing to uphold competition, openness, transparency, and the rule of law. The president has called for far-reaching reforms to the UN Security Council to expand the number of members, both permanent and nonpermanent, and make it more effective and representative.

The president also knows that countries need to be able to cooperate on challenges that were unfathomable not that long ago. That need is particularly urgent with respect to artificial intelligence. This is why we brought together the leading U.S. businesses responsible for AI innovation to make a series of voluntary commitments to develop AI in ways that are safe, secure, and transparent. It is why the U.S. government itself has made commitments to this end, issuing in February a declaration on the responsible military use of AI. And it is why we are building on these initiatives by working with U.S. allies, partners, and other countries to develop strong rules and principles to govern AI.

Delivering a better value proposition is a work in progress, but it is a vital pillar of a new foundation of American strength. Not only is it the right thing to do; it also serves U.S. interests. Helping other countries get stronger makes America stronger and more secure. It creates new partners and better friends. We will continue to build America's affirmative offering to the world. It is absolutely necessary if the United States is to win the competition to shape the future of the international order so that it is free, open, prosperous, and secure.

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For most countries,  
the complaint is  
not that there is  
too much America  
but too little.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

In the 1990s, U.S. defense policy was dominated by questions about whether and how to intervene in war-torn countries to prevent mass atrocities. After 9/11, the United States shifted its focus to terrorist groups. The risk of great-power conflict appeared remote. That began to change with Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, as well as with China's breakneck military modernization and its growing military provocations in the East China and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait. But America's priorities had not adapted fast enough to the challenges of deterring great-power aggression and responding once it occurred.

President Biden was determined to adapt. He ended U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history, and freed the United States from sustaining military forces in active hostilities for the first time in two decades. This transition was unquestionably painful—especially for the people of Afghanistan and for the U.S. troops and other personnel who served there. But it was necessary for preparing the U.S. military for the challenges ahead. One of those challenges came even more quickly than we had anticipated, with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. If the United States were still fighting in Afghanistan, it is highly likely that Russia would be doing everything it could right now to help the Taliban pin Washington down there, preventing it from focusing its attention on helping Ukraine.

Even as our priorities shift away from major military interventions, we remain ready to deal with the enduring threat of international terrorism. We have acted over the horizon in Afghanistan—most notably with the operation that killed the head of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri—and we have taken other terrorist targets off the battlefield in Somalia, Syria, and elsewhere. We will continue to do so. But we will also avoid the protracted forever wars that can tie down U.S. forces and that do little to actually reduce the threats to the United States.

With respect to the Middle East more generally, the president inherited a region that was highly pressurized. The war in Yemen was escalating, and U.S. troops were under regular attack in Iraq and Syria. In September 2020, two months before the U.S. presidential election, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threatened to shut down the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, having already shuttered the U.S. consulate in Basra. Shortly thereafter, the embassy suffered the largest rocket attack on the capital's Green Zone in over a decade. Such attacks, at least for now, have largely stopped. In October, the war in Yemen, a

driver of regional instability and immense human suffering, marked its 18th month of a truce, thanks to persistent and principled U.S. diplomacy. Indeed, although the Middle East remains beset with perennial challenges, the region is quieter than it has been for decades.

The progress is fragile, to be sure. But it is also not an accident. At a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, last year, the president set forth his policy for the Middle East in an address to the leaders of members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. His approach returns discipline to U.S. policy. It emphasizes deterring aggression, de-escalating conflicts, and integrating the region through joint infrastructure projects and new partnerships, including between Israel and its Arab neighbors. And it is bearing fruit. At the G-20 summit in September, for example, the president announced a groundbreaking effort to create a new economic corridor that connects India to Europe through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. New partnerships such as this can help make the region a place of connection rather than chaos.

This disciplined approach frees up resources for other global priorities, reduces the risk of new Middle Eastern conflicts, and ensures that U.S. interests are protected on a far more sustainable basis. Challenges remain. The Israeli-Palestinian situation is tense, particularly in the West Bank, but in the face of serious frictions, we have de-escalated crises in Gaza and restored direct diplomacy between the parties after years of its absence. Iran remains a threat, and its nuclear program a global challenge. We have acted militarily to protect U.S. personnel, and we have enhanced deterrence, combined with diplomacy, to discourage further aggression. We are committed to ensuring that Iran never obtains a nuclear weapon. And while military force must never be a tool of first resort, we stand ready and prepared to use it when necessary to protect U.S. personnel and interests in this important region.

As one era ends, the United States needs to prepare for the next—in particular, by deterring and responding to great-power aggression. When we found out that Russian President Vladimir Putin was preparing to invade Ukraine, we were confronted with a challenge: the United States was not committed by treaty to Ukraine's defense, but if Russia's aggression went unanswered, a sovereign state would be extinguished, and a message would be sent to autocrats around the world that might makes right. We sought to avert the crisis by making it clear to Russia that the United States would respond by supporting Ukraine and by displaying a

willingness to engage in talks on European security, even though Russia was not serious about doing so. We also used the deliberate and authorized public release of intelligence to warn Ukraine, rally U.S. partners, and deprive Russia of the ability to create false pretexts for its invasion.

When Putin invaded, we implemented a policy to help Ukraine defend itself without sending U.S. troops to war. The United States dispatched massive quantities of defensive weapons to the Ukrainians and rallied allies and partners to do the same. It coordinated the immense logistical undertaking to deliver those capabilities to the battlefield. This assistance has been divided into 47 different packages of military assistance to date, which were structured to respond to Ukraine's needs as they evolved over the course of the conflict. We cooperated closely with the Ukrainian government on its requirements and worked through technical and logistical details to make sure its forces had what they needed. We also increased U.S. intelligence cooperation with Ukraine, as well as training efforts. And we imposed far-reaching sanctions on Russia to reduce its ability to wage war.

President Biden also made it abundantly clear that if Russia attacked a NATO ally, the United States would defend every inch of allied territory, backing that up with new force deployments. We started a process with U.S. allies and partners to help Ukraine build a military that could defend itself on land, at sea, and in the air—and deter future aggression. Our approach in Ukraine is sustainable, and, contrary to those who say otherwise, it enhances the United States' capacity to meet every contingency in the Indo-Pacific. The American people know a bully when they see one. They understand that if they were to pull U.S. support from Ukraine, it would not just put Ukrainians at a severe disadvantage as they defend themselves but also set a terrible precedent, encouraging aggression in Europe and beyond. American support for Ukraine is broad and deep, and it will endure.

#### THE COMPETITION TO COME

It is clear that the world is becoming more competitive, that technology will be a disruptive force, and that shared problems will become more acute over time. But it is not clear precisely how these forces will manifest themselves. The United States has been surprised in the past (with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990), and it will likely be surprised in the future, no matter how hard the government works to anticipate what is coming (and U.S. intelligence agencies

have gotten a lot right, including accurately warning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022). Our strategy is designed to work in a wide variety of scenarios. By investing in the sources of domestic strength, deepening alliances and partnerships, delivering results on global challenges, and staying disciplined in the exercise of power, the United States will be prepared to advance its vision of a free, open, prosperous, and secure world no matter what surprises are in store. We have created, in Secretary of State Dean Acheson's words, "situations of strength."

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The Middle East is quieter than it has been for decades.

The coming era of competition will be unlike anything experienced before. European security competition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely a regional contest between midsize and proximate powers that ultimately ended in calamity. The Cold War that followed the most

destructive war in human history was waged between two superpowers that had very low levels of interdependence. That ended decisively and in America's favor. Today's competition is fundamentally different. The United States and China are economically interdependent. The contest is truly global, but not zero-sum. The shared challenges the two sides face are unprecedented.

We are often asked about the end state of U.S. competition with China. We expect China to remain a major player on the world stage for the foreseeable future. We seek a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order, one that protects the interests of the United States and its friends and delivers global public goods. But we do not expect a transformative end state like the one that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. There will be an ebb and flow to the competition—the United States will make gains, but China will, too. Washington must balance a sense of urgency with patience, understanding that what matters is the sum of its actions, not winning a single news cycle. And we need a sustained sense of confidence in our capacity to outcompete any country. The past two and a half years have upended assumptions on the relative trajectories of the United States and China.

The United States continues to enjoy a substantial trade and investment relationship with China. But the economic relationship with China is complicated because the country is a competitor. We will make no apology in pushing back on unfair trade practices that harm American workers. And we are concerned that China can take advantage of America's

openness to use U.S. technologies against the United States and its allies. Against this backdrop, we seek to “de-risk” and diversify, not decouple. We want to protect a targeted number of sensitive technologies with focused restrictions, creating what some have called “a small yard and a high fence.” We have faced criticism from various quarters that these steps are mercantilist or protectionist. This is untrue. These are steps taken in partnership with others and focused on a narrow set of technologies, steps that the United States needs to take in a more contested world to protect its national security while supporting an interconnected global economy.

At the same time, we are deepening technological cooperation with like-minded partners and allies, including with India and through the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, a forum created in 2021. We will keep investing in the United States’ own capacities and in secure, resilient supply chains. And we will keep advancing an agenda that promotes workers’ rights in pursuit of decent, safe, and healthy work at home and abroad to create a level playing field for American workers and companies.

At times, the competition will be intense. We are prepared for that. We are pushing back hard on aggression, coercion, and intimidation and standing up for the basic rules of the road, such as freedom of navigation in the sea. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken put it in a speech in September, “America’s enlightened self-interest in preserving and strengthening this order has never been greater.” We also understand that the United States’ competitors, particularly China, have a fundamentally different vision.

But Washington and Beijing need to figure out how to manage competition to reduce tensions and find a way forward on shared challenges. That is why the Biden administration is intensifying U.S. diplomacy with China, preserving existing channels of communication and creating new ones. Americans have internalized some of the lessons of the crises of decades past, especially the potential to stumble into conflict. High-level and repeated interaction is crucial to clear up misperception, avoid miscommunication, send unambiguous signals, and arrest downward spirals that could erupt into a major crisis. Unfortunately, Beijing has often appeared to have drawn different lessons about managing tensions, concluding that guardrails can fuel competition in the same way that seat belts encourage reckless driving. (It is a mistaken belief. Just as the use of seat belts cuts traffic fatalities in half, so do communication and basic safety measures reduce the risk of geopolitical accidents.) Recently, however, there have been encouraging

signs that Beijing may recognize the value of stabilization. The real test will be if the channels can endure when tensions inevitably spike.

We should also remember that not everything competitors do is incompatible with U.S. interests. The deal that China brokered this year between Iran and Saudi Arabia partially reduced tensions between those two countries, a development that the United States also wants to see. Washington could not have tried to broker that deal, given the lack of U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran, and it should not try to undermine it. To take another example, the United States and China are engaged in a rapid and high-stakes technological competition, but the two sides need to be able to work together on the risks that arise from artificial intelligence. Doing so is not a sign of going wobbly. It reflects a clear-eyed assessment that AI could pose unique challenges to humanity and that great powers have a collective responsibility to deal with them.

It is only natural that countries aligned with neither the United States nor China will engage with both, seeking to benefit from the competition while endeavoring to protect their own interests from any spillover effects. Many of these countries see themselves as part of the global South, a grouping that has a logic of its own and a distinct critique of the West that dates back to the Cold War and the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement. Unlike during the Cold War, however, the United States will avoid the temptation to see the world solely through the prism of geopolitical competition or treat these countries as places for proxy contests. It will instead continue to engage with them on their own terms. Washington should be realistic about its expectations when dealing with these countries, respecting their sovereignty and their right to make decisions that advance their own interests. But it also needs to be clear about what is most important to the United States. That is how we will seek to shape relations with them: so that on balance they have incentives to act in ways consistent with U.S. interests.

In the decade ahead, U.S. officials will spend more time than they did the past 30 years talking with countries that they disagree with, often on fundamental issues. The world is becoming more contested, and the United States cannot talk only with those who share its vision or values. We will keep working to shape the overall diplomatic landscape in ways that advance both U.S. and shared interests. For instance, when China, Brazil, and a group of seven African countries announced that they would pursue peace efforts to end Russia's war in Ukraine, we did not reject these initiatives on principle; we called on these countries to talk

with Ukrainian officials and offer assurances that their proposals for a settlement would be consistent with the UN Charter.

Some of the seeds we are planting now—investments in advanced technology, for instance, or the AUKUS submarines—will take many years to bear fruit. But there are also some issues on which we can and will act now, what we call our “unfinished business.” We have to ensure a Ukraine that is sovereign, democratic, and free. We have to strengthen peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. We have to advance regional integration in the Middle East while continuing to check Iran. We have to modernize the United States’ military and defense industrial base. And we have to deliver on infrastructure, development, and climate commitments to the global South.

#### UP TO US

The United States has reached the third phase of the global role it assumed following World War II. In the first phase, the Truman administration laid the foundation of American power to accomplish two objectives: strengthening democracies and democratic cooperation and containing the Soviet Union. This strategy, carried on by subsequent presidents, included a comprehensive effort to invest in American industry, especially in new technologies, from the 1950s to the 1970s. This commitment to national strength through industrial investment began to erode in the 1980s, and there was little perceived need for it after the Cold War. In the second phase, with the United States having no peer competitor, successive administrations sought to enlarge the U.S.-led rules-based order and establish patterns of cooperation on critical issues. This era transformed the world for the better in a variety of ways—many countries became more free, prosperous, and secure; global poverty was slashed; and the world responded effectively to the 2008 financial crisis—but it was also a period of geopolitical change.

The United States now finds itself at the start of the third era: one in which it is adjusting for a new period of competition in an age of interdependence and transnational challenges. This does not mean breaking with the past or giving up the gains that have been made, but it does mean laying a new foundation of American strength. That requires revisiting long-held assumptions if we are to leave America stronger than we found it and better prepared for what lies ahead. The outcome of this phase will not be determined solely by outside forces. It will also, to a large extent, be decided by the United States’ own choices. 🌐

# The Dysfunctional Superpower

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## Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia?

ROBERT M. GATES

**T**he United States now confronts graver threats to its security than it has in decades, perhaps ever. Never before has it faced four allied antagonists at the same time—Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran—whose collective nuclear arsenal could within a few years be nearly double the size of its own. Not since the Korean War has the United States had to contend with powerful military rivals in both Europe and Asia. And no one alive can remember a time when an adversary had as much economic, scientific, technological, and military power as China does today.

The problem, however, is that at the very moment that events demand a strong and coherent response from the United States, the country cannot provide one. Its fractured political leadership—Republican and Democratic, in the White House and in Congress—has failed to convince enough Americans that developments in China and Russia matter.

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Political leaders have failed to explain how the threats posed by these countries are interconnected. They have failed to articulate a long-term strategy to ensure that the United States, and democratic values more broadly, will prevail.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin have much in common, but two shared convictions stand out. First, each is convinced that his personal destiny is to restore the glory days of his country's imperial past. For Xi, this means reclaiming imperial China's once dominant role in Asia while harboring even greater ambitions for global influence. For Putin, it means pursuing an awkward mixture of reviving the Russian Empire and recapturing the deference that was accorded the Soviet Union. Second, both leaders are convinced that the developed democracies—above all, the United States—are past their prime and have entered an irreversible decline. This decline, they believe, is evident in these democracies' growing isolationism, political polarization, and domestic disarray.

Taken together, Xi's and Putin's convictions portend a dangerous period ahead for the United States. The problem is not merely China's and Russia's military strength and aggressiveness. It is also that both leaders have already made major miscalculations at home and abroad and seem likely to make even bigger ones in the future. Their decisions could well lead to catastrophic consequences for themselves—and for the United States. Washington must therefore change Xi's and Putin's calculus and reduce the chances of disaster, an effort that will require strategic vision and bold action. The United States prevailed in the Cold War thanks to a consistent strategy pursued by both political parties through nine successive presidencies. It needs a similar bipartisan approach today. Therein lies the rub.

The United States finds itself in a uniquely treacherous position: facing aggressive adversaries with a propensity to miscalculate yet incapable of mustering the unity and strength necessary to dissuade them. Successfully deterring leaders such as Xi and Putin depends on the certainty of commitments and constancy of response. Yet instead, dysfunction has made American power erratic and unreliable, practically inviting risk-prone autocrats to place dangerous bets—with potentially catastrophic effects.

#### XI'S AMBITIONS

Xi's call for "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is shorthand for China becoming the dominant world power by 2049, the

centenary of the Communists' victory in the Chinese Civil War. That objective includes bringing Taiwan back under the control of Beijing. In his words, "The complete unification of the motherland must be realized, and it will be realized." To that end, Xi has directed the Chinese military to be ready by 2027 to successfully invade Taiwan, and he has pledged to modernize the Chinese military by 2035 and turn it into a "world-class" force. Xi seems to believe that only by taking Taiwan can he secure for himself status comparable to Mao Zedong's in the pantheon of Chinese Communist Party legends.

Xi's aspirations and sense of personal destiny entail significant risk of war. Just as Putin has disastrously miscalculated in Ukraine, there is a considerable danger Xi will do so in Taiwan. He has already dramatically miscalculated at least three times.

First, by departing from the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's maxim of "hide your strength, bide your time," Xi has provoked exactly the response Deng feared: the United States has mobilized its economic power to slow China's growth, begun strengthening and modernizing its military, and bolstered its alliances and military partnerships in Asia. A second major miscalculation was Xi's leftward swing in economic policies, an ideological shift that began in 2015 and was reinforced at the 2022 National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. His policies, from inserting the party into the management of companies to increasingly relying on state-owned enterprises, have profoundly harmed China's economy. Third, Xi's "zero COVID" policy, as the economist Adam Posen has written in these pages, "made visible and tangible the CCP's arbitrary power over everyone's commercial activities, including those of the smallest players." The resulting uncertainty, accentuated by his sudden reversal of that policy, has reduced Chinese consumer spending and thus further damaged the entire economy.

If preserving the power of the party is Xi's first priority, taking Taiwan is his second. If China relies on measures short of war to pressure Taiwan to preemptively surrender, that effort will likely fail. And so Xi would be left with the option of risking war by imposing a full-scale naval blockade or even launching an all-out invasion to conquer the island. He may think he would be fulfilling his destiny by

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Xi's sense of personal destiny entails significant risk of war.

trying, but win or lose, the economic and military costs of provoking a war over Taiwan would be catastrophic for China, not to mention for everyone else involved. Xi would be making a monumental mistake.

Despite Xi's miscalculations and his country's many internal difficulties, China will continue to pose a formidable challenge to the United States. Its military is stronger than ever. China now boasts more warships than the United States (although they are of poorer quality). It has modernized and restructured both its conventional forces and its nuclear forces—and is nearly doubling its deployed strategic nuclear forces—and upgraded its command-and-control system. It is in the process of strengthening its capabilities in space and cyberspace, as well.

Beyond its military moves, China has pursued a comprehensive strategy aimed at increasing its power and influence globally. China is now the top trading partner of more than 120 countries, including nearly all of those in South America. More than 140 countries have signed up as participants in the Belt and Road Initiative, China's sprawling infrastructure development program, and China now owns, manages, or has invested in more than 100 ports in some 60 countries.

Complementing these widening economic relationships is a pervasive propaganda and media network. No country on earth is beyond the reach of at least one Chinese radio station, television channel, or online news site. Through these and other outlets, Beijing attacks American actions and motives, erodes faith in the international institutions the United States created after World War II, and trumpets the supposed superiority of its development and governance model—all while advancing the theme of Western decline.

There are at least two concepts invoked by those who think the United States and China are destined for conflict. One is "the Thucydides trap." According to this theory, war is inevitable when a rising power confronts an established power, as when Athens confronted Sparta in antiquity or when Germany confronted the United Kingdom before World War I. Another is "peak China," the idea that the country's economic and military power is or will soon be at its strongest, while ambitious initiatives to strengthen the U.S. military will take years to bear fruit. Thus, China might well invade Taiwan before the military disparity in Asia changes China's disadvantage.

But neither theory is convincing. There was nothing inevitable about World War I; it happened because of the stupidity and arrogance of

Europe's leaders. And the Chinese military itself is far from ready for a major conflict. Thus, a direct Chinese attack on or invasion of Taiwan, if it happens at all, is some years in the future. Unless, of course, Xi grievously miscalculates—again.

#### PUTIN'S GAMBLE

“Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire,” Zbigniew Brzezinski, the political scientist and former U.S. national security adviser, once observed. Putin certainly shares that view. In pursuit of Russia's lost empire, he invaded Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022—with the latter adventure turning out to be a catastrophic miscalculation with devastating long-term consequences for his country. Rather than dividing and weakening NATO, Russia's actions have given the alliance new purpose (and, in Finland and, soon, Sweden, powerful new members). Strategically, Russia is far worse off now than it was before the invasion.

Economically, oil sales to China, India, and other states have offset much of the financial impact of sanctions, and consumer goods and technology from China, Turkey, and other countries in Central Asia and the Middle East have partly replaced those once imported from the West. Still, Russia has been subjected to extraordinary sanctions by virtually all developed democracies. Countless Western firms have pulled their investments and abandoned the country, including the oil and gas companies whose technology is essential to sustain Russia's primary source of income. Thousands of young tech experts and entrepreneurs have fled. In invading Ukraine, Putin has mortgaged his country's future.

As for Russia's military, even though the war has significantly degraded its conventional forces, Moscow retains the largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Thanks to arms control agreements, that arsenal includes only a few more deployed strategic nuclear weapons than what the United States has. But Russia has ten times as many tactical nuclear weapons—about 1,900.

This large nuclear arsenal notwithstanding, the prospects for Putin seem grim. With his hopes for a quick conquest of Ukraine dashed, he appears to be counting on a rough military stalemate to exhaust the Ukrainians, betting that by next spring or summer, the public in Europe and the United States will tire of sustaining them. As a temporary alternative to a conquered Ukraine, he may be willing

to consider a crippled Ukraine—a rump state that lies in ruins, its exports slashed and its foreign aid dramatically reduced. Putin wanted Ukraine as part of a reconstituted Russian Empire; he also feared a democratic, modern, and prosperous Ukraine as an alternative model for Russians next door. He will not get the former, but he may believe he can prevent the latter.

As long as Putin is in power, Russia will remain an adversary of the United States and NATO. Through arms sales, security assistance, and discounted oil and gas, he is cultivating new relationships in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. He will continue to use all means at his disposal to sow division in the United States and Europe and undermine U.S. influence in the global South. Emboldened by his partnership with Xi and confident that his modernized nuclear arsenal will deter military action against Russia, he will continue to aggressively challenge the United States. Putin has already made one historic miscalculation; no one can be sure he will not make another.

#### AMERICA IMPAIRED

For now, the United States would seem to be in a strong position vis-à-vis both China and Russia. Above all, the U.S. economy is doing well. Business investment in new manufacturing facilities, some of it subsidized by new government infrastructure and technology programs, is booming. New investments by both government and business in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, and bioengineering promise to widen the technological and economic gap between the United States and every other country for years to come.

Diplomatically, the war in Ukraine has handed the United States new opportunities. The early warning that Washington gave its friends and allies about Russia's intention to invade Ukraine restored their faith in U.S. intelligence capabilities. Renewed fears of Russia have allowed the United States to strengthen and expand NATO, and the military aid it has given Ukraine has provided clear evidence that it can be trusted to fulfill its commitments. Meanwhile, China's economic and diplomatic bullying in Asia and Europe has backfired, enabling the United States to strengthen its relationships in both regions.

The U.S. military has been healthily funded in recent years, and modernization programs are underway in all three legs of the nuclear triad—intercontinental ballistic missiles, bombers, and submarines.

The Pentagon is buying new combat aircraft (F-35s, modernized F-15s, and a new, sixth-generation fighter), along with a new fleet of tanker aircraft for in-flight refueling. The army is procuring some two dozen new platforms and weapons, and the navy is building additional ships and submarines. The military continues to develop new kinds of weapons, such as hypersonic munitions, and strengthen its offensive and defensive cyber-capabilities. All told, the United States spends more on defense than the next ten countries combined, including Russia and China.

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As long as Putin is in power, Russia will remain a U.S. adversary.

Sadly, however, America's political dysfunction and policy failures are undermining its success. The U.S. economy is threatened by runaway federal government spending. Politicians from both parties have failed to address the spiraling cost of entitlements such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Perennial opposition to raising the debt ceiling has undermined confidence in the economy, causing investors to worry about what would happen if Washington actually defaulted. (In August 2023, the ratings agency Fitch downgraded the United States' credit rating, raising borrowing costs for the government.) The appropriations process in Congress has been broken for years. Legislators have repeatedly failed to enact individual appropriations bills, passed gigantic "omnibus" laws that no one has read, and forced government shutdowns.

Diplomatically, former President Donald Trump's disdain for U.S. allies, his fondness for authoritarian leaders, his willingness to sow doubt about the United States' commitment to its NATO allies, and his generally erratic behavior undermined U.S. credibility and respect across the globe. But just seven months into the administration of President Joe Biden, the United States' abrupt, disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan further damaged the rest of the world's confidence in Washington.

For years, U.S. diplomacy has neglected much of the global South, the central front for nonmilitary competition with China and Russia. The United States' ambassadorships are disproportionately left vacant in this part of the world. Beginning in 2022, after years of neglect, the United States scrambled to revive its relationships with Pacific island nations—but only after China had taken advantage of Washington's absence to sign security and economic agreements

with these countries. The competition with China and even Russia for markets and influence is global. The United States cannot afford to be absent anywhere.

The military also pays a price for American political dysfunction—particularly in Congress. Every year since 2010, Congress has failed to approve appropriations bills for the military before the start of the next fiscal year. Instead, legislators have passed a “continuing resolution,” which allows the Pentagon to spend no more money than it did the previous year and prohibits it from starting anything new or increasing spending on existing programs. These continuing resolutions govern defense spending until a new appropriations bill can be passed, and they have lasted from a few weeks to an entire fiscal year. The result is that each year, imaginative new programs and initiatives go nowhere for an unpredictable period.

The Budget Control Act of 2011 put in place automatic spending cuts, known as “sequestration,” and reduced the federal budget by \$1.2 trillion over ten years. The military, which then accounted for only about 15 percent of federal expenditures, was forced to absorb half that cut—\$600 billion. With personnel costs exempted, the bulk of the reductions had to come from maintenance, operations, training, and investment accounts. The consequences were severe and long-lasting. And yet as of September 2023, Congress is headed toward making the same mistake again. A further example of Congress letting politics do real harm to the military is allowing one senator to block confirmation of hundreds of senior officers for months on end, not only seriously degrading readiness and leadership but also—by highlighting American governmental dysfunction in such a critical area—making the United States a laughingstock among its adversaries. The bottom line is that the United States needs more military power to meet the threats it faces, but both Congress and the Executive Branch are rife with obstacles to achieving that objective.

#### MEETING THE MOMENT

The epic contest between the United States and its allies on one side and China, Russia, and their fellow travelers on the other is well underway. To ensure that Washington is in the strongest possible position to deter its adversaries from making additional strategic miscalculations, U.S. leaders must first address the breakdown in the decades-long bipartisan agreement with respect to the United

States' role in the world. It is not surprising that after 20 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, many Americans wanted to turn inward, especially given the United States' many problems at home. But it is the job of political leaders to counter that sentiment and explain how the country's fate is inextricably bound up in what happens elsewhere. President Franklin Roosevelt once observed that "the greatest duty of a statesman is to educate." But recent presidents, along with most members of Congress, have utterly failed in this essential responsibility.

Americans need to understand why U.S. global leadership, despite its costs, is vital to preserving peace and prosperity. They need to know why a successful Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion is crucial for deterring China from invading Taiwan. They need to know why Chinese domination of the Western Pacific endangers U.S. interests. They need to know why Chinese and Russian influence in the global South matters to American pocketbooks. They need to know why the United States' dependability as an ally is so consequential for preserving peace. They need to know why a Chinese-Russian alliance threatens the United States. These are the kinds of connections that American political leaders need to be drawing every day.

It is not just one Oval Office address or speech on the floor of Congress that is needed. Rather, a drumbeat of repetition is required for the message to sink in. Beyond regularly communicating to the American people directly, and not through spokespersons, the president needs to spend time over drinks and dinners and in small meetings with members of Congress and the media making the case for the United States' leadership role. Then, given the fragmented nature of modern-day communications, members of Congress need to carry the message to their constituents across the country.

What is that message? It is that American global leadership has provided 75 years of great-power peace—the longest stretch in centuries. Nothing in a nation's life is costlier than war, nor does anything else represent a greater threat to its security and prosperity. And nothing makes war likelier than putting one's head in the sand and pretending that the United States is not affected by events elsewhere, as the country learned before World War I, World War II, and 9/11. The military power the United States possesses, the alliances it has forged, and the international institutions it has designed are all essential to deterring aggression against it and its partners. As a century

of evidence should make clear, failing to deal with aggressors only encourages more aggression. It is naive to believe that Russian success in Ukraine will not lead to further Russian aggression in Europe and possibly even a war between NATO and Russia. And it is equally naive to believe that Russian success in Ukraine will not significantly increase the likelihood of Chinese aggression against Taiwan and thus potentially a war between the United States and China.

A world without reliable U.S. leadership would be a world of authoritarian predators, with all other countries potential prey. If America is to safeguard its people, its security, and its liberty, it must continue to embrace its global leadership role. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said of the United States in 1943, “The price of greatness is responsibility.”

Rebuilding support at home for that responsibility is essential to rebuilding trust among allies and awareness among adversaries that the United States will fulfill its commitments. Because of domestic divisions, mixed messages, and political leaders’ ambivalence about the United States’ role in the world, there is significant doubt abroad about American reliability. Both friends and adversaries wonder whether Biden’s engagement and alliance-building is a return to normal or whether Trump’s “America first” disdain for allies will be the dominant thread in American policy in the future. Even the closest of allies are hedging their bets about America. In a world where Russia and China are on the prowl, that is particularly dangerous.

Restoring public support for U.S. global leadership is the highest priority, but the United States must take other steps to actually exercise that role. First, it needs to go beyond “pivoting” to Asia. Strengthening relationships with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and other countries in the region is necessary but not sufficient. China and Russia are working together against U.S. interests on every continent. Washington needs a strategy for dealing with the entire world—particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, where the Russians and the Chinese are fast outpacing the United States in developing security and economic relationships. This strategy ought not to divide the world into democracies and authoritarians. The United States must always advocate for democracy and human rights everywhere, but that commitment must not blind Washington to the reality that U.S. national interests sometimes require it to work with repressive, unrepresentative governments.

Second, the United States' strategy must incorporate all the instruments of its national power. Both Republicans and Democrats have grown hostile to trade agreements, and protectionist sentiment runs strong in Congress. This has left the field open for the Chinese in the global South, which offers huge markets and investment opportunities. Despite the Belt and Road Initiative's flaws, such as the enormous debt it piles on recipient countries, Beijing has successfully used it to insinuate China's influence, companies, and economic tentacles into scores of countries. Enshrined in the Chinese constitution in 2017, it is not going away. The United States and its allies need to figure out how to compete with the initiative in ways that play to their strengths—above all, their private sectors. U.S. development assistance programs add up to a small fraction of the Chinese effort. They are also fragmented and disconnected from larger U.S. geopolitical objectives. And even where U.S. aid programs are successful, the United States maintains a priestly silence about its accomplishments. It has said little, for example, about Plan Colombia, an aid program designed to combat the Colombian drug trade, or the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which saved millions of lives in Africa.

Public diplomacy is essential to promoting U.S. interests, but Washington has let this important instrument of power wither since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, China is spending billions of dollars around the world to advance its narrative. Russia also has an aggressive effort to spread its propaganda and disinformation, as well as incite discord in and among democracies. The United States needs a strategy for influencing foreign leaders and publics—especially in the global South. To succeed, this strategy would require the U.S. government not merely to spend more money but also to integrate and synchronize its many disparate communications activities.

Security assistance to foreign governments is another area in need of radical change. Although the U.S. military does a good job training foreign forces, it makes piecemeal decisions about where and how to do so without sufficiently considering regional strategies or how better to partner with allies. Russia has increasingly provided security assistance to governments in Africa, especially those with an authoritarian bent, but the United States has no effective strategy to counter this effort. Washington must also figure out a way to accelerate the delivery of military equipment to recipient states. There is now a

roughly \$19 billion backlog of weapons sales to Taiwan, with delays ranging from four to ten years. Although the holdup is the result of many factors, an important cause is the limited production capacity of the U.S. defense industry.

Third, the United States must rethink its nuclear strategy in the face of a Chinese-Russian alliance. Cooperation between Russia, which is modernizing its strategic nuclear force, and China, which is vastly expanding its once small force, tests the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent—as do North Korea’s expanding nuclear capabilities and Iran’s weapons potential. To reinforce its deterrent, the United States almost certainly needs to adapt its strategy and probably needs to expand the size of its nuclear forces, as well. The Chinese and Russian navies are increasingly exercising together, and it would be surprising if they were not also more closely coordinating their deployed strategic nuclear forces.

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Even the closest  
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about America.

There is broad agreement in Washington that the U.S. Navy needs many more warships and submarines. Again, the contrast between politicians’ rhetoric and action is stark. For a number of years, the shipbuilding budget was basically flat, but in recent years, even as the budget has increased substantially, continuing resolutions and execution problems have prevented the navy’s expansion. The main obstacles to a bigger navy are budgetary: the lack of sustained higher funding to the navy itself and, more broadly, underinvestment in shipyards and in industries that support shipbuilding and ship maintenance. Even so, it is difficult to discern any sense of urgency among politicians for remedying these problems anytime soon. That is unacceptable.

Finally, Congress must change the way it appropriates money for the Defense Department, and the Defense Department must change the way it spends that money. Congress needs to act more quickly and efficiently when it comes to approving the defense budget. That means, above all, passing military appropriations bills before the start of the fiscal year, a change that would give the Defense Department badly needed predictability. The Pentagon, for its part, must fix its sclerotic, parochial, and bureaucratic acquisition processes, which are especially anachronistic in an era when agility, flexibility, and speed

matter more than ever. Leaders in the Defense Department have said the right things about these defects and announced many initiatives to correct them. Effective and urgent execution is the challenge.

LESS TALK, MORE ACTION

China and Russia think the future belongs to them. For all the tough rhetoric coming from the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch about pushing back against these adversaries, there is surprisingly little action. Too often, new initiatives are announced, only for funding and actual implementation to move slowly or fail to materialize altogether. Talk is cheap, and no one in Washington seems ready to make the urgent changes needed. That is especially puzzling, since at a time of bitter partisanship and polarization in Washington, Xi and Putin have managed to forge impressive, if fragile, bipartisan support among policymakers for a strong U.S. response to their aggression. The Executive Branch and Congress have a rare opportunity to work together to back up their rhetoric about countering China and Russia with far-reaching actions that make the United States a significantly more formidable adversary and might help deter war.

Xi and Putin, cocooned by yes men, have already made serious errors that have cost their countries dearly. In the long run, they have damaged their countries. For the foreseeable future, however, they remain a danger that the United States must deal with. Even in the best of worlds—one in which the U.S. government had a supportive public, energized leaders, and a coherent strategy—these adversaries would pose a formidable challenge. But the domestic scene today is far from orderly: the American public has turned inward; Congress has descended into bickering, incivility, and brinkmanship; and successive presidents have either disavowed or done a poor job explaining America's global role. To contend with such powerful, risk-prone adversaries, the United States needs to up its game in every dimension. Only then can it hope to deter Xi and Putin from making more bad bets. The peril is real. 🌐

# The Return of Nuclear Escalation

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## How America's Adversaries Have Hijacked Its Old Deterrence Strategy

KEIR A. LIEBER AND DARYL G. PRESS

**N**uclear weapons once again loom large in international politics, and a dangerous pattern is emerging. In the regions most likely to draw the United States into conflict—the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, eastern Europe, and the Persian Gulf—U.S. adversaries appear to be acquiring, enhancing, or threatening to use nuclear weapons. North Korea is developing intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the United States; China is doubling the size of its arsenal; Russia is threatening to use nuclear weapons in its war in Ukraine; and according to U.S. officials, Iran has amassed enough fissile material for a bomb. Many people hoped that once the Cold War ended, nuclear weapons would recede into irrelevance. Instead, many countries are relying on them to make up for the weakness of their conventional military forces.

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Still, optimists in the United States argue that the risk of nuclear war remains low. Their reasoning is straightforward: the countries that are building up and brandishing their nuclear capabilities are bluffing. Nuclear weapons cannot paper over conventional military weakness because threats to escalate—even by a desperate enemy—are not credible. According to the optimists, giving credence to the nuclear bluster of weak enemies is misguided and plays squarely into their hands.

Unfortunately, the optimists are wrong. The risk of nuclear escalation during conventional war is much greater than is generally appreciated. The conundrum that U.S. adversaries face today—how to convincingly threaten escalation and bring a nuclear-armed opponent to a stalemate—was solved decades ago by the United States and its NATO allies. Back then, the West developed a strategy of coercive nuclear escalation to convince the Soviet Union that NATO allies would actually use nuclear weapons if they were invaded. Today, U.S. rivals have adopted NATO's old nuclear strategy and developed their own options for credible escalation. The United States must take seriously the nuclear capabilities and resolve of its foes. It would be tragic for Washington to stumble into nuclear war because it discounted the very strategy that it invented decades ago.

#### NATO'S NUCLEAR PLAYBOOK

In the late 1950s, the forces of the Warsaw Pact, an alliance of the Soviet Union and seven other satellite states, outnumbered those of NATO in terms of manpower by about three to one. Up to that point, NATO's response to Soviet conventional superiority had been simple. If the Soviets invaded Western Europe, the United States would launch an all-out nuclear bombing campaign against the Soviet Union. The message to Moscow was brutal but credible: the Soviets might have conventional superiority, but the next European war would not remain conventional.

But this strategy began to fall apart merely a decade into the Cold War. The Soviet Union was on the cusp of fielding a strong nuclear arsenal of its own, a vast improvement over the small and vulnerable force it had deployed up to that point. Soon, NATO's strategy would no longer make sense. The alliance could not credibly threaten to respond to a conventional invasion with a full-blown nuclear strike on the Soviet Union because the Soviets would have the capability to retaliate in kind. During a war, NATO would face a lose-lose choice: lose a fight with conventional weapons or initiate a mutually catastrophic nuclear exchange.

In other words, in the latter decades of the Cold War, NATO faced the same challenge that many U.S. adversaries face today: it had little hope of prevailing in a conventional war, and no hope of winning a nuclear one.

NATO found an answer to this problem. The alliance made plans to use nuclear weapons in the event of war, but in a different way. Instead of relying solely on the threat of a massive U.S. nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, NATO would respond to an invasion by using nuclear weapons coercively. That is, they would launch a few nuclear weapons—probably tactical ones, which have small yields and short ranges—against military targets to convince Soviet leaders that the war was spinning out of control, pressuring them to stop the invasion. Such a use of nuclear weapons could deliver a heavy blow to a Soviet advance, but more important, it would demonstrate to Soviet leaders that they were courting nuclear disaster. NATO had solved what had seemed to be an intractable problem: how to use nuclear threats to stalemate an enemy they could not beat at the conventional or nuclear level.

To back up this strategy, the United States deployed thousands of tactical nuclear weapons to Europe so that Washington could escalate in a manner that was distinguishable from an all-out strike on the Soviet Union. The alliance also created a “nuclear sharing” arrangement, whereby U.S. weapons based in Europe would be given to several NATO allies during a war, so that the countries the Soviet Union hoped to overrun would have their own nuclear defenses.

The details of NATO’s strategy evolved over time, but the core rationale remained constant. NATO would not keep its nuclear weapons holstered as its member states were being conquered; nor would it launch a suicidal nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. Instead, the alliance would escalate gradually and coercively, ensuring that the risks of continuing the conflict were too great for the Soviets to bear.

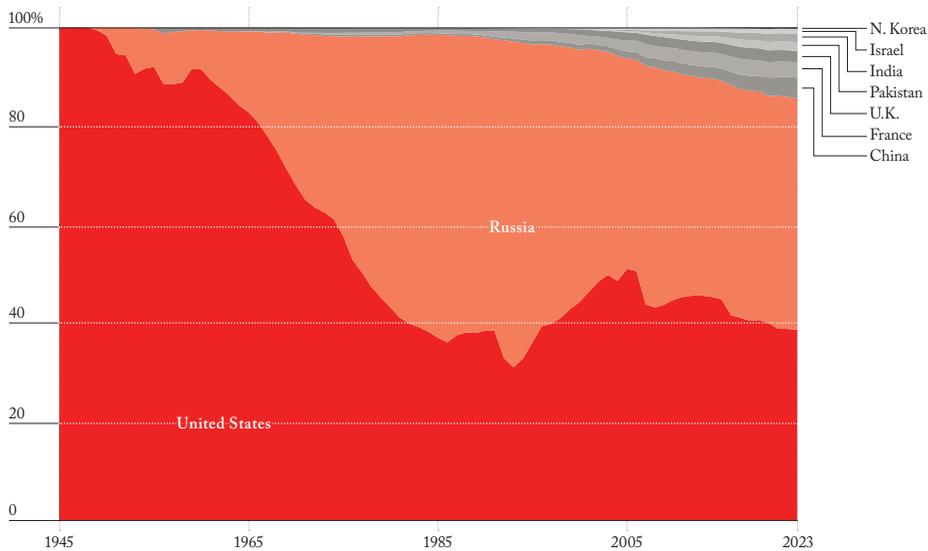
At the time, analysts criticized many aspects of NATO’s strategy. They argued, for example, that nuclear strikes on Soviet military targets would trigger retaliation against NATO’s forces, thus negating any advantage of using nuclear weapons in the first place. But the point of NATO’s escalation was not to change the military balance per se, but to use the shock of nuclear strikes to generate fear and compel the Soviets to accept a cease-fire. Other critics asked why NATO should

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In contests of  
resolve, the side  
that cares the most  
has the advantage.

## GOING NUCLEAR

Estimated distribution of warhead stockpiles, 1945 to 2023



Source: *Federation of American Scientists*.

expect that, once both sides escalated, the Soviets would be the party to blink first. But deterrence strategists noted that in a defensive war, the NATO allies would care more about defending their own freedom and territorial independence than the Soviets would care about waging a war of aggression. In contests of resolve, after all, the side that cares the most has the advantage.

Critics disapproved of NATO's strategy for other reasons—threatening to start a potentially civilization-ending nuclear war seemed immoral, and assuming that escalation could be controlled once started appeared foolish. NATO leaders could not allay such criticisms, but the alliance nevertheless relied on the logic of deliberate escalation to defend itself from an otherwise overwhelming foe. NATO's strategy made nuclear weapons the ultimate weapons of the weak, the perfect tool for holding off powerful rivals.

### COPYCATS

This strategy of nuclear escalation did not disappear when the Cold War ended. Around the world today, several nuclear-armed countries

that find themselves outmatched at the conventional military level lean on nuclear weapons to stave off catastrophic military defeat.

Pakistan is a prime example. Its principal adversary, India, has five times the population, nine times the GDP, and spends six times as much on its military. To make matters worse, most of Pakistan's largest cities are less than 100 miles from the Indian border, and the terrain in the most likely corridors of an Indian invasion is difficult to defend. Unable to build sufficient conventional defenses, Pakistan's leaders worry that a major war would lead to the destruction of its army and the seizure or isolation of its major cities. And so they rely on nuclear weapons to keep their next-door neighbor at bay.

Pakistan has approximately 170 nuclear warheads, a third of which are tactical. Pakistani officials have made clear that the country's nuclear posture is designed to deter or halt an Indian invasion. The former head of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, explained in 2015 that "by introducing the variety of tactical nuclear weapons in Pakistan's inventory, . . . we have blocked the avenues for serious military operations by the other side." In May 2023, he reiterated that the purpose of Pakistan's diverse arsenal is to give it a "strategic shield" to blunt India's conventional military superiority. To this end, Pakistan has focused on being able to rapidly assemble, mobilize, and disperse nuclear weapons at the outset of any conflict. Of course, Pakistan could not hope to win a nuclear war against India—which has a comparable number of nuclear warheads and sophisticated delivery systems capable of retaliation—but Pakistan could inflict tremendous pain on its neighbor, coercing India to halt a conventional military campaign.

North Korea has adopted a similar strategy. Pyongyang's conventional military is vastly outmatched by the combined forces of South Korea and the United States. North Korea's army is large, but its military equipment is decrepit, and its troops rarely conduct training beyond simple small-unit exercises. Lacking the resources to compete militarily, Pyongyang leans heavily on its nuclear weapons. As the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un explained in 2022, although the primary mission of his country's nuclear arsenal is to deter an attack, he would use nuclear weapons to repel an attack if deterrence failed. "If any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish [this] unexpected second mission," Kim said.

U.S. and South Korean military planners, like their Indian counterparts, must now grapple with the same problem the Soviets once faced: how to capitalize on conventional military advantages against an enemy that may be willing to use nuclear weapons. The United States has more than enough nuclear weapons to respond to North Korean nuclear escalation, as leaders in Pyongyang surely know. But if there is a war on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will be desperate. The country's leaders fear succumbing to the same fate as recent rulers who lost conventional wars, such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, who were killed after being ousted. With their regime and lives on the line, Pyongyang's leaders would face enormous pressure to start a perilous tit-for-tat nuclear exchange—at first striking targets in the region, and then possibly in the United States—to compel their opponents in Seoul and Washington to accept a cease-fire.

Unlike Pakistan and North Korea, China has declined to use nuclear threats to compensate for its conventional military inferiority relative to the United States. China's reluctance to depend on nuclear threats is particularly notable given the high stakes of a major war over Taiwan. Defeat in such a conflict might lead to formal independence for the island—a major blow to China's conception of its sovereignty. Perhaps more important, the loss of Taiwan would humiliate the Chinese Communist Party and could stoke a nationalist backlash or internal coup. Nevertheless, China has focused on improving its conventional military rather than readying its nuclear arsenal for wartime coercion. In fact, Beijing asserts that it will never be the first side in a conflict to use nuclear weapons.

To be clear, China's nuclear doctrine is not as simple as it sounds. According to Chinese military documents, Beijing would consider exceptions to its no-first-use policy if China faced a major military defeat in a high-stakes conventional war. And Chinese strategists have considered how low-yield nuclear weapons could be used coercively. Additionally, around 2019 China began updating its nuclear forces in ways that would support a coercive strategy. It has increased the size, readiness, and diversity of its arsenal to increase its survivability; this would allow Beijing to initiate wartime escalation without fear that the United States could respond by destroying its nuclear force. Finally, China's leaders could change their official stance during a war and use nuclear weapons if a conflict against the United States went badly. But as of now, China remains committed in its rhetoric to eschewing a nuclear first use and in addressing its military weaknesses by strengthening its conventional military power.

China's current no-first-use policy aside, the pattern is dangerous to ignore: nuclear-armed countries that fear catastrophic military defeat frequently adopt escalatory doctrines to keep their enemies at bay. For NATO during the Cold War, Pakistan or North Korea today, and perhaps even China in the future, nuclear escalation on the battlefield makes sense if the only alternative is a regime-threatening defeat. Coercive nuclear escalation is a competition in pain—both inflicting it and suffering it—which is a type of conflict that invariably favors the desperate.

ALL IN

Russia is another country that embraces the strategy of coercive nuclear escalation. When the Cold War ended, the Western allies—suddenly freed from the fear of major military defeat in Europe—quickly soured on nuclear forces. Russia, acutely aware of its newfound conventional military inferiority, did the opposite, adapting NATO's old ideas about nuclear escalation to Russia's new circumstances.

Analysts debate the details of Russia's current nuclear doctrine, but most agree that it calls for escalation to deter or stop the most serious military threats to Russian security. Like other conventionally weak but nuclear-armed countries, Russia has integrated into its conventional war-fighting plans and exercises many tactical nuclear weapons, including air-delivered bombs, cruise missiles, and short-range ballistic missiles. If the fighting in Ukraine shifts significantly in favor of Kyiv, and Russian President Vladimir Putin decides that defeat in Ukraine threatens his regime, Russia appears capable—and likely willing—to initiate a coercive nuclear war.

Putin has always portrayed the war in Ukraine as a core national security interest, based on historic territorial claims and the perceived threat of Ukraine's membership in NATO. He has publicly framed the war in nearly existential terms. Perhaps most important, complete defeat in Ukraine would be humiliating and particularly dangerous to a leader who has built his power on a reputation for strength, acumen, and restoring Russian greatness. Preventing military catastrophe would be of paramount importance to Putin, and nuclear escalation would be one of his few remaining cards to play. No enemy army stands poised to invade Russia. But if Putin believes that complete defeat in Ukraine will lead to his being toppled—and killed or detained—he will likely see the stakes as sufficiently high to use nuclear weapons.



Russian leaders have made the links between the war in Ukraine and nuclear escalation clear. One of Russia's most senior defense officials and former president, Dmitry Medvedev, said in July 2023 that Russia "would have to use nuclear weapons" if Ukraine's counteroffensive succeeded in retaking Russian-held territory. "There simply wouldn't be any other solution," he said. Putin claimed in February 2023 that Western countries "intend to transform a local conflict into a phase of global confrontation," adding that Russia "will react accordingly, because in this case we are talking about the existence of our country." And in September 2022, he said that Russia would use "all means at its disposal" to defend its territorial annexations in Ukraine.

Perhaps these nuclear threats are mere bluffs aimed at convincing the West to end its support for Ukraine. In fact, some Western observers discount the plausibility of escalation, noting that if Russia's military position in Ukraine starts to collapse, nuclear escalation would not solve Moscow's problem. Ukraine's military forces are dispersed, so even a handful of Russian tactical nuclear strikes would do limited damage to Kyiv's forces. Moreover, Russian escalation would only make the Kremlin's problems worse because NATO would probably respond with conventional attacks against Russian forces in Ukraine. In short, according to the skeptics, Russia's nuclear threats are hollow.

Those who downplay Russia's nuclear options misunderstand the logic of coercive escalation. Russia's goal would not be to rectify the conventional military imbalance but to demonstrate in a shocking fashion that the war is spinning out of control and must be ended immediately. The aim would be to raise the prospect of a wider nuclear war and convince people and their leaders in the West that given what is at stake for Russian leaders, Moscow will keep inflicting pain to forestall defeat.

If Russian escalation triggered a large-scale conventional NATO attack on Russia's forces in Ukraine, as many analysts expect it would, Moscow could just use nuclear weapons again—much as NATO would have done in the face of a Soviet invasion. Had the Soviet Union invaded a NATO member, the balance of wills would have favored NATO because the allies would have been fighting to protect their own freedom and territory. Now, if defeat in Ukraine endangers Putin's regime, the Kremlin would have the most to lose. The reasoning behind escalation is brutal, similar to that for blackmail or torture. But self-interested leaders facing a defeat that could cost them their lives may have no other option.

To be sure, Russian nuclear escalation is only one possible course. The current battlefield stalemate may drag on until the two sides grudgingly agree to a cease-fire. Perhaps Russian forces will regain the initiative and seize larger swaths of Ukrainian territory. Or maybe Putin's domestic opponents will remove him from power, opening the door to a better settlement for Ukraine. It is even possible that if Russia's leaders order nuclear escalation, military commanders may refuse to carry it out, instead launching a coup to end Putin's regime. The future of the conflict is uncertain, but the logic and history of the nuclear age is clear: when a conventionally superior army backs a nuclear-armed enemy against a wall, it risks nuclear war.

#### TABLES TURNED

Hawkish policy analysts suggest that the United States can stare down its adversaries' nuclear threats if Washington has enough military power, a resolute mindset, and a strong nuclear deterrent. But those attributes will not deter an enemy that is cornered. The United States will be in grave danger if it underestimates the will of desperate, nuclear-armed adversaries.

The good news is that the Biden administration appears to understand the risk of escalation in the Ukraine war. Early statements made by U.S. President Joe Biden suggesting that Putin "cannot

remain in power” have been replaced with more moderate rhetoric, and U.S. leaders have limited the kinds of weapons they provide Ukraine in large part to manage the dangers of escalation. Similarly, U.S. planners have encouraged their South Korean allies to consider wartime objectives far short of complete victory, to avoid pushing the Kim regime to the edge of nuclear war. For example, if North Korea launches a major artillery attack on South Korea, the wisest response may be to destroy or seize those artillery positions but not continue the campaign north to Pyongyang.

But it is impossible to know for sure how an enemy will react in war, especially because leaders are incentivized to misrepresent their actual redlines. Fighting nuclear-armed adversaries is a dangerous game of brinkmanship. There are military steps the United States can take to reduce these dangers. For potential conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. military should be developing strategies for waging conventional war in a manner designed to reduce the risks of escalation. For example, the U.S. military should minimize attacks that undermine an enemy leadership’s situational awareness and hold on power, such as strikes on national command-and-control networks, nuclear forces, and leadership targets themselves. Enemies who rely on nuclear weapons to stalemate U.S. military power will, of course, adapt as well; they will likely entangle the conventional and nuclear domains to prevent the United States from safely waging a conventional war. But the United States can make plans to escalate conventionally without threatening the survival of an enemy regime, thereby reducing the risk that a desperate leader will employ a nuclear weapon.

The United States must take the growing threat of coercive nuclear escalation seriously. After the Cold War, the United States became more ambitious in its foreign policy objectives. It spread Western political values and free markets and forged military ties around the world. But such objectives are opposed by nuclear-armed adversaries in China, North Korea, Russia, and perhaps soon in Iran. U.S. policymakers would be wise to not discount the potential power of their enemies. And if they need to be reminded of what their foes may be able to do, they need turn only to their own history. 🌐

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NATO’s strategy  
made nuclear  
weapons the  
ultimate weapons  
of the weak.

# AI Is Already at War

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## How Artificial Intelligence Will Transform the Military

MICHÈLE A. FLOURNOY

**I**n 2002, a special operations team practiced raiding a safehouse. The team silently approached a two-story building, built for military training, where a fictitious terrorist leader was hiding. One soldier crept up to an open window and tossed in a small drone piloted by artificial intelligence. The AI drone began flying autonomously through the building, room by room, beaming footage from its camera directly to the commander's handheld tablet outside. In just a few minutes, the team had full situational awareness of the interior of the building. It knew which rooms were empty, which were occupied by sleeping family members, and where the primary target was. The team entered the building knowing exactly where to go, reducing the risk for each member. The drill was a success: had it been real, the team would have killed the terrorist leader.

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The AI-piloted quadcopter, designed by Shield AI (where I was an adviser), has since been used in real-world operations. It is just one of the many ways that AI is beginning to reshape U.S. national security. The U.S. military is using AI to optimize everything from equipment maintenance to budgetary decisions. Intelligence analysts are relying on AI to quickly scan mountains of information to identify relevant patterns that enable them to make better judgments and to make them faster. In the future, Americans can expect AI to change how the United States and its adversaries fight on the battlefield, as well. In short, AI has sparked a security revolution—one that is just starting to unfold.

As AI has burst into the public consciousness, some researchers, worried about AI's dangers, have called for a pause on development. But stopping American AI progress is impossible: the mathematical foundations of AI are ubiquitous, the human skills to create AI models have widely proliferated, and the drivers of AI research and development—both human creativity and commercial gain—are very powerful. Trying to stop progress would also be a mistake. China is working hard to surpass the United States in AI, particularly when it comes to military applications. If it succeeds, Beijing would then possess a much more powerful military, one potentially able to increase the tempo and effect of its operations beyond what the United States can match. China's ability to use cyber and electronic warfare against U.S. networks and critical infrastructure would also be dangerously enhanced. Put simply, the Pentagon needs to accelerate—not slow—its adoption of responsible AI. If it doesn't, Washington could lose the military superiority that underwrites the interests of the United States, the security of its allies and partners, and the rules-based international order.

Acceleration, however, is easier said than done. The United States may lead the world when it comes to artificial intelligence research and development, but the U.S. government still struggles to adopt innovative technologies such as AI with speed and at scale. It does not employ enough professionals with the technical expertise needed to test, evaluate, procure, and manage AI products. It is still building the data and computer infrastructure necessary to support large AI models. It lacks the flexible funding required to quickly take the most promising AI prototypes and scale them across agencies. And it has yet to build up the testing and evaluation processes and platforms needed to ensure that any AI integrated into military systems is safe, secure, and trusted. When AI plays a role in the use of force, the bar for safety and reliability must remain very high.

Politicians and defense officials are aware of these issues. Congressional leaders are paying close attention to AI, and they are discussing how they can regulate the industry and yet keep it globally competitive. The Office of the Secretary of Defense has issued a policy framework for AI to expedite its responsible and safe adoption by the Defense Department. The essential effort to simultaneously foster AI and put guardrails around its use—aims that are seemingly in tension—is underway.

But Congress has yet to act, and the implementation of the Pentagon's AI framework is still very much a work in progress. Although the creation of a Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office at the Defense Department was an important milestone, Congress has yet to provide this office with the resources it needs to drive responsible AI adoption across the defense establishment. To ensure that AI defense applications are both safe and successful, the Pentagon will need to further bolster AI guardrails, add new technical staff, and develop new ways of testing and procuring AI. Time is of the essence, and the stakes are too high for the United States to fall behind.

#### HERE AND NOW

Even as policies and regulations are still being written, AI is already transforming U.S. security. The U.S. Air Force, for example, is beginning to use AI to help it allocate resources and to predict how a single decision can reshape its program and budget. If air force leaders, for example, add another squadron of F-35s, their AI-enabled resource allocation platform can immediately highlight not only the direct costs of the decision but also its effects on personnel, bases, aircraft availability, and other important domains.

Similarly, the military is beginning to use AI models in the maintenance of complex weapons systems, from ships to fighter jets. AI programs can now collect data from a platform's sensors and predict when and what kind of maintenance will maximize its readiness and longevity while minimizing costs.

These maintenance insights are tremendously helpful, and they are just the beginning of what predictive AI can do. The U.S. intelligence community and several U.S. combatant commands—the joint military commands with operational responsibility for a particular region or function—are using AI to sift through reams of classified and unclassified data to identify patterns of behavior and forecast future international events. In the intelligence community, AI helped analysts predict Russia's invasion

of Ukraine months in advance, enabling the United States to warn the world and deny Russian President Vladimir Putin the element of surprise. At U.S. Strategic Command, AI developed by Rhombus Power (where I am an adviser) is being used to help warn officials about the movement of nuclear-armed missiles that often evaded detection in the past.

Predictive AI could also give Washington a better understanding of what its potential adversaries might be thinking, especially leaders in Beijing. Unlike during the height of the Cold War, when there were legions of experts on Soviet decision-making, the United States is still figuring out how China's leadership translates policy into specific actions. The intelligence community could, for instance, develop a large language model that would ingest all available writings and speeches by Chinese leaders, as well as U.S. intelligence reports about these figures, and then emulate how Chinese President Xi Jinping might decide to execute stated policy. Analysts could ask the model specific questions—"Under what circumstances would President Xi be willing to use force against Taiwan?"—and anticipate potential responses based on a wealth of data from more sources than any human being could ever quickly synthesize. They could even ask the model to map out how a crisis might unfold and how different decisions would shape the outcome. The resulting insights could be useful in informing analysts and policymakers, provided the training sets were transparent (meaning they cite the sources of data underlying key judgments) and trusted (not prone to "hallucinations"—inexplicable inferences made by AI).

Intelligence officers are already using AI daily to sift through thousands of pictures and videos. In the past, analysts had to watch thousands of hours of full-motion video to find and tag objects of interest, whether a concentration of tanks or dispersed mobile missiles. But with AI, developers can train a model to examine all this material and identify only the objects the analyst is looking for—usually in a matter of seconds or minutes. The analyst can also set the AI model to send an alert whenever a new object of interest is found in a given geographic area. These "computer vision" tools enable analysts to spend more time doing what only humans can do: applying their expertise and judgment to assess the meaning and implications of what AI discovers. As these models become more accurate and trusted, they have the potential to help U.S. commanders on the ground make critical operational decisions much faster than an adversary can respond, giving U.S. forces a tremendous—perhaps even decisive—advantage.

AI could support military operations in other ways, as well. For instance, if an adversary were to jam or attack U.S. command, control, and communications networks, AI could enable a smart switching and routing agent that would redirect the flow of information between sensors, decision-makers, and shooters to make sure they stay connected and can maintain situational awareness. Having these capabilities will be critical to ensuring that Washington and its allies can make better decisions faster than their adversaries, even in the thick of combat.

AI could further help U.S. and allied forces by amplifying the work of individual service members in the field. Some AI applications currently in development allow a single human operator to control multiple unmanned systems, such as a swarm of drones in the air, on the water, or undersea. For example, a fighter pilot could use a swarm of flying drones to confuse or overwhelm an adversary's radar and air defense system. A submarine commander could use undersea unmanned vehicles to conduct reconnaissance in a heavily defended area or to hunt for undersea mines that threaten U.S. and allied ships. The Pentagon recently announced its Replicator drone program, which promises to field thousands of small, smart, low-cost, expendable, autonomous systems within the next two years.

In a conflict with China over Taiwan, this human-machine teaming could be critical. If Beijing decides to use force to claim the island, China will have the advantage of fighting in its own backyard, allowing it to mass forces more easily. The United States, meanwhile, will be sending its units long distances and in far fewer numbers. If the U.S. military can augment its manned platforms such as fighters, bombers, ships, and submarines with large numbers of relatively cheap unmanned systems, it could compensate somewhat for this comparative disadvantage and greatly complicate the Chinese military's operations.

#### PLAY IT RIGHT

Beijing, of course, has no intention of ceding technological dominance to Washington. It is working hard to develop its own advanced AI military applications. China is investing heavily in many of the same AI use cases as the United States—such as surveillance, target identification, and drone swarms. The difference is that it may not be bound by the same ethical constraints as the United States and its allies, particularly when it comes to using fully autonomous weapons systems.

In the race for technological supremacy, China has some obvious advantages. Unlike Washington, Beijing can dictate its country's economic

priorities and allocate whatever resources it deems necessary to meet AI targets. China's national security policy encourages Chinese hackers, officials, and employees to steal Western intellectual property, and Beijing is unabashed in trying to recruit leading Western technologists to work with Chinese institutions. Because China has a policy of "civil-military fusion," which eliminates barriers between its civilian and military sectors, the People's Liberation Army can draw on the work of Chinese experts and companies whenever it likes. And by 2025, China will churn out nearly twice as many Ph.D. candidates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as the United States does, flooding China's economy with talented computer scientists in particular.

But the United States has its own unique strengths. The country's market-based economy and more open political system give developers room to be creative. It has unrivaled innovation ecosystems in Silicon Valley, the Austin metropolitan area, the Massachusetts Route 128 corridor, and elsewhere. The United States also has a vibrant venture capital and private equity ecosystem that draws incomparable domestic and international investment. It is home to many of the world's leading universities, allowing it to attract and retain some of the world's best tech talent. Indeed, half the startups in Silicon Valley have at least one founder who is an immigrant. Even among those who lament China's rapid AI progress, few, if any, would trade the United States' hand for China's. But almost all of them would agree the United States needs to play its hand better to win.

To do so, the Defense Department and the intelligence community will have to invest more in accelerating AI adoption. They can start by building common digital infrastructure systems that share the same standards to ensure interoperability. The infrastructure would include cloud-based technologies and services; common data standards; validated data sets; shared access to secure software stacks; sophisticated tools for the testing, evaluation, and validation of AI models; and secure application programming interfaces that control who gets access to what information at various levels of classification. The goal would be to give developers the data, algorithms, tools, and compute power—or high-speed computing power—they need to create, test, validate, and use new AI tools.

Those tools will only be as good as the people who operate them, of course, and right now, the Defense Department does not have a digitally adept workforce. Few people on staff understand enough about AI to properly govern its use, to test and evaluate AI tools to ensure

they meet the Pentagon's "responsible AI" standards, or to assess which AI models best meet the needs of the military or the Defense Department—one of the world's largest enterprises.

To attract more AI talent and to make better use of the tech workforce it already has, the Defense Department will need to improve how it recruits and manages digitally skilled employees. The Pentagon can start by following the advice of the National Security Commission on AI and establish a digital corps (modeled on the Army Medical Corps) to organize, train, and equip technologists. In addition, all the existing military service academies should start teaching the basics of AI, and the Pentagon should also establish a U.S. digital service academy that would educate and train aspiring civilian technologists, offering them a free college education in exchange for a commitment to serve in government for at least five years after graduating. Finally, the Defense Department should create a digital reserve corps in which tech workers from across the United States could volunteer, part time, to serve their country.

The Pentagon, however, will never be able to attract as many AI experts as the private sector. The defense establishment must therefore improve how it leverages outside talent. For starters, the Defense Department should deepen its conversations with technology companies and the computer science departments of leading universities. It should also reduce some of the outdated barriers to tech firms doing business with the government. To do so, defense officials must rethink how they buy software-based products and services, including AI. Instead of taking years to develop a fixed set of highly specific requirements—as the department does when procuring military hardware—it should quickly identify the specific problems it is trying to solve and the common standards that any proposed solutions must meet and then allow companies to offer solutions in a competitive bidding process. It should also make sure that the people who will actually use the specific AI tools are able to provide feedback as models are being developed and tested.

In fact, the Pentagon should create a dedicated career path for acquisition professionals who want to specialize in AI and other commercially driven technologies. Most of the Defense Department's current acquisition corps have been trained to buy complex weapons systems, such as submarines, missiles, and jets, which requires paying meticulous attention to whether contractors meet rigid specifications, cost requirements, and scheduled milestones. As a result, most of these professionals are (understandably) highly risk averse—they are neither trained nor incentivized to

buy rapidly developing commercial technologies or to disrupt an existing multiyear acquisition program to integrate a more effective new technology. The Pentagon should therefore create a new cohort of acquisition experts who are specifically trained to buy these kinds of systems. This cadre should be considered the Green Berets of the acquisition force, and its members should be rewarded and promoted based on their ability to quickly deliver and scale needed commercial technologies, such as AI.

Although internal reforms will help the Pentagon accelerate progress, defense officials will also need sustained congressional support to keep pace with their Chinese counterparts. To that end, Congress should give the Defense Department more flexible funding that allows it to optimally manage AI programs. Most of the Pentagon's appropriations are fixed: when Congress funds a program, the department cannot simply redirect the money to something else. But AI is evolving so fast, and in so many different directions, that defense officials need more reprogramming authorities and more flexible funding so they can quickly move money out of underperforming projects and reinvest it in more promising ones, giving Congress appropriate notice. This approach is critical to enabling the Pentagon to adopt AI with more agility and speed.

Congress should simultaneously provide the Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office with bridge funding to help promising AI pilot projects cross the so-called valley of death—the difficult period between when a project demonstrates success and when the department is ready to make it a full-scale program of record. The U.S. military simply cannot afford to delay the adoption of a critical AI tool that emerges in 2023 until the 2025 budget or later.

The United States will also need to continue attracting the best tech talent in the world, including by reforming elements of the U.S. immigration system. Science and technology students and workers may want to come to and stay in the United States, but byzantine immigration rules make it impossible for many of them to do so. Educational visas, for instance, do not let foreign students stay in the United States for more than three years after graduation. The resulting dynamic is perverse: U.S. institutions train many of the world's best tech experts, only to send them away. Many of them are Chinese and return to China.

In addition, congressionally imposed caps on H-1B visas—the visa the United States most commonly offers to skilled workers—mean that the country can bring in only a small percentage of people who apply. For example, from the 758,994 eligible electronic registrations received during

the 2023 H-1B lottery, only 110,791 people were selected (or less than 15 percent). In short, the United States is keeping out much-needed foreign talent that would willingly and meaningfully contribute to the country's ability to compete in AI and other critical technologies.

#### HIGH RISK, HIGH REWARD

AI is indispensable to the United States' future security. But it also poses major risks. AI is already accelerating the spread of disinformation online and facilitating inadvertent discrimination in hiring. Computer scientists have argued that it could enable automated cyberattacks at "machine speeds," as well. Chemists have shown that AI can synthesize chemical weapons, and biologists have expressed concern that it could be used to design new pathogens or bioweapons. The risks are severe enough that even AI industry leaders have expressed alarm. In May 2023, the heads of almost every major U.S. AI lab signed a letter warning that their inventions could pose an existential threat to humanity.

Indeed, national security is the realm of human activity where the risks of AI are most profound. AI models could, for example, misidentify people or objects as targets, resulting in unintended death and destruction during conflict. Black box AI models—ones whose reasoning cannot be adequately understood or explained—might lead military planners to make hazardous decisions. This risk would be most acute if AI developed for one situation were applied to another without enough testing and oversight. What might be perfectly rational and responsible in one situation might be irrational and dangerous in another.

The risks do not stem just from poorly designed or carelessly used systems. The United States could be fastidious in developing and implementing AI, only for its adversaries to find ways to corrupt U.S. data, prompting systems to go haywire. For example, if an adversary were able to spoof an AI-enabled computer vision tool into targeting a civilian vehicle instead of a military one, it could cause the United States to inadvertently harm civilians in a conflict zone, undermining U.S. credibility and moral authority. An adversary could also corrupt data in ways that would degrade the performance of an AI-enabled weapon system or that could cause it to shut down.

The Pentagon is aware of these risks, and in February 2020, it issued a set of ethical principles governing how AI should be used. One principle called on the department's personnel to exercise judgment and care in developing, deploying, and using AI capabilities. Another said

the Defense Department will try to “minimize unintended bias in AI capabilities.” A third called for ensuring that all AI is made and used in ways that can be understood and explained—with data and methodologies that are transparent and auditable. And defense leaders have directed their employees to make sure that AI systems are rigorously tested for their safety, security, and effectiveness; that AI systems are assigned to clearly defined uses; and that AI systems can be disengaged or deactivated if they exhibit unintended behavior.

For autonomous and semiautonomous weapons, the Defense Department has issued even more specific guidance. Pentagon leaders have directed commanders and operators to use careful judgment over AI-enabled weapons, including by ensuring that these weapons are used in ways that are consistent with the parameters of the model’s training and with the rules of engagement for the operation in which the AI is being deployed. The Defense Department’s rules also stipulate that commanders use AI in accordance with the laws of war. For example, any AI-enabled weapon must be discriminate, able to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants on the battlefield, and able to avoid deliberately targeting the latter. The Pentagon has also forbidden the use of AI in its nuclear command-and-control systems, and it has urged other nuclear powers to do the same.

Among the U.S. defense community’s leadership, these “responsible AI” rules have achieved great consensus. But putting them into practice is no small challenge—especially given the size of the United States’ defense apparatus. The Pentagon has started the process by creating a high-level governance body, beginning to establish data and digital infrastructure to support a variety of AI applications; building out the testing, evaluation, and validation capabilities needed to ensure compliance with the Defense Department’s AI principles; and increasing AI awareness across the department. This implementation process is still in its infancy. But the policy framework provides a sound basis on which to build.

Still, the Pentagon would be wise to further strengthen these guidelines. For example, defense officials should require that all AI vendors give the Defense Department full transparency into the origins of data they use in their training sets. In addition, the department should make sure that the behavior of any AI model it adopts is explainable (fully understood by its users and developers), without stifling innovation. It can do so by strengthening how it tests, evaluates, and verifies systems. The department should also scale and broaden the work done by the Defense

Advanced Research Projects Agency—one of the entities responsible for developing emerging technologies for the military—on making sure that AI tools are explainable and responsible by design. The department's ethical principles, in other words, should be treated as required traits that shape how defense AI models are designed from the start.

But the U.S. defense community will not be able to speed AI adoption unless the public believes it will use AI in ways that are effective, responsible, ethical, and lawful. Otherwise, the first time an AI application leads to a very bad decision or serious unintended consequences on the battlefield, warfighters are unlikely to trust it, and policymakers and lawmakers are likely to suspend or prohibit its use. The Defense Department must therefore increase its investment in the research and development of AI safety and security. It must be transparent about what it will and will not use AI to do. And the Pentagon should consider making its vendors put guardrails on how they develop AI. If a company wants to provide AI to the military, for example, the Defense Department could require it to meet rigorous data protection and cybersecurity standards. By doing so, the Pentagon could help make AI safer, not just for the armed forces, but for everyone.

The United States, of course, cannot singlehandedly make sure that AI is developed and used responsibly. Other countries—including competitors—will also have to adopt policy guardrails and norms. The world took a valuable first step when, in November 2021, 193 countries approved a global agreement on the ethics of artificial intelligence—the world's first. It includes the principle that countries must guarantee human oversight of and agency over all AI.

Although this agreement is an important foundation, the United States should seek out venues to discuss AI with its potential adversaries, especially China, just as it found ways to talk about nuclear weapons and other forms of arms control with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. To succeed, Washington will also have to work closely with its allies and partners to make sure they are all on the same page. Countries that agree on a set of AI norms should be willing to threaten violators with severe costs, including multilateral economic sanctions, expulsion from international forums, and legal action to hold perpetrators responsible for damage. Actors that violate AI rules, for instance, could be indicted in a U.S. federal court, as five Chinese hackers were in 2014 for launching cyberattacks on U.S. companies. States that violate these rules could face potential retaliation for any harm done—including, in extreme cases, military action.

THE NEED FOR RESPONSIBLE SPEED

In the world of microelectronics, experts often talk about Moore's law: the principle that the number of transistors on chips doubles every two years, resulting in exponentially more capable devices. The law helps explain the rapid rise of so many technological innovations, including smartphones and search engines.

Within national security, AI progress has created another kind of Moore's law. Whichever military first masters organizing, incorporating, and institutionalizing the use of data and AI into its operations in the coming years will reap exponential advances, giving it remarkable advantages over its foes. The first adopter of AI at scale is likely to have a faster decision cycle and better information on which to base decisions. Its networks are likely to be more resilient when under attack, preserving its ability to maintain situational awareness, defend its forces, engage targets effectively, and protect the integrity of its command, control, and communications. It will also be able to control swarms of unmanned systems in the air, on the water, and under the sea to confuse and overwhelm an adversary. The United States cannot afford to fall behind.

But the national security apparatus cannot afford to be reckless, either. Without proper safeguards, AI models could cause all kinds of unintended harm. Rogue systems could even kill U.S. troops or unarmed civilians in or near areas of combat. The United States therefore finds itself facing a conundrum. The stakes of slowing AI down are unacceptably high, but so are the stakes of racing ahead without needed precautions.

U.S. policymakers appear to understand this paradox. Congressional leaders know that if they were to regulate AI with too heavy a hand, they could prompt the best AI innovators to leave the United States to work where there are fewer restrictions, and the United States would then fall behind its competitors. But both Democratic and Republican policymakers also know that some regulation and oversight is essential to ensuring that AI adoption is safe and responsible. The House of Representatives and the Senate are holding sessions to educate their members and scheduling hearings to get advice from experts. These efforts to build bipartisan consensus before legislating should be applauded.

Yet understanding the problem is just the first step. To solve it—to balance the need for speed with the need for safety—policymakers will have to implement better approaches to accelerating adoption as well as ensuring safety. Otherwise, Americans risk being caught in a world of both spiraling AI dangers and declining U.S. power and influence. 🌐

# The Coming AI Economic Revolution

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## Can Artificial Intelligence Reverse the Productivity Slowdown?

JAMES MANYIKA AND MICHAEL SPENCE

**I**n June 2023, a study of the economic potential of generative artificial intelligence estimated that the technology could add more than \$4 trillion dollars annually to the global economy. This would be on top of the \$11 trillion that nongenerative AI and other forms of automation could contribute. These are enormous numbers: by comparison, the entire German economy—the world’s fourth largest—is worth about \$4 trillion. According to the study, produced by the McKinsey Global Institute, this astonishing impact will come largely from gains in productivity.

At least in the near term, such exuberant projections will likely outstrip reality. Numerous technological, process-related, and organizational hurdles, as well as industry dynamics, stand in the way of an

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AI-driven global economy. But just because the transformation may not be immediate does not mean the eventual effect will be small.

By the beginning of the next decade, the shift to AI could become a leading driver of global prosperity. The prospective gains to the world economy derive from the rapid advances in AI—now further expanded by generative AI, or AI that can create new content, and its potential applications in just about every aspect of human and economic activity. If these innovations can be harnessed, AI could reverse the long-term declines in productivity growth that many advanced economies now face.

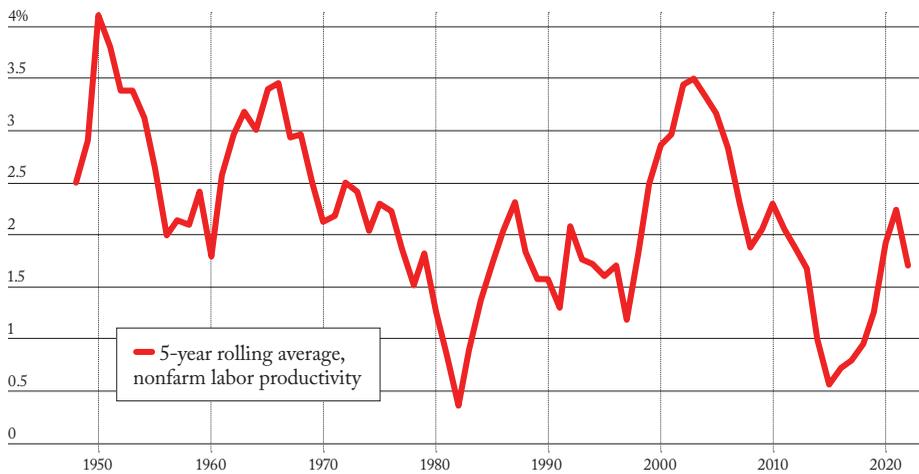
This economic revolution will not happen on its own. Much recent debate has focused on the dangers that AI poses and the need for international regulations to prevent catastrophic harm. As important, however, will be the introduction of positive policies that foster AI's most productive uses. These policies must promote technologies that augment human capabilities rather than simply replace them; encourage AI's widest possible implementation, both within and across different sectors, especially in areas that tend to have lower productivity; and ensure that firms and sectors undergo necessary process and organizational changes and innovations to effectively capitalize on AI's potential. To unleash the full force of an AI-powered economy, then, will require not only a new policy framework but also a new mindset toward artificial intelligence. Ultimately, AI technologies must be embraced as tools that can enhance, rather than undermine, human potential and ingenuity.

#### THE GREAT SLOWDOWN

The accelerating progress of AI comes at a pivotal moment in the global economy. For three decades, the massive growth of productive capacity in China and other emerging economies kept inflation in check, allowing central banks to lower interest rates to zero and inject very large amounts of liquidity into their financial systems. Those years are over. In many developed countries, growth is slowing and remains weak, in part as a result of the protracted battle with inflation that central banks are now fighting. And productivity growth has been ebbing since around 2005, with the falloff especially pronounced in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Labor productivity growth in the United States, which ran at 1.73 percent in the decade before the financial crisis, dropped by more than two-thirds to 0.53 percent, in the decade before the pandemic. Large service sectors—the areas of the economy that fall outside of manufacturing and trade that now account for almost

## DIMINISHING RETURNS

U.S. labor productivity growth, 1948–2022



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Productivity is measured as value added per hour worked.

80 percent of U.S. employment—fared even worse, with pre-pandemic productivity growth of just 0.16 percent, almost zero.

Other factors have also created supply-side constraints in the global economy. In countries that account for over 75 percent of global economic output, aging populations have limited the growth of the labor supply, increasing dependency ratios—the number of nonworkers relative to the working-age population in a given country—and creating fiscal stress. Many large employment sectors, including government, health care, traditional retail, hospitality, and construction, have critical shortages of workers. And in some countries, such as China, Italy, Japan, and South Korea, overall labor forces are shrinking. Labor markets have also been transformed by the preferences of job seekers in advanced economies, who are choosing employment sectors—and frequently shifting between them—based on flexibility, safety, level of stress, and income. Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions, combined with the shocks of climate change and the pandemic, have led many companies and countries to “de-risk” and diversify their supply chains at great expense for reasons that have nothing to do with reducing costs. The era of building global supply chains entirely on the basis of efficiency and comparative advantage has clearly come to a close.

In short, without a powerful new productivity-enhancing force, the global economy will continue to be held back by slow growth and reduced labor supply, the persistent threat of inflation, higher interest rates, shrinking public investments, and elevated costs of capital for the foreseeable future. Against these headwinds, the costly clean energy transition—which will require an additional \$3 trillion in capital spending each year for several decades, according to projections by the International Energy Agency—will be close to impossible to engineer.

These long-term global pressures are a key reason why the AI revolution is so important. It holds the potential for a digitally enabled surge in productivity that could restore growth momentum by easing the supply-side constraints—especially the shrinking labor pool in many countries—that have been holding the global economy back. But for this transformation to occur, the surge will need to have the right characteristics. It must be driven primarily by value-added growth, in which firms and sectors expand value-added output, thereby contributing to a rise in GDP, rather than simply by reducing inputs, such as labor, while keeping the growth in output weak or flat.

#### A DIFFERENT DIGITAL REVOLUTION

In some respects, the current tsunami of investment in generative AI seems surprising. After all, digital technologies have been transforming the economy in measurable ways for at least three decades. One explanation for the excitement is that unlike earlier digital innovations, the AI revolution has extended the impact of digital technologies well beyond so-called codifiable work—routine tasks that can be reduced to a precise series of instructions. Until recent AI breakthroughs, digital machines could not perform tasks that defied codification, such as recognizing an object as a cat.

In the areas that it touched, the digital revolution was dramatic. Tasks long performed by humans were suddenly taken over by machines. Activities such as bookkeeping, filing, and accounting, much of consumer banking, and the control systems for entire supply chains were partially and sometimes completely automated. In parallel, most information came to be stored and transmitted in digital form, making it cheaper and easier to access and use. An abundance of free and low-cost web-based services also transformed the consumer economy and social interaction.

But the economic impact of these changes, although substantial, was limited in scope. In the sectors where the technologies were widely implemented, productivity increased, much as it did after the first Industrial

Revolution, when humans stopped digging trenches and turned instead to steam shovels. In certain areas, jobs declined along with the incomes of some middle-class earners in a phenomenon that has come to be known as “job and income polarization.” Nonetheless, there were many kinds of tasks that could not be automated, and the extent of digital takeover was limited. Above all, the technologies had little effect on knowledge industries and creative industries, such as medicine, law, advertising, and consulting, in which much of the value comes from specific expertise and the performance of nonroutine tasks.

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The AI revolution has shattered the constraints of earlier digital technologies.

Now, the AI revolution has shattered those constraints. Through advances in machine learning and pattern recognition over the past 15 years, AI researchers have shown that digital machines can do much more. For example, many human activities that do not lend themselves easily to codification involve pattern recognition: finding and assembling facts and insights, detecting logical and conceptual structures embedded in language, synthesizing and reprocessing information, and drawing on experience, expertise, and tacit knowledge to provide answers to complex and nuanced questions. By using deep learning—multilayered neural networks that simulate the way neurons send and receive signals in the human brain—researchers have made swift advances in machine learning. And with enough data and computing power, this approach has been remarkably effective at replicating many of these pattern-recognition, predictive, and now also generative tasks. The result has been a stunning series of breakthroughs.

Even before the advent of generative AI, machine learning had produced a number of major innovations. A short list of these includes handwriting recognition, speech recognition, and image and object recognition. Many of these tools have been used in smartphones and numerous business and consumer applications. Consider Google Translate, which employs deep learning and is used by more than one billion people; it can already handle more than 100 languages, a number that AI researchers aim to soon expand to more than 1,000. AI has also assisted breakthroughs in a number of scientific fields. For example, AlphaFold, an AI system developed by Google’s AI lab, DeepMind, has been able to predict the protein structures of all 200 million proteins known to science. Researchers around the world are now using these

structures to accelerate and assist their investigation of diseases and develop new treatments for them.

Perhaps the most striking development, however, has been the rise of large language models, or LLMs, which provide the basis for generative AI. What underlies LLMs is the Transformer, a deep-learning architecture that was introduced in a now famous paper by Google researchers in 2017. Transformers make use of a mechanism of self-attention to understand the connections and relationships between different words. Along with so-called embeddings—which map the relationships between words and use a unique neural architecture—the Transformer makes it possible for the model to learn in a self-supervised way. Once trained, the model can generate human-like outputs by simply predicting the next word or sequence of words in response to a prompt.

By training these new LLMs on billions, and now trillions, of words, and over long periods, they can generate increasingly sophisticated human-like responses when prompted. More important, their capabilities are not confined to any one sector or area of knowledge. Unlike many previous AI innovations, which were tailored to specific functions, the LLMs that underlie generative AI have a strong claim to be a truly general-purpose technology.

#### QUICK STUDIES

Generative AI has several features that suggest its potential economic impact could be unusually large. One is exceptional versatility. LLMs now have the capacity to respond to prompts in many different domains, from poetry to science to law, and to detect different domains and shift from one to another, without needing explicit instructions. Moreover, LLMs can work not only with words but also with software code, audio, images, video, and other kinds of inputs, as well as generated outputs—what is often referred to as “multimodality.” Their ability to operate flexibly among multiple disciplines and modes means that these models can provide a broad platform on which to build applications for almost any specific use. Many developers of LLMs, including OpenAI, have created APIs—application programming interfaces—that allow others to build their own proprietary AI solutions on the LLM base. The race to create applications for a huge diversity of sectors and professional disciplines and use cases has already begun.

LLMs are also noteworthy for their accessibility. Because they are designed to respond to ordinary language and other ubiquitous inputs,

LLMs can be readily used by nonspecialists who lack technical skills. All that is needed is a little practice in creating prompts that elicit effective responses. At the same time, the models' use of the vast material on the Internet or any other corpus for training means that they can acquire expertise in almost any field of knowledge. These two features give LLMs far more extensive potential uses than previous digital technologies, even those involving AI. In June 2023 alone, the ChatGPT website was visited by 1.6 billion users, a convincing signal of the low barrier to entry and the breadth of interest in the technology.

It is hard to make detailed predictions about potential future uses for LLMs. But given their unusual attributes, combined with continuing rapid technical innovations by researchers and the huge amounts of venture capital pouring into AI research, their capabilities will almost certainly grow. Within the next five years, AI developers will introduce thousands of applications built on LLMs and other generative AI models aimed at highly disparate sectors, activities, and jobs. At the same time, generative AI models will soon be used alongside other AI systems, in part to address the current limitations of those systems, but also to expand their capabilities. Examples include adapting LLMs to help with other productivity applications, such as spreadsheets and email, and pairing LLMs with robotic systems to improve and expand the operation of these systems. If these various applications are implemented effectively across the economy, a large and extended surge in productivity and other measures of economic performance seems almost certain to follow.

Among the most promising uses of generative AI in the broader economy are in digital assistant systems for the workplace. Consider an April 2023 study by Erik Brynjolfsson, Danielle Li, and Lindsey Raymond on the impact of an AI digital assistant for customer service representatives in the tech sector. The AI assistant had been trained on a large collection of audio recordings of interactions between agents and customers, along with performance metrics for these interactions: Was the problem solved? How long did it take to solve it? Was the customer happy with the result? The AI assistant was then made available to some agents and not others.

The authors of the study identified two important results. The first was that productivity for the group with the AI assistants was on average 14 percent higher. The second, and even more significant, was that, although everyone in the group with the AI assistant had productivity gains, the effect was much higher for relatively inexperienced agents.

In other words, the AI assistant was able to markedly close the gap in performance between new and seasoned agents, suggesting generative AI's potential to accelerate on-the-job training.

Digital mapping tools have had a similar effect on London taxi drivers. London is an incredibly complex city to drive in. In the past, drivers took months and even years to learn the streets well enough to pass the city's notoriously difficult taxi driver exam, known as "the Knowledge." Then came Google Maps and Waze. These apps did not eliminate the differential between the veterans and the newcomers, but they certainly reduced it. This leveling-up effect on employee performance seems likely to become a general consequence of the advent of powerful AI digital assistants in many parts of the economy.

Given their demonstrable value, AI digital assistants will soon be performing a great assortment of tasks. For example, they will produce first drafts in media and marketing applications and produce much of the basic code needed for a variety of programming, thus dramatically speeding up the work of advanced-software developers. In many professions, an AI system's ability to absorb and process vast amounts of literature at superhuman speed will also accelerate both the pace and the dissemination of research and innovation.

Another area in which nascent LLM applications could have a large impact is in ambient intelligence systems. In these, AI technologies are used in conjunction with visual or audio sensors to monitor and enhance human performance. Take the health-care sector. As a 2020 study in *Nature* discussed, an ambient intelligence system could use a number of signals and inputs—say, recorded discussions between doctors and interns as they make their hospital rounds, combined with a given patient's charts and the updates to them—to identify missing actions or overlooked questions. The AI component could then produce a summary of its findings for review by the medical staff. According to some estimates, doctors currently spend about a third of their time writing up reports and the decisions made; such a system could reduce that time by up to 80 percent.

In the foreseeable future, ambient intelligence and digital assistants could improve efficiency and transparency in supply-chain management as well as help with complex human tasks. According to the McKinsey

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AI digital assistants will soon be common in many workplaces.

Global Institute's June 2023 report, generative AI has the potential to automate activities that currently take up 60 to 70 percent of workers' time. Not only would this provide a spur to productivity; it would also free up more human labor for the most advanced tasks and allow for more rapid innovation.

#### CREATIVE INSTRUCTION

Despite the promise of AI, much of the public debate about it has focused on its controversial aspects and its potential to do harm. To begin with, LLMs are not 100 percent reliable. Their outputs can sometimes reflect the bias of their training sets, produce erroneous material, or include so-called hallucinations—assertions that sound plausible but do not reflect the reality of the physical world. Researchers are trying hard to address these issues, including by using human feedback and other means to guide the generated outputs, but more work is needed.

Another concern is that AI could achieve wholesale automation of many sectors, triggering large-scale job losses. These concerns are real, but they overlook the barriers to full automation in many workplaces, as well as the compensatory job gains—some from growing demand for existing occupations, others from the rise of new occupations, as a result of AI, including generative AI. For example, research suggests that over the next couple of decades, some occupations—roughly 10 percent of all occupations according to some estimates—whose constituent tasks can almost all be automated, will likely decline. Other occupations, both existing and new, will grow. But the largest effect of AI on the economy overall, involving about two-thirds of occupations, will be to change the way that work is performed, as some constituent tasks—on average about a third—are augmented by AI. Occupations in these fields will not go away, but they will require new skills as people do their jobs in collaboration with capable machines.

Many commentators have also noted the dangers of giving AI systems too much control. As numerous examples have shown, generative AI platforms occasionally get things wrong or hallucinate—that is, make things up. For example, an LLM given a prompt to write an article on inflation not only produced the article but concluded with a list of additional reading that included five articles and books that do not exist. Obviously, in applications that require factual accuracy, made-up answers pose a major concern. Even when not hallucinating,

LLMs can produce bad, seriously biased, silly, or obnoxious predictions that require human review. Thus, the careless or overly expansive implementation of generative AI could lead to the perpetuation of flawed information or even to malpractice.

Access to better training data may lower the risks of faulty outputs, but the problem is really a function of how LLMs work: even if trained on perfectly accurate data, the models can yield different and even contradictory answers to the same prompt simply because they are prediction machines operating in a probabilistic world. The mistake in all this is to think of LLMs as databases that simply store information. In fact, because of the probabilistic mechanism by which they learn and generate outputs from the material they are trained on, and their ability to associate ideas and concepts that may not have been associated before, their output cannot be wholly determined, even with perfect training data. For many companies and economic sectors, prudence will dictate that humans cannot be entirely written out of the script, at least not any time soon.

Moreover, in some areas of the economy, facts and accuracy are not as important as new ideas or creativity. Fashion designers have started to ask AIs to generate new clothing prototypes. AIs can generate music, write poems, make art, and draft the outlines of novels. As a source of inspiration, generative AI could become a useful tool. The concern for some is that AI could eventually replace the artist. It is too soon to know whether AI-generated content will find a serious following in the creative and performing arts. Our best guess is that it will be used more for assisting and providing inspiration than for producing finished works of art.

Given its remarkable capabilities and range, where will the main economic impact of generative AI occur? When Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Alphabet, Google's parent company, was asked a version of this question, he responded that it would come in the "knowledge economy." This seems exactly right. One could substitute the term "information economy," but across fields from scientific research to software development and a host of service functions, the potential economic benefits of LLM-based applications seem extremely large.

#### WITH US, NOT AGAINST US

Despite its enormous promise, AI is unlikely to trigger an economy-wide jump in productivity, or to support sustainable and inclusive growth,

if its use is left to market forces. Achieving AI's greatest potential benefits will require a proactive two-sided approach. One is anticipating and, to the extent possible, preventing the misuse or harmful effects of the technology. The other is promoting the uses of AI that most assist and benefit people, power the economy, and help society tackle its most pressing opportunities and challenges—by making it more accessible, ensuring its widespread diffusion, and encouraging its most productivity-enhancing applications.

For the moment, preventing harm and damage has received the lion's share of attention. In May, more than 350 AI industry leaders signed an open letter warning that “mitigating the risk of extinction” from AI should be a global priority alongside preventing pandemics and nuclear war; many, including one of us (Manyika), signed the letter to highlight the precautionary principle that should always be applied to powerful technology. Others have warned of the risks of misuse by bad actors with various motivations, as well as unconstrained military applications of AI in the absence of international regulations. These issues are important and should be addressed. But it is wrong to assume that simply limiting the misuse and harmful side effects of AI will ensure that its economic dividends will be delivered in a broadly inclusive way. Active policies and regulations aimed at unleashing those benefits will play a major role in determining whether AI realizes its full economic potential.

First, policies will need to be developed to ensure that AI complements rather than replaces human labor. In current practice, AI tools are often developed and benchmarked against human performance, leading to an industry bias toward automation. That bias has been referred to as “the Turing trap,” a term coined by Brynjolfsson, after the mathematician Alan Turing's argument that the most important test of machine intelligence is whether it can equal or surpass human performance. To get around this trap, public and private research funding for AI research should avoid an overly narrow focus on creating human-like AI. For example, in a growing number of specific tasks, AI systems can outperform humans by substantial margins, but they also require human collaborators, whose own capabilities can be further extended by the machines. More research on augmenting technologies and their uses, as well as the reorganization of workflow in many jobs, would help support innovations that use AI to enhance human productivity.

Another crucial priority will be to encourage the widest possible spread of AI technologies across the economy. In the case of the earlier digital revolution, a large body of research has documented highly uneven adoption across sectors and firms. Many large employment sectors lagged, leading to a drag on productivity. This pattern could easily be repeated. In the case of generative AI, small and medium-sized firms deserve special attention, since they may not have the resources to conduct the experiments and develop use cases. It is possible that reductions in the current

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Generative AI  
will cause far more  
jobs to change  
than to disappear.

high costs of AI development and research, as well as competition among the major developers, will lead to affordable AI applications that can be widely implemented, by keeping costs down and spurring entrepreneurial activity. But policymakers must be diligent in creating rules that ensure that such competition results in broad diffusion and use of the technologies.

A related issue is how to accelerate the use of AI by the industries that stand to benefit from them most. In many cases, some stakeholders, including employees, will understandably focus on the risks and resist adopting AI systems. To counter this tendency, policymakers and companies will need to consult with all parties involved and ensure that their interests are taken into account. At a macro level, the employment and wage effects of AI adoption—including the disappearance of some jobs even as others grow—should also be addressed. Partnerships involving government and industry and educational institutions will be needed to help people adapt to the different skill requirements needed for working in an AI-assisted environment. Income support during the transition to an AI-augmented economy may be another key ingredient, particularly in occupations such as call centers and other customer operations in which AI could put downward pressure on wages and even cause net job loss.

But despite fears to the contrary, the prospect of large-scale AI-induced unemployment does not seem likely, especially given current labor shortages in a number of sectors. Those anxieties are based on the incorrect assumption that demand is fixed, or inelastic, and hence insensitive to price and cost changes. In such a world, productivity gains automatically produce employment reductions. In fact, although there are likely to be lots of changes in the characteristics of many jobs, as well as some job displacement, overall employment levels in the economy are unlikely to change much, assuming the economy

continues to grow. Research suggests that under most scenarios, more jobs will be gained than lost over the next decade or more.

A larger challenge will be addressing the uneven effects of the new technologies, both within and between countries. Within countries, productivity growth is likely to be concentrated in white-collar jobs rather than blue-collar jobs because of generative AI's particular impact on the knowledge economy. To achieve a similar productivity surge in the industrial economy, however, will require additional major advances in robotics. Despite good progress on that front, technological challenges remain, with the result that automation and augmentation in manufacturing, logistics, and autonomous vehicles are proceeding more slowly. Such a divergence in productivity growth between the knowledge economy, the wide service sector, and industrial sectors could further contribute to unequal distribution of AI gains.

Countries will also need to confront the uneven adoption of advanced digital technologies both among firms within the same sector and among sectors. For example, within sectors, so-called frontier firms, which are often the most nimble, have outstripped other firms in using digital technologies. Similarly, the high-tech and financial services sectors have been faster to adopt new technologies than has health care, creating unevenness that can become a barrier to economy-wide productivity gains.

Internationally, the recent breakthroughs and innovations in AI have clearly been led by the United States, with China in second place. These two countries are also home to the AI platform companies with enough computing power to train advanced LLMs. By contrast, the European Union has fallen behind the United States and China in AI, cloud computing, and other related areas. The question, then, is how quickly advanced AI applications can be implemented throughout the global economy. Under the open model that prevailed for several decades after World War II, technology could spread quite rapidly across borders. But that world is no more. The complex and increasingly restrictive constraints on flows of technology and capital—whether from the war in Ukraine, sanctions, or rising tensions between China and the United States—have created new barriers to international diffusion.

Because of its digital nature, AI technology will spread; in fact, it would be very hard to stop it from doing so. But ensuring that it does so in the right way will require new forms of international economic governance. Thus, even if it lags in AI research, the EU will

adopt the technology and use it. But many emerging economies will also benefit from this technology, and for them, access may be slow and uneven. The extent to which AI can be developed and used in an equitable way worldwide will determine the magnitude of its effect on the global economy.

#### THE REAL AI CHALLENGE

AI, including its most recent addition, generative AI, has the potential to produce a large and decisive upswing in productivity and growth at a moment when the global economy desperately needs it. Among many current economic challenges are supply constraints, growing pressure on overindebted countries, demographic changes, and persistent inflation, all of which threaten to limit countries' ability to sustain prosperity.

With its broad scope and its ease of use, generative AI could do much to counter these forces. Moreover, the AI revolution has unleashed an intense period of experimentation and innovation that could add much more value to the economy. But to fully realize this potential will require equally intense attention to policy. Governments, companies, and researchers will need to prioritize augmenting human skills rather than replacing them. They will need to promote the use of the technology across the whole of the economy. And they will need to build an economy in which the use of AI systems is sensitive to the needs of workers themselves and in which shocks are minimized and the widespread fears of excessive automation are addressed—or they will likely encounter unnecessary resistance.

The development of AI has reached a crucial juncture. The technology's fraught potential, to bring enormous human and economic gains but also to cause very real harms, is coming sharply into focus. But harnessing the power of AI for good will require more than simply focusing on existential threats and potential damage. It will demand a positive vision of what AI can do and effective measures to turn that vision into reality. For the most likely risk that AI poses to the world today is not that it will produce some kind of civilizational catastrophe or a huge negative shock to employment. Rather, it is that without effective guidance, AI innovations could be developed and implemented in ways that simply magnify current economic disparities rather than bring about a strengthened global economy for generations to come. 🌐

# The Real Washington Consensus

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## Modernization Theory and the Delusions of American Strategy

CHARLES KING

**A**mong American foreign policy whisperers and assessors of the state of the world, no one had a more checkered reputation than Walt Rostow—academic economist, influential author, adviser to presidents, and, as the U.S. diplomat Averell Harriman once called him bitingly, “America’s Rasputin.” In the administrations of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, nearly every strategic move Rostow advocated turned out to be wrong, from escalating the commitment of U.S. combat troops for South Vietnam to rejecting peace talks with the North Vietnamese. Since he continued to defend those positions after most other people had concluded they were mistakes, his name became a byword for a specific kind of Washington virtue: offering terrible advice but at least doing so consistently. “[Zbigniew] Brzezinski aspires to be the Henry Kissinger of this administration,”

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the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted in his diary in May 1978 as the administration of President Jimmy Carter was developing a harder line toward the Soviet Union. “I fear he will end up the Walt Rostow.”

But before Rostow became a punch line, he was a thinker. Despite his policy errors and his diminished status inside the Beltway, his ideas and worldview lodged themselves deep inside the collective unconscious of the American foreign policy establishment—and remain there today, although sometimes in ways that are hard to see at first.

Rostow had come into the White House from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology after publishing the must-read foreign policy book of 1960, *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Around the world, the Soviet Union was peddling a seductive model of development, one built from a one-party dictatorship, state monopolies, and five-year plans. To Rostow, the West desperately needed its own theory for how societies evolve, a coherent set of principles translatable into a practical blueprint. It should be drawn not from airy Marxism, he believed, but from concrete history: the pathway that Western Europe and North America had already trod from the Enlightenment onward. In his book, Rostow offered a framework for how U.S. foreign policy could spur economic and social change abroad, especially in what was then known as the Third World. Countries develop in predictable stages, he argued, from preconditions for growth to economic takeoff, toward the goal of a modern consumer society. The trick was to accumulate the capital, know-how, and—crucially—Western values that would allow takeoff to occur.

Rostow’s book was where many readers first encountered what came to be called “modernization theory.” On Rostow’s reading of the historical evidence, politics, economics, and mentalities came bundled together. Modern economies were impossible without modern minds, which in turn formed the habits of playing by the rules and respecting abstract institutions that were fundamental to democracy. Some of those ideas ran back to early social scientists such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim and would be elaborated by many of Rostow’s contemporaries, such as the American sociologist Talcott Parsons. But Rostow’s aim was more than academic. Fighting communism in theory was the first step toward countering it in practice. To make that point, he gave his book an unsubtle but memorable subtitle: “A Non-Communist Manifesto.”

After reading *The Stages of Economic Growth*, an American could come away convinced that global poverty and economic development were

challenges on par with the arms race. Rather than thinking of foreign affairs as merely a grand chessboard, Rostow insisted, U.S. policymakers should aim the country's resources at jump-starting other countries' internal evolutions—a process that would essentially reverse-engineer the route to success that the United States and other industrialized societies had traversed since the eighteenth century. In the end, most of the assistance programs that were born in Rostow's era, from the Peace Corps to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), bore his stamp. But in the drive to bring the Third World up to the level of the First, Rostow believed, Americans could take comfort in one deep truth: that ultimately history, common sense, and human nature were on their side. Consumerism would enable social transformations that, sooner or later, would increase the likelihood of global convergence with the values, interests, and preferences of the United States.

For more than half a century, the worldview that Rostow articulated has remained a mainstay of American thought at the intersection of foreign policy and political economy. It still influences foreign aid programs and democracy assistance. It is evident in Americans' sense of strategic disappointment and bafflement—at the direction of Russia since the end of the Cold War, at the resurgence of right-wing nationalism among European allies, at the renewed appeal of non-alignment among middle powers and poorer countries. The tenets of modernization theory even inform the analysis of domestic politics in the United States. Seven years after the numb bewilderment of election night 2016, American liberals and moderate conservatives still view the phenomenon of Donald Trump as an atavistic throwback to what Rostow called “traditional society”: regional economic backwardness, social stagnation, and, as he put it, “the inaccessibility of modern science, its applications, and its frame of mind.”

More than any other intuition or outlook, modernization theory still has the greatest claim to being a genuine Washington consensus. “U.S. foreign policy is rooted in a belief that the way to lasting peace and prosperity is actually to integrate diplomacy, defense, and development, the three Ds,” the USAID administrator, Samantha Power, said during a trip to Fiji in August. Yet in an age of renewed superpower competition and global realignments, the task for American thinkers and doers is to reimagine what is taken for granted about how societies work internally, how they change, and how—even whether—external actors can influence the process.

Modernization theory was born in an age when the alternatives to democracy and the market were clear. Today, more than at any point since the Cold War, new competitors have their own theories to offer, as well as the resources to realize them: the global loan-sharking of China's Belt and Road Initiative; the civilizational counterrevolution spearheaded by leaders such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; and even the vision of a benevolent tech-bro oligarchy represented by figures such as Elon Musk. Developing a coherent account of how the world really works—and what American foreign policy can do to nudge the country's own long-term interests into closer alignment with humanity's—will be one of this decade's signature intellectual challenges.

#### RACE TO THE TOP

It is a particular obsession of great powers to build grand theories about how and why the rest of the world is not like them. Americans, of course, have long been concerned with their own country's providential specialness. It is a theme that runs back—in the way the story is told today—to the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Governor John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" sermon of 1630. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, American thinkers were beginning to develop something new: not a paean to American exceptionalism but a general, historically informed account of how societies evolve—one influenced in no small measure by the example they found on their own doorstep.

In the 1840s, the New York lawyer, businessman, and amateur scholar Lewis Henry Morgan traveled the rural back roads of his state and was struck by the social transformation playing out before his eyes. The once powerful Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, Confederacy—the multicentury alliance among the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora peoples—was fading in the face of white expansion. The greatest Native American alliance to exist on the continent was passing into obscurity, a development that Morgan set about to document in real time.

Over the next several decades, Morgan translated his observations into a monumental study of the Haudenosaunee and then, in 1877, a work he called *Ancient Society*. His aim was to derive general conclusions from both the changes he had witnessed in his own lifetime and the vast scholarship on ancient Greece and other bygone eras. Simpler forms of association—families and tribes—had over time

given way to modern cities and states, Morgan noted. In the process, human societies all seemed to travel through the same waypoints. He named these stages “the savage,” “the barbarous,” and “the civilized.” Each had its own qualities of language, religion, and behavior: how to express abstract ideas of time, say, or whether the weather was produced by capricious gods or discernible patterns of heating and cooling. Moreover, these stages were comparable across cultures: peoples at the same stage of history did things more or less the same way. What his Haudenosaunee neighbors had experienced was not so much displacement or disaster, he concluded, as their own process of slouching toward civilization, a development that had been accelerated, for good and ill, by their encounter with white Americans farther along the same human highway.

Morgan would turn out to have an outside influence on science and the public understanding of social difference, both in the United States and abroad. Charles Darwin quoted him. Karl Marx jotted down notes on his ideas. The Smithsonian Institution made *Ancient Society* required reading for its research staff, and his findings would inform government policy on forced Native American assimilation. When the Library of Congress opened its domed Thomas Jefferson Building in 1897, designers were so taken with Morgan’s framework that they literally carved it in stone. The building’s window arches featured keystones in the shape of male heads representing Morgan’s understanding of the principal types of humanity. On the front were civilized Europeans and their diaspora, looking out toward the U.S. Capitol. Barbarous Chinese, Japanese, and Turks wrapped around the sides. Savage Africans and Melanesians were relegated to the back. It was a graphic illustration of the principal stages of human development as white Americans perceived them at the time. (And it is still on display today.)

Morgan’s outlook on society was evolutionary. It was perfectly possible for a human community to move from the back of the Library of Congress to the front, as it were, given enough time and effort. No race or culture was stuck in one natural station. That claim, however, set Morgan and his followers apart from another powerful strain of American thought: one that, by the early twentieth century, was quickly becoming the dominant way of analyzing national greatness and decline.

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The task for American thinkers and doers is to reimagine how societies change.

“In America we have nearly succeeded in destroying the privilege of birth; that is, the intellectual and moral advantage a man of good stock brings into the world with him,” wrote the naturalist and philanthropist Madison Grant. A pioneering conservationist, Grant was a friend of Theodore Roosevelt and had helped found the Bronx Zoo. But his widest influence came from a sweeping survey of human history, *The Passing of the Great Race*, which he published in 1916. In the years to come, Grant’s work would become a defining text for a new generation of globally aware citizens and policymakers.

Expanding the franchise to Black Americans had become “an unending wail for rights” leading to a “rule of the average” in U.S. politics, Grant argued. In contrast to Morgan’s claims, biological races were immutable, he felt, a fact evident from the massive experiment in social reform and nation-building he had witnessed in his own lifetime: Reconstruction and the reassertion of white power in the Jim Crow era. “It has taken us fifty years to learn that speaking English, wearing good clothes, and going to school and to church . . . [do] not transform a negro into a white man,” he wrote. Even worse, Grant warned, the literal body politic of the United States was now being threatened by race defilement, especially given the influx of new arrivals from southern and eastern Europe since the 1890s. “The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a negro is a negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu; and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew,” Grant stated plainly near the beginning of his book.

Some people found these claims ghastly and nonsensical. The Columbia University professor Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, was so outraged that he gave *The Passing of the Great Race* negative reviews in two different periodicals. In a famous public debate in Chicago, W. E. B. Du Bois made a laughingstock of a younger associate of Grant’s, Lothrop Stoddard. But the worldview Grant espoused—the deep reality of inherited race, the ranking of world communities by their racial station, the struggle for survival among incompatible racial types—would reshape American thought and practice. The American eugenics movement sprang from the ideas Grant promoted. The Johnson-Reed Act, a racially preferential immigration policy passed by Congress in 1924, came about in part because of his lobbying. It would remain largely in place for the next four decades.

A THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Walt Rostow was born the same year *The Passing of the Great Race* appeared. His father, Victor Rostowsky, had been the publisher of an underground socialist newspaper in Odessa, which was then a Russian imperial port. Like other Russian Jewish activists at the time, he escaped the tsarist police by sailing, steerage class, for New York, shortening the family name along the way.

He made sure his three sons were unmistakably American. Walt was named for the poet Walt Whitman, and his two brothers for the socialist Eugene Debs and the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. The household sparkled with ideas and debate. Grand speculations about human nature, the tides of history, and the possibilities of government were traded across the dinner table. Not long after enrolling as an undergraduate at Yale at the age of 15, Rostow had already come around to the concerns that would drive his professional life. "I would work on two problems," he later remembered. "One was economic history and the other was Karl Marx."

In ways that might be less apparent today, both interests were infused with scholarly ambition as well as practical urgency. Rostow had grown up in a country that had ready-made answers to the great problems in the social sciences. They were confidently on display in school curricula, in natural history museums, and in the everyday hierarchies of segregated water fountains, streetcars, and movie theaters—the visible world justified by widely accepted theories of racial civilization and timeless barbarism.

But Rostow's own lifetime had seen these truths begin to crumble. The rise of the Nazis had shown the real-world consequences of a country's remaking its government according to a warped theory of history. The American eugenics movement began to ebb. American children, schooled since the 1890s to recite the pledge of allegiance by stretching out the right arm toward the flag, a gesture known as the Bellamy salute, were quietly instructed to place hands on hearts instead.

In 1936, a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford allowed Rostow to witness another country's response to the rise of fascism. He also began to research a case study that he felt contained the keys to social change: an analysis of how the first modernizer, Great Britain, had wrenched itself from an agricultural economy into an industrial one without succumbing to dictatorship.

After earning a Ph.D. in economics at Yale, Rostow joined the war effort as a bombing analyst for the Office of Strategic Services, a job that would later have a profound, and horrific, impact on his approach



America's Rasputin: Rostow testifying in the U.S. Senate, 1962

to Vietnam. By 1950, back in academia as a member of the economics department at MIT, he began to sense that good theory might hold the secret to dismantling bad practice. He had “earlier promised to produce an alternative to Marxism as a theory of modern history,” he wrote the American politician and diplomat Adlai Stevenson in 1958 while on leave at Cambridge University, “and I have used my sabbatical to make my bid.” He had begun to sketch out his own account of social evolution, rooted in economics but drawing on a particular reading of American and world history—leaping over Grant, in a way, and reaching back toward Morgan. The result was *The Stages of Economic Growth*.

On the first page, Rostow pleaded for the modesty of his own theory while also announcing it as a new, universal take on social and economic development. The concept at the core of his book—the stages through which societies pass in moving from traditional society to modernity—was both “arbitrary and limited” and “in no absolute sense, a correct way,” he wrote. Yet in all the societies he had surveyed, from the nineteenth-century vanguard of industrialization such as Great Britain and France, to later modernizers such as Japan and Russia, to countries straining to catch up, such as Turkey and China, there was a “uniformity” in the pathway to development that sprang up from the historical data. In short, countries move from traditional society to “maturity”

through a combination of cultural change, technological innovation, and elite choice—the realization that a growth-oriented economy and public welfare are the principal goals of governance.

Chapter by chapter, Rostow described in detail the five stages of growth he had gleaned from history: traditional society, preconditions for takeoff, takeoff, the drive to maturity, maturity, and high mass-consumption. His prose was that of a system builder and an optimist, and in both ways, there was no escaping the gravitational pull of Marx—which was also, in a way, the pull of Lewis Henry Morgan, from the concept of developmental stages to the view that all of history leads inexorably toward countries that happen to be the wealthiest and most powerful today. Marx had built “a system full of flaws,” as Rostow put it, “but full also of legitimate partial insights, a great formal contribution to social science.”

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Modernization theory was not so much wrong as self-limiting.

Yet as he saw it, his Marxist contemporaries, by contrast, were playing pantomime, advocating grotesque policies that flowed from their own wishful thinking about history and human nature. “Gentlemen, I have very important news,” Rostow would declare dramatically to his White House staff in 1967, announcing the assassination of Che Guevara. “They finally got the SOB. The last of the romantic guerrillas.” Lenin, Guevara, Ho Chi Minh—each had consistently chosen the wrong course when the right one was blindingly apparent. “It is they,” Rostow concluded, referring to political leaders in former colonial states, “who, having helped achieve independence, under the banners of human freedom, appealing to those values in the West which they share, must now accept a large part of the responsibility for making those values come to life, in terms of their own societies and cultures, as they complete the preconditions and launch themselves into self-sustained growth.”

History knew its business. The grand sweep of social and economic change was a single journey of liberation and improvement, one that any country or culture might choose to join. All politicians had to do was get out of the way. It was a truth that Rostow believed applied equally well to his own country. One of the ancillary aims of *The Stages of Economic Growth* was to introduce Americans to their own history—not Plymouth Rock and Washington crossing the Delaware, but the great arc of the human past, in which the United States had simply followed the well-worn path of other modernizing societies.

The difference in Rostow's own day, however, was the rapidity with which other countries were doing the same thing. The principal problem for the future was how to ensure peace in a coming age of what he called "the diffusion of power." If current trends followed the past as he understood it, the coming world would contain many more countries that had become full adults. "It is fairly safe to predict that, by 2000 or 2010 . . . India and China . . . will be, in our sense, mature powers." The idea of a bipolar world was already an illusion by the time he sat down to write, Rostow believed. No countries were mere spectators in the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. It would become an even dimmer fantasy, he predicted, in decades to come.

Once he went into government—in the Kennedy White House, then the State Department, then as Johnson's national security adviser—Rostow was an engine of memos, slogans, and proposals. "Walt can write faster than I can read," Kennedy once said, apparently not as a compliment. Rostow's career rested on the accidental coming together of intellect and experience: in political economy and, during World War II, in bomb targeting. His opinions on both would shape an entire era in U.S. foreign policy, from the creation of a federal infrastructure for overseas development assistance to the escalation of the war in Vietnam.

After leaving government in 1969, he spent the next several decades totting up the good calls and the bad ones—the former his, he believed, the latter those of defeatists who failed to understand the mechanics of history. The Vietnam War had been a victory for the United States and a benefit to the world, he argued. It had successfully staved off communism long enough for capitalism to take off across much of Asia. As time went on, the only person who seemed to be convinced by that line of reasoning was Rostow himself. Like Morgan, Grant, and even the Marxists he battled throughout his career, Rostow had succumbed to the occupational hazard of embracing big history. The long run only comes into view when you ignore the nearer miseries.

#### WHAT ROSTOW GOT RIGHT

The fate of modernization theory tracked that of its greatest popularizer. By the 1970s, the objections from social scientists had become legion. Rostow was at best naive, ignorant of the ways in which the world of the late twentieth century, replete with structural disadvantages that kept poor countries poor, was not that of the nineteenth. At worst, he was an imperialist manqué, justifying interventions, military

and otherwise, by former colonizers in the internal affairs of newly independent states. And to judge from the actions of high-consumption societies, Western values seemed the last thing the West really believed in. For someone who worked closely with Kennedy, it took a leap of the imagination to believe that the dominance of “family and clan connections,” as he put it, was exclusive to traditional societies. It took an even greater leap to see saturation bombing in Vietnam as a historical necessity.

As Rostow’s early critics argued, modernization theory seemed less science than folk theory—one society’s quaint attempt to make sense of all the others. Political economy was not a time machine, his detractors pointed out. In examining inequalities of national income and power in the global system, wealthier countries were not simply staring back at earlier versions of themselves. All societies lived in the here and now, with their own internal and external obstacles to growth. Development required smart policies—in trade, finance, and governance—not just a set of inputs to kick poorer countries into modernity. There was no reason even to believe that modernity itself was just one thing, the variety that came with a Renaissance, a Reformation, and an Industrial Revolution. Rostow had taken a slice of history and derived universal laws from it. His was a kinder form of the historical determinism of a Morgan or a Grant perhaps, but no less blinkered and time-bound.

His critics notwithstanding, Rostow, who died in 2003, could look at the later decades of his life as a kind of quiet vindication. If socialism had offered the most dynamic program for political and economic change in Rostow’s childhood—as it had been for his father, bent over his printing press in Odessa—that role now came to be occupied by modernization. In South Korea, in Turkey, and even in China, political elites came to use precisely that term, sometimes in direct translation into local languages. “We must run while they walk,” Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere had said in the 1960s of his own country’s postcolonial development according to socialist principles. But as the decades wore on, as the message of nationalization, autarky, and single-party systems faded, what remained was the idea of a country racing headlong into modernity, catching up with the rest of the developed world.

When Marxist economies and communist states finally collapsed in eastern Europe and Eurasia, the array of policies adopted in response by the United States and its European allies seemed to crib Rostow.

Advisers, bankers, investors, and consultants descended on countries that were busy cementing market economies and opening to external trade and investment. Democracy assistance programs provided funds and know-how. Election monitors and democracy watchers reported on practices that they classified as either progress toward freedom or democratic backsliding, as if each country could be assigned to a specific stage of political development. The expectations were clear. Demand for choice in consumer goods would fuel demand for choice in elected officials. Globalization would shift local identities. Democracy at home would buttress peaceful behavior abroad.

For all Rostow's insistence on the stepwise development of human societies, however, his version of modernization did not end with global peace, prosperity, and millennial happiness. The place he stopped was with the diffusion of power. The United States would have to plan for a time when the advantages of modernity, as he saw them, were no longer confined to the western appendage of Eurasia and a few of its former colonies. A world in which lots of societies were "mature"—filled with consumer goods and an expectation of progress, brimming with national and individual ambition—was very different from the one he knew in 1960, but it might be glimpsed on the horizon. In that sense, modernization theory was not so much the culmination of American exceptionalism as a warning against it. Prepare for the future, Rostow cautioned, by imagining how the United States would behave, in its foreign policy and in its own self-understanding, in a world where it was not particularly special at all.

In that respect at least, Rostow was broadly right. A national economy that strives for growth, a political system that assumes some kind of mass participation, and a society that expects welfare and progress have all become far closer to human universals than they were a half century ago. But from this point forward, all bets are off. There is no reason to expect that economic behavior, political institutions, and social values will always be bundled and unidirectional. Since 1981, the World Values Survey, a cluster of cross-national surveys, has arrayed societies along two dimensions of self-reported values: "traditional" versus "secular-rational" values, meaning the balance among things such as religiosity, respect for authority, secularism, and individuality; and "survival" versus "self-expression" values, meaning the balance among security, distrust of outsiders, liberty, and personal happiness. As the survey data have shown, none of these things is fixed. Even in high-modern

societies, the sum of values and behaviors is more like a kaleidoscope than a way station along a predetermined developmental path.

Similar lessons apply to Rostow's major area of concern, economic development. In the last quarter century, global progress has been remarkable, if uneven. Even accounting for the effects of climate change, by the middle of this century, human well-being—less poverty, lower child and maternal mortality, and more primary education—is likely to be at a level that would have astonished Rostow's generation. The World Bank's World Development Report is today more likely to focus on sovereign debt, data management, and technology as the most pressing issues in promoting human welfare, rather than health, water, sanitation, and absolute poverty. But as the economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo have argued, "speculating on a grand scale" does not help explain where specific policies have succeeded or failed, much less whether external aid is, in general, good or bad. Except in the broadest possible sense—Rostow's metrics of higher income and more investment—countries do not move through discrete stages. Instead, the challenge is to know what works in specific contexts—the textured environment of hard incentives and existing habits—and to build in an ability to pivot when a solution does not pan out.

Modernization theory was not so much wrong as self-limiting. To the degree that Americans look on Hungary, India, Russia, Turkey, or even the United States with a sense of disappointment—at the weakening of democracy, at the deepening of old social fissures such as ethnicity or religion, at the ineffable sense that things are going backward—it is because of the staying power of the worldview Rostow popularized. But as Rostow himself warned, the essence of strategy was straining to imagine beyond the horizon. In fact, when he reflected on his own contributions in his memoirs in 1972, his assessment was rather surprising. One of his goals, he wrote, had been to chart the inadequacies of life in an era of high mass consumption. The goal of human life was not to make and acquire more stuff, he felt, even though an economist might use that as a shorthand. It was "the adventure of seeing what man can and will do when the pressure of scarcity is substantially lifted from him."

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Pragmatism is what states call a theory they would rather not talk about.

There was no reason to believe that the early modernizers had any advantage in this regard, or to expect that they would also be in the vanguard of finding ever newer frontiers to breach. “Babies, boredom, three-day weekends,” the steady “increase in real income”—his worry was that, in fully modern societies, all these things would one day soon lose their charm. In knowing more about how the stages of growth played out in different settings, Americans might at last be able to see more clearly how diverse societies “have, in different ways, organized themselves for growth without suppressing the possibility of human freedom.” At the core of Rostow’s thinking was a set of humanistic commitments that contrasted wildly with the cruelty of his policy advice—the source of the most famous quip about him, that he was “a sheep in wolf’s clothing,” a phrase attributed to the writer and government official Townsend Hoopes (although no evidence seems to exist that anyone ever said it).

Rostow knew that once a country becomes modern, things can still go terribly wrong. “Billions of human beings must live in the world, if we preserve it,” he wrote in the final paragraphs of *The Stages of Economic Growth*. “They have the right to live their time in civilized settings, marked by a degree of respect for their uniqueness and their dignity.”

#### THE WAY THE WORLD WORKS

The challenges of Rostow’s era have their analogs today. He was worried about nuclear annihilation, which might be a stand-in for climate change. He was concerned about the allure of the alternative model offered by Marxism, which might well be compared to the role played by today’s populist and nationalist reactions to neoliberalism. The essentials of U.S. strategy—counter China and Russia, deter attacks on the homeland, build resilience, and cooperate on climate change, food insecurity, and communicable diseases—are different from the ambitions that Rostow had in mind. Yet he would have understood the American desire to believe that capitalism, democracy, and a pro-American foreign policy are endpoints of the same process of social development. In *The Stages of Economic Growth*, what he thought he had provided his fellow Americans was a way of unbundling those expectations.

For all its asterisks and misinterpretations, modernization theory was a contribution to thinking about what is universal in human development and how foreign policy might prepare for a coming age in which the benefits of modernity are more open to all. It was also a recognition that how one thinks about the world determines how one acts in it.

“The United States will work pragmatically with any partner willing to join us in constructive problem-solving, reinforcing and building new ties based on shared interests,” the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy declared. But pragmatism is what states call a theory they would rather not talk about, and it comes at a cost. In the absence of some broad understanding of what drives social and political change, the United States will continue to lurch from one crisis to the next, overburdened as a great power yet underemployed as a leader—one that may be in relative decline but that still has the awesome power to define global priorities, mobilize coalitions, and serve as the closest thing the world has to a planetary voice for cooperation, justice, and human survival.

All these roles depend on the United States’ own pathway through modernity, where the forces of change are no different from those at work in other countries. Immigration and shifting demographics will alter the public assessment of vital interests abroad. Income inequality will fuel new waves of populism. Affective polarization—the sense among voters and their leaders that the other side is not merely wrong but malicious—will present problems for the peaceful transition of power and the respect for national institutions, especially in what has effectively become a federation of one-party states. An electoral system blatantly corrupt by the standards of other established democracies, awash in private money and with weak mechanisms of internal reform, will embolden authoritarians who promise to destroy it all in one cleansing fire.

Being explicit about the way the world works is not an academic luxury. It is a way not just of forecasting the future but also of hedging against it—a tool for contingency-proofing, to the degree possible, a great power’s global vision against the domestic developments that could bring everything crashing down. Rostow believed history had demonstrated that every society can get to a specific point of human development, irrespective of language or culture. But he had no illusions that things ended there, not even for the pioneers of high consumption such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Once modernity became the taken-for-granted way of organizing the globe, once scarcity had been lessened and minds opened, further stages of development—hopeful ones as well as disasters—lay ahead. Modernization theory offered no comfort about what these stages might be. Surveillance capitalism, weaponized interdependence, the rise of artificial intelligence? Now, Rostow might have said, you take it from here. 🌐

pursuit of innovative solutions to the most pressing problems facing society, Japanese universities have pushed the boundaries of knowledge across various disciplines, from technology to healthcare, thanks to close partnerships with government, industry and other educational institutions.

**The Kyoto College of Graduate Studies for Informatics** (kcg.edu) embodies Japan's renowned innovative spirit. As an IT professional graduate school, borne out of the country's first computer education institution, Kyoto Computer Gakuin (KCG), it remains faithful to its mission to provide world-leading computer education.

Recognizing that skilled information technology specialists will remain in high demand as the digital economy develops rapidly, the institution educates the next generation of applied IT specialists who will develop new advancements in their field, locally and globally.

"Our founding philosophy to provide cutting-edge computer education has required what we call 'technological courage.' We've invested in upgrading our computer facilities with bigger screens, cameras and a projector during the pandemic to better conduct hybrid classes. Teachers can interact with students either face-to-face or online. I think we coped well during the difficult time," said **The Kyoto College of Graduate Studies for Informatics Rector and Chairman Wataru Hasegawa**.

**KCG Group Chief Academic Officer Prof. Sanford Gold**, who teaches in the college, added: "We're bringing in world-leading technologies because we want to have an instructional edge. Our goal is to bring synergy to the field of IT so our students can work in Japan, abroad or go back home to apply what they've learned."

Meanwhile, **Nagoya City University** is pushing the boundaries in AI and data science through pioneering research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of its students and faculty.

"AI and science engineering are rapidly developing right now. These fields have contributed to leading solutions to social issues and help in government policy-making. We have been developing and strengthening this field, which is why we opened our faculty for data science," said **Nagoya City University President Kiyofumi Asai**.

As platforms for collaboration in research and as incubators of innovation, Japan's universities have emerged as leaders in fields such as robotics and artificial intelligence. Their output has the potential to improve the lives of billions of people and bring about a sustainable future.

### Advancing a more humane society

The concept of Society 5.0 lays out a future where technology is harnessed to create a human-centered society. By integrating the breakthroughs of the Information Age, like Big Data, the Internet of Things, and Artificial Intelligence, Japan hopes to create an environment where technology serves its citizens in the essential aspects of their lives, including health care, transportation, and urban planning.

Universities play a pivotal role in realizing this vision

through research and collaboration with industries and government agencies, both national and local, to develop solutions that improve efficiency, sustainability, and the overall well-being of citizens. If this transformational project is to succeed, the humans behind the technology must likewise be well-developed.

Tracing its origins to 1886 as the Kyoritsu Women's Educational Institution, **Kyoritsu Women's University** was established in 1949 and has remained committed to educating and empowering women as valuable members of society from the post-war period to the present day.

"The founding spirit of our institution is promoting independence and self-reliance of women. We put an emphasis on hands-on education and leadership, starting with the Faculty of Home Economics and growing into the comprehensive university we are today. Recently, we are actively fostering the full potential of our students' leadership with global perspectives," said **Kyoritsu Women's University President Kiyoshi Kawakubo**.

In the context of Society 5.0, Kyoritsu Women's University sees itself playing a pivotal role by expanding its curriculum and equipping its students with the knowledge, skills, and a critical mindset that will allow them to succeed in a rapidly evolving world.

Located in central Tokyo, Kyoritsu Women's University has six faculties offering bachelor degrees: Home Economics, Arts and Letters, International Studies, Nursing, Business Studies, and Architecture and Design. Associate degrees are offered by two departments: the Science of Living and Language and Literature. Graduate programs are offered in Home Economics, Arts and Letters, International Studies, and Nursing Studies.

Another institution committed to narrowing the gender gap is **Toyo University**.

Through various initiatives, like scholarships, mentorship programs and leadership workshops, the Tokyo-based university promotes the advancement of women in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Through a shared commitment to research, openness to the world, and vision for a more humane society, Japan's schools have secured their future as world-leading innovators. ■

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# The New Economic Security State

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## How De-risking Will Remake Geopolitics

HENRY FARRELL AND ABRAHAM NEWMAN

In April 2023, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan begged his listeners' indulgence for straying out of his lane by delivering a major address about economics. But his actual argument—that decades of free-market zealotry had weakened the country's national security—was anything but apologetic. "Ignoring economic dependencies that had built up over the decades of liberalization had become really perilous—from energy uncertainty in Europe to supply-chain vulnerabilities in medical equipment, semiconductors, and critical minerals," Sullivan said. "These were the kinds of dependencies that could be exploited for economic or geopolitical leverage." Sullivan acknowledged both the costs and the benefits of markets but emphasized how

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They are the authors of *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy*.

the economic liberalization pursued by past U.S. administrations had not created peace. Instead, a simplistic faith in the magic of markets had hollowed out U.S. industry, welcomed a rising adversary (China) into free-trade arrangements, and riddled global supply chains with critical security vulnerabilities.

In the past decade, economics and national security have collided, turning government inside out and upside down. The definition of security has expanded beyond matters related to warfare and terrorism,

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Security and  
economics  
can no longer  
have separate  
policy lanes.

as previously disregarded economic and environmental problems such as food insecurity, energy shortages, inflation, and climate change have moved to the “very core” of the official U.S. National Security Strategy. Sullivan’s duties now involve the global marketplace as much as they do missile systems, and international economics officials such as U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo

and U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai spend more and more of their time thinking about national security questions. They have little choice. Officials cannot easily disentangle trade and commerce from security when U.S. markets are intertwined with those of adversaries, consumer electronics are readily weaponized, and beefed-up graphics chips are the engines of military artificial intelligence.

The “new Washington consensus” of U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration, as expounded by Sullivan, attempts to escape two very different traps. It breaks from the conventional approach of the post–Cold War era, when politicians and pundits prioritized markets over security, hoping that economic liberalism and interdependence would underpin peace. But it also avoids reviving the prior Cold War-era assumption that security trumped markets, when the denizens of Washington feared that trading with the Soviet Union was tantamount to giving succor to the enemy.

The economies of the United States and China are inextricably entangled, however much economic nationalists in both countries resent that fact. There is no plausible way to completely unwind this interdependence or detach the civilian and military economies from each other without causing irreparable harm to American society. That is why U.S. officials have borrowed European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s language about “de-risking,” the process of managing the

vulnerabilities generated by an interdependent world. They see their job as keeping as much of the global economy intact as possible and solving shared problems while defusing the most urgent security threats.

This enormous task does not fall into the domain of either traditional national security or free-market economics. It is an effort to maintain economic security, one that looks to prevent economic shocks that could destabilize society and hopes to limit the growing use of interdependence as a tool of coercion. Protecting economic security means keeping an eye on the trajectories of growth and innovation while managing anticipated security threats and creating enough policy bandwidth to tackle unanticipated ones. It cannot be reduced to either missile systems or market regulations, and it involves messy tradeoffs and decisions over which economic restrictions will defuse threats without undermining growth and which measures might help tackle shared global problems, such as climate change, without substantially damaging American security and prosperity.

Security and economics have had separate policy lanes until the recent past, which is why the work that Sullivan, Raimondo, and Tai are doing has become so complicated. The United States is still tied to the legacy of the Cold War, when policymakers tended to think that security trumped economics, and to the legacy of the era of globalization that followed, during which they mostly assumed that economics trumped security. But the two eras have had an asymmetric effect on the present: although Washington bulked up its security muscles during the Cold War, its economic brain actively shrank during the giddy excesses of globalization, when everyone believed that markets knew best and that government should steer clear of trying to direct the economy. That dynamic makes it more likely that Cold War reflexes could hijack the new economic security agenda, pushing the country down a risky path of tit-for-tat escalation between the major powers.

To address the new problems of economic security and avoid a downward spiral that could threaten the global economy, U.S. officials must reckon with a major task: nothing less than a transformation of the U.S. government. The past offers the wrong guidance, and the current predicament calls for an exacting reassessment. Several U.S. allies, notably Japan and the European Union, have retained greater control over markets in the interest of economic security; the United States can learn from them. Only a considerably reformed economic security state will be suited to a world that is both highly interdependent and filled with security risks.

THE VISIBLE HAND

Over the last two years, the Biden administration has regularly turned to Cold War laws and institutions to strengthen the country's economic security. When Biden declared limits on U.S. investments in China in August, he invoked emergency powers legislation from the 1970s. When he wanted U.S. industries to produce critical minerals for the transition to a post-carbon economy in 2022, he used the 1950 Defense Production Act. Washington's new measures to deny Beijing access to the semiconductors it needs for military artificial intelligence were empowered and justified by the Trump administration's reform of export control regulations. But that system of export controls itself dates back at least as far as the 1949 Export Control Act.

All these tools were crafted in simpler times, when the U.S. government was more powerful and when it subordinated markets to the needs of national security. During the Cold War, the government intervened directly in large parts of the economy, cutting off nearly all trade with the Soviet Union for extended periods. It saw itself as engaged in an existential conflict with an adversary committed to an alien way of organizing the economy and society and thus developed policy instruments to ensure that its own economy supported military power and limited interdependence with its enemy to a bare minimum.

The Defense Production Act was originally one element of a vast military bureaucracy that was empowered to plan the security economy by allocating resources, controlling wages and prices, and even, in principle, seizing private property. Export controls were a linchpin of the Cold War economy. The U.S. diplomat and foreign policy thinker George Kennan had warned in his famous 1947 essay in these pages, written under the pseudonym "X," that the Soviet Union saw trade as an economic weapon. As the scholar Bruce Jentleson has documented, U.S. policymakers listened, using export controls to minimize economic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union for decades. The export control regime was unimaginably strict by today's standards, affecting the United States' economic relations with its allies, too. The historians Mario Daniels and John Krige have found that by the mid-1980s, 40 percent of U.S. exports required government approval, and 90 percent of licenses were granted for trade with other "free countries."

Defense production planning and Cold War export controls were wide ranging, but their aim was simple: to support U.S. military production and strangle the Soviet economy.

The United States routinely worried that its allies might become economically dependent on its adversary and did what it could to prevent such ties from forming. When European countries and the Soviet Union built a joint gas pipeline in the 1980s, the Reagan administration retaliated with sanctions and even threatened the Europeans with the withdrawal of the U.S. security guarantee.

#### REIGN OF THE MARKET

By the time the Cold War ended, Washington had already moved away from the economic interventionism practiced by Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed like an unqualified victory for market openness over state planning. The original “Washington consensus” recommended that the state retreat from direct involvement in the economy and embrace the free movement of capital. Multilateral institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, demanded radical economic changes in return for aid. Great-power competition seemed a relic of antiquity, and expanding interdependence the wellspring of a better world to come.

The result was that the United States didn’t simply stand by as globalization took hold. It vigorously encouraged it, betting that markets would not just increase prosperity but underpin security, too. A complex and interdependent global economy would mean that war—with all its economic disruptions—would be increasingly unthinkable, and warmongering dictatorships might become more liberal and peace loving as their economies became more free.

The gamble had sharp limits. The United States, after all, never abandoned its goal of military supremacy. But the belief that interdependence depressed the likelihood of conflict allowed U.S. officials to be initially sanguine about the vast increase in global trade, financial flows, and the complexity of supply chains. In their view, the widening and deepening of commercial ties would make the world safer, not more dangerous. Policymakers in the West broadly assumed that economic activities were best handled by private enterprise. Washington liberalized critical infrastructure, and the government looked on with indifference as U.S. telecommunications manufacturers, such as Lucent, were bought out by foreign firms or went under. The Department of Commerce subcontracted the key aspects of Internet regulation to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, a

nonprofit incorporated under California law. Governments across the globe increasingly outsourced core national security missions, such as those to do with space flight and satellite technology, to private companies, in the belief that businesses could do such work cheaper and better than could the state.

They weren't completely wrong. Markets can indeed do some things better than states. But as Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, observed in *The Wealth of Nations*, it was "the first duty of the sovereign" to protect "the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies"; such responsibilities could not just be ceded to the marketplace. Businesses want to maximize profits, not provide loosely defined public goods for the citizens of a particular country.

Over the last few years, the consequences of these decisions have been clear for all to see. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how many businesses had failed to become resilient, sending shock waves through global supply chains. Russia took advantage of decades of somnolence in Europe to try to exploit its neighbors' reliance on Russian gas after the invasion of Ukraine. But Russia also discovered that it, too, was vulnerable: in a matter of days, the United States and European countries cut off access to Russian central bank reserves held abroad.

Markets can provide great flexibility and adapt to shocks over time, but they no longer offer a general alternative to geopolitics as they seemed to in the wake of the Cold War. Indeed, great-power strategy and markets are thoroughly entangled. The United States and China are trapped in a feedback loop of action, counteraction, and hostile suspicion, but their markets are heavily enmeshed. And great-power competition and interdependence are combining to generate new problems. Companies such as the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei could create a global telecommunications infrastructure with Chinese characteristics. The United States and Europe could do to China's central bank reserves what they did to Russia's. If China embargoed or attacked Taiwan, disrupting the operations of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, the world's largest producer of semiconductors, the results would affect the entire world economy. Information networks, financial flows, and supply chains fueled explosive economic growth, but they also

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The United States' capacity to understand the global economy has eroded.

created new geopolitical vulnerabilities. The United States now has to manage its economic security in a highly interdependent and highly competitive world, where countries are inevitably tempted to exploit the weaknesses of others.

#### BRAWN OVER BRAIN

Even as the global economy became vastly more complex and more dangerous, the United States' capacity to understand and manage it eroded. The Cold War version of the U.S. state sought to limit economic exchange with adversaries, and then the globalization-focused version sought to promote it. Now, policymakers have to grapple with interdependence, a vastly more complex task than that faced by U.S. officials in the past.

In the wake of the Cold War, manufacturing logistics were the domain of private industry, not government. Today, official Washington still has little understanding of global supply chains, even though they are critically important to economic security. The U.S. government has conducted reviews of supply chains across four areas it deems critical and has mandated that government departments review risks to relevant supply chains; yet it must rely on incomplete commercial databases and imperfect and nonstandardized information disclosed with great reluctance by private firms. Often, businesses themselves have a limited understanding of their own supply chain vulnerabilities. Even if they know what their suppliers are doing, they do not always have a clear view into the roles of their suppliers' suppliers.

Furthermore, as the United States seeks to limit China's ambitions, it has to take complex and uncertain technological risks. The United States has adopted a "small yard, high fence" approach to technology control, with strong measures taken to restrict a limited set of products and techniques. Doing that well, however, requires a degree of surgical precision that would be hard to achieve even with a detailed understanding of the global economy and the likely future paths of innovation. It requires a deep understanding of the sectors involved. But the U.S. government does not have the institutions and structures in place to arrive at such an understanding, which would require gathering extensive market information, making it useful across siloed bureaucracies, and applying it to questions of national security.

Export control legislation passed by the U.S. Congress in 2018 mandated future presidential administrations to focus restrictions on

“emerging and foundational technologies” without specifying any particular ones. The Commerce Department’s Bureau of Industry and Security is seeing substantial budget increases, but it still needs far greater scientific and decision-making resources to implement export controls effectively. Without these resources, it is hard to make more than educated guesses about the future direction of innovation and where chokepoints in the global economy might emerge. Perhaps it makes sense for Washington to hold back China’s ambitions for military artificial intelligence through export controls on specialized semiconductors. But it is also possible that doing so may spark successful indigenous investment in China, allowing Beijing not just to evade Washington but to outrun it.

The United States cannot assume that it is still the global technology leader across the board. In some areas, such as the development of batteries and photovoltaics that are essential for the green economy, China is clearly ahead. That fact leads to difficult decisions. The United States might be tempted to steal a page from China’s playbook and encourage inward investment by Chinese battery technology companies, so that it can learn from and emulate its rival. But such a move might just create new vulnerabilities and dependencies. China could deny the United States access to these technologies, which could pose a major headache.

Such dilemmas require both the application of policy muscle and, crucially, the intelligence to plan for unexpected consequences. Without such preparation, the risk is not just that the United States will make mistakes but that its preponderance of enforcement muscle may overwhelm its capacity to make intelligent decisions. When policymakers need to solve a problem, they usually build on whatever tools they have readily available, creating a feedback loop that short-circuits consideration of whether it might be better to start afresh. The result could then be that as the U.S. security state leans into economics, it overemphasizes those tools of coercion aimed at limiting interactions rather than those aimed at maintaining a healthy economic exchange. And if China and other adversaries respond similarly, as is likely, a mix of miscalculations and overreactions could dangerously imperil the global economy.

#### HAMMER, MEET NAIL

To understand the risk, consider the recent history of U.S. sanctions, which emerged as a favorite tool during Washington’s so-called war on terror. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States moved to take advantage of the many flaws and vulnerabilities in the global

economy to promote its own security. The U.S. government compelled SWIFT, the financial messaging service, to provide it with data on its enemies and gradually deployed dollar power to cut Iran out of the global financial system. As under the Biden administration, these measures depended on old emergency powers and World War II- and Cold War-era institutions, such as the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which became the heart of U.S. sanctions policy.

These innovations led to some striking early successes, such as bringing Iran to the negotiating table over its nuclear weapons, but at the cost of a deeply worrying long-term dynamic. U.S. achievements were not the result of comprehensive planning but of continual improvisation, as underresourced policymakers adapted existing tools and institutions in a hurry, responding to urgent security needs. Sanctions, in particular, became a go-to solution, paving the way for what might be termed a "sanctions industrial complex" that advocates for ever more sanctions, with the benefit of little strategic thinking.

Some officials, such as Jack Lew, who served as treasury secretary during the Obama administration, worried that the overuse of sanctions might lead to the gradual undermining of U.S. financial power by encouraging countries to work around the U.S. dollar-dominated financial system. But sanctions have just kept expanding and have increasingly become Washington's security tool of first resort.

Republican members of Congress are already sponsoring legislation to take authority over export controls away from the Department of Commerce and give it instead to the Department of Defense. The risk is that this shift will systematically skew decisions about economic security so that they overemphasize traditional security concerns, which focus on strangling adversaries, and undervalue the more novel aspects of security, such as building up the shared ability among the United States and its allies to coordinate innovative policy. If brawn overwhelms brain on sanctions and export controls, Washington could lose sight of the contributions that innovation, growth, and greater economic opportunity make to securing the United States.

#### LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Avoiding this scenario will require the U.S. government to create the institutions and capacities necessary for intelligent economic security policy. Luckily, it does not have to do this from scratch and can learn from both the solutions and the difficulties of its closest allies,

countries that confront similar questions and have sometimes moved more rapidly to adapt to the new needs of a changing world.

It is no surprise, for example, that Japan has been quick to reorganize its state apparatus in recent years. Despite formidable U.S. pressure to liberalize in the 1980s and 1990s, the Japanese government never fully retreated from maintaining a strong role in economic planning. That helped Japan adapt to Chinese coercion in 2010, when a maritime dispute escalated into a possible crisis as China threatened Japan's access to rare-earth minerals. The country's high-tech sector relied on Chinese sources for over 90 percent of its supply, so the government pivoted to domestic seabed extraction as well as trade agreements with alternative suppliers. In just a decade, Japan was able to reduce its rare-earths dependency on China to under 60 percent, offering an example of how diversification can bolster economic security.

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To get economic security right, the U.S. government must reinvent itself.

As the questions of economic security have grown more acute, Japan has also reshaped its bureaucracy. It appointed its first economic security minister to the cabinet in 2021 and followed up with a new national security strategy in 2022 that made "promoting economic security" a core objective. At the same time, the government passed new legislation, the Economic Security Promotion Act, which gives the administration the legal authority to coordinate an all-of-government effort, backed by a budget of roughly \$7 billion, aimed at minimizing supply chain dependencies and promoting innovation in critical sectors. Crucially, the government is interested not just in safeguarding Japan's security but also in generating economic growth. Because it has dedicated economic security institutions, Japan finds it easier than the United States, which also has passed large subsidy programs, to coordinate its actions to match both domestic economic goals and international security imperatives.

The Japanese government has also looked to protect its economy through global cooperation. At the G-7 summit in Hiroshima in 2023, the group agreed to "work together to ensure that attempts to weaponize economic dependencies by forcing G-7 members and our partners including small economies to comply and conform will fail and face consequences." Japan, then, played a key role in getting several of the largest economies of the world to start thinking collectively. This, in

turn, will help anchor the new U.S.–Japanese–South Korean initiatives that seek to coordinate technology policy in pushing back against China.

Responding to the coming challenges, however, will involve more than reorganizing bureaucracies. The United States needs to build a comprehensive economic security strategy. Sullivan’s speech rightly noted the ways in which economic interdependence has created new security vulnerabilities; he urged building greater resilience to address these weaknesses. U.S. officials, however, have said little about how they plan to do so.

Here, U.S. policymakers can learn from the experience of the European Union, whose strengths and weaknesses are nearly opposite to those of the United States. The EU fell harder for free-market doctrine than even the United States did. It had little choice: its founding treaties were built around freedom of movement for goods, services, money, and people; they had little to say about security. Jealous member states prevented the EU’s precursor, the European Economic Community, from building any real national security muscle during the Cold War. Europe invested instead in those areas in which it had authority, creating a powerful economic bureaucracy responsible for its internal market and trade relations.

This combination of strengths and weaknesses led Europe to develop its own approach to economic security. Rather than leaning on Cold War defense authorities that it does not have, the EU has repeatedly repurposed market-building regulations toward new goals. In response to U.S. President Donald Trump’s misuse of sanctions, the COVID-19 shock, and China’s 2022 freezing of trade relations with Lithuania to punish the Baltic country for allowing the opening of a *de facto* Taiwanese embassy, European officials are turning the machinery of the single market to protect the EU. To map its vulnerabilities, the EU is developing an assessment tool to identify whether particular trade links carry high, medium, or low risks. That will enable the EU to pursue its policy of de-risking by fostering continued trade and exchange in low-risk areas and considering how best to protect itself when it comes to higher-risk ones.

Simply mapping out potential threats in this way makes it less likely that policymakers will slip into a spiral of decoupling, disrupting the world economy by recklessly severing ties with adversaries and rivals. Crucially, this approach assesses not just the risks generated by dependencies but also the risks generated by policy responses. That

does not mean the EU will inevitably produce smarter policy; because the EU has little traditional security experience, it may underestimate some risks that straddle the military-economic divide, such as China's civil-military fusion whereby the Chinese government seeks to unite the research capabilities and resources of its civilian scientific and commercial sectors with its military and defense industrial sectors.

The EU has also responded to mounting economic security threats through new legislation that will allow it to use its common trade policy to punish states that attempt to coerce it. It is also considering strengthening its so-called blocking rules, which would forbid European firms from complying with foreign sanctions to better dissuade hostile actions by others. Again, for better and for worse, the EU is more hesitant to use direct coercion than is the United States. EU officials told us that they hope they will not have to deploy these instruments and that the mere fact of their existence might be a sufficient deterrent. That is likely too optimistic, as deterrents are credible only when others believe that they will be used. The EU will almost certainly have to develop and use more coercion, perhaps changing the EU's governing treaties to prevent rogue members such as Hungary from vetoing collective sanctions.

All this fits into the EU's preference for de-risking (managing the risks of continued interdependence) over decoupling (detaching economies from one another as in the Cold War). Similarly, the EU's new Economic Security Strategy, released in June, does not start from the sorts of traditional national security concerns that have motivated the United States. Instead, the EU strategy emphasizes that societies must prepare for economic shocks in addition to external attempts to exert influence on European economies and curtail the EU's autonomy. Europe may still use tools such as sanctions and export controls to protect itself, but the emerging strategy could quite as easily direct the EU toward diversification through new trade agreements or subsidies for critical sectors. Like Japan, the EU seeks to reconcile the imperatives of growth and innovation with the needs of security.

#### REINVENTION, NOT REFORM

Drawing a detailed blueprint for the U.S. economic security state will require a lengthy and difficult debate. Still, Sullivan, Raimondo, and Tai—and those who succeed them—should address three priorities in particular.

Most obviously, the United States needs to set out its own comprehensive economic security strategy. Turning de-risking from a catch phrase to a coherent approach will require a lot of work—work that should be guided by a formal policy document that will send an important signal to the government agencies that will fulfill its mission as well as to the broader public. Different parts of the U.S. government have begun to examine specific policy tools, such as sanctions, even if these investigations have not gone nearly as far as some would like. Integrating these separate elements into a coherent policy will require an all-of-government approach as well as input from concerned parties, including both industry and civil society.

Making changes to carry out that strategy risks creating a bureaucratic morass, as happened when the Department of Homeland Security was created in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Washington will need to get better at collective intelligence and decision-making, shifting authority around appropriately: to this end, the government should consider creating an economic security intelligence apparatus on a par with other intelligence arms of the U.S. government but with a very different mission. At a minimum, the United States needs to properly resource the sorely understaffed Office of Science and Technology Policy, which provides the executive branch with scientific advice, and revive the badly missed Office of Technology Assessment, which did the same for Congress.

Experts on bureaucracy, such as Jennifer Pahlka, have documented how rules and culture undermine the flexibility of the federal government, and senior officials lament how incredibly complex and time-consuming it is even to solicit advice from outside government. These are general problems, but once the government establishes what works and what does not and begins to intervene regularly in the economy, they have urgent consequences. New government powers would also produce new risks to civil liberties. The federal government may struggle to rein in abuses if it builds up its capacities for economic intelligence. A rogue president such as Trump could deploy detailed maps of the economy to help friends and hurt enemies.

The government also needs to draw on new ideas and new sources of expertise, as do the universities and think tanks that supply Washington with talent. That means hiring fewer economists and political scientists and more people who understand logistics, cybernetics, and material sciences. At a bare minimum, the United States needs to

attract more people into government with a deep understanding of supply chains and global finance. In addition to bolstering the parts of the government that already have such experience and talent, such as the Treasury Department, this effort might involve new institutions along the lines of the U.S. Digital Service, which has attracted people from the information technology industry into government, to provide expertise across the different areas of economic security.

Finally, the U.S. government should consider creating an Economic Security Council to mediate between the National Security Council and the National Economic Council while drawing on and building up sources of expertise within the government, including the National Laboratories and the International Trade Commission. That might, in turn, support some more formal apparatus of coordination among policy principals in the various parts of the federal government that touch on economic security. Rather than creating another bureaucratic monstrosity, this should be as small and agile as the National Security Council was originally supposed to be, providing a switchboard to help connect the parts of the government that have an economic security mandate. Alternatively, some members of the National Security Council and the National Economic Council could wear two hats, informally integrating economic and national security discussions.

Such suggestions are only a starting point for debate, but that debate must start now. The Biden administration rightly wants to avoid a world in which the United States and China get drawn into a dangerous process of decoupling. The risk is that existing U.S. institutions may pull the country relentlessly in the direction that it wants to avoid. To get economic security right in a highly interdependent world marked by serious great-power competition, the U.S. government must reinvent itself. 🌐

# From Risk to Resilience

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## How Economies Can Thrive in a World of Threats

ANTHEA ROBERTS

**I**n recent years, a fierce debate has raged among scholars and policy-makers about the risks and rewards of economic interdependence. On one side are globalists who argue that economic globalization remains the best route to peace and prosperity, even if it comes with some risks. On the other are nationalists who contend that Western countries must decouple their economies from China and other authoritarian powers to avoid dangerous dependencies and reduce the vulnerability of their critical infrastructure and supply chains.

These debates tend to frame the tradeoffs in black-and-white terms: globalization versus deglobalization and interdependence versus decoupling. But such binaries have never been realistic. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and rising tensions between the United States and China have all made Western companies and countries more wary of the risks associated with economic inter-

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dependence. Few, however, are prepared to make the sacrifices that full-scale decoupling would entail.

No wonder that “de-risking” has entered the policy lexicon as a softer alternative to decoupling. In January 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen coined the term as she laid out the EU’s strategy for reducing critical vulnerabilities while maintaining economic relations with China. The United States and the rest of the G-7 have since embraced de-risking, in part to assuage growing fears of a painful economic divorce from China. The idea is to differentiate connections that are high risk, for which selective decoupling is appropriate, from those that are low risk, for which it makes sense to maintain ties while also diversifying.

But inherent to de-risking is the idea that policymakers need to accept a zero-sum tradeoff between the risks and rewards of interconnection. There is a better way to understand the problem. Companies and countries need to embed calculations about risk and reward in a broader framework of systemic resilience—that is, the characteristics of a system that determine its ability to survive and thrive over time. Although resilience is commonly understood as the ability to withstand shocks and stressors, it is about more than just effectively responding to risks. It is also about evolving to better capture future rewards and cope with change.

To achieve systemic resilience, governments and firms must strike the right balance between risk and reward. If they always aim to minimize risks, they will not only reduce their rewards but also create new vulnerabilities over time. Likewise, if they always aim to maximize rewards in the short term, they may overlook existing risks and create new ones that could cost them dearly later. As a framework for weighing these competing objectives, systemic resilience can help policymakers and business executives think through questions of economic interdependence. It can help them decide when they should take risks in search of rewards and how they should prepare for potentially transformative changes—none more pressing than the coming energy transition.

#### THE BINARY BIAS

The rewards of economic connection can be immense. Global markets create extraordinary opportunities for economies of scale and enable companies and countries to develop their capabilities by specializing in what they do best and trading for the rest. Trade and investment treaties facilitate access to such markets, as do improvements in infrastructure,

communications, and transportation. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, global supply chains proliferated as the rewards of international trade and investment seemed to far outstrip any potential risks. But by the first decade of the next millennium, the dangers of international connectedness had become manifest. The global financial crisis of 2008 stoked fears about financial contagion. China's economic rise and growing assertiveness fueled Western capitals' concerns about economic coercion. And Western sanctions made Moscow and Beijing more worried about weaponized interdependence.

Risks arise when a vulnerable system is exposed to threats or hazards. Interconnection exposes countries to intentional threats, such as economic coercion, as well as unintentional hazards, including financial crises and pandemics. Specialization creates additional vulnerabilities in the form of dependencies and concentration risks, such as when a country relies on critical goods manufactured by a foreign country or by a small group of suppliers in a region that is subject to extreme weather events. But because the same things that promise economic rewards often pose security risks, interdependence creates a dilemma. "Just in time" global supply chains that enable companies to reduce costs by storing minimal inventory can be tremendously efficient. But as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, they can also leave societies dangerously exposed to disruptions, including in the supply of vital medical goods. The United States' deep economic integration with China has produced enormous economic rewards, but it has also created vulnerabilities and dependencies for both countries, for example, in access to active pharmaceutical ingredients and semiconductors.

Interdependence does more than create tradeoffs between risk and reward; sometimes an increase in rewards can lead to a reduction in risks—a classic win-win outcome. Trade is often thought to promote peace and prosperity because rich and economically interdependent countries have powerful incentives to avoid war. But the effect is more ambiguous: interdependence may reduce the probability of conflict, but it can also make the consequences of conflict more dire if it does break out—since strong economic ties can be weaponized to devastating effect.

Efforts to mitigate one risk can also create or exacerbate others. Reshoring global supply chains may make countries less vulnerable

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Few are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for full-scale decoupling.



to international disruptions while making them more vulnerable to domestic ones. Insulation from international supply chains can cause its own problems. For example, the United States generally manufactures enough baby formula to meet its own needs. But in 2022, a major U.S. baby formula plant was shut down because of bacterial contamination, causing nationwide shortages and forcing the Biden administration to take emergency actions to secure international supplies. People often struggle to acknowledge such tradeoffs because doing so is cognitively taxing. Rather than attempting to weigh the necessary multiple factors, people overwhelmed by that exercise tend to lump them together and simply declare that their chosen course of action is preferable on all counts. The psychologist Adam Grant calls this the “binary bias”—the tendency to collapse shades-of-gray spectrums into black-and-white categories. The result is tradeoff denialism: one side argues for globalization because it promotes peace and prosperity, while the other argues for decoupling on the grounds that it reduces the risks of coercion and stimulates the economy through reshoring.

The rhetorical shift from decoupling to de-risking is important because it represents an effort to move past the binary bias and tradeoff denialism. In this vein, Europe’s new economic security strategy, released by the European Commission in June 2023, begins by noting “the inherent tensions that exist between bolstering our

economic security, and ensuring that the European Union continues to benefit from an open economy.” Policymakers must acknowledge those tensions instead of obfuscating them if their goal is to manage risk, not just minimize it.

In some sectors, the rewards from economic globalization are high and the risks are comparatively low. “Most of our trade in goods and services remains mutually beneficial and ‘un-risky,’” von der Leyen said in March 2023. Decoupling in these areas makes little sense. In other sectors, the risks arising from interdependence are high and the rewards are low. For example, trade in sensitive military technologies is too high a risk for the reward. In cases such as these, decoupling seems sensible. The hardest cases are where both the risks and rewards of economic interdependence are high. Here, focusing on systemic resilience is particularly helpful.

#### BOUNCING BACK

Resilience is a rich concept, with applications in engineering, psychology, disaster management, climate change adaptation, and more. In engineering, resilience describes the ability of a substance to return to its original shape after bending or stretching. Applied to people, communities, corporations, and countries, it describes the ability to absorb and adapt to changes. Scholars call this “socioecological resilience.”

Absorbing shocks means enduring them without incurring lasting damage or undergoing minor adaptations or major transformations. When countries stockpile semiconductors and other goods that are critical for manufacturing, they aim to create a cushion against supply chain disruptions. Building in redundancies such as multiple suppliers, some onshore and some offshore, helps systems weather shocks without suffering harm or disruption.

Adapting to shocks or stressors involves making incremental changes. When stocks of hand sanitizer ran low during the COVID-19 pandemic, some gin manufacturers adjusted their operations to produce needed supplies. Companies that specialized in three-dimensional printing began producing face masks and oxygen valves, while still others responded to shortages of medical supplies by finding alternative vendors. Adaptive changes are often small and short in duration. For example, schools shifted their classrooms online during the height of the pandemic, but most have since returned to in-person learning.

Transforming in the face of shocks is even more radical. It involves making more permanent structural changes that either reduce exposure and vulnerability to risks or increase the ability to capture rewards. Whereas adaptation can be achieved through incremental adjustments that largely preserve the status quo, transformation involves dramatic change to a new and better state. COVID-19 vaccines enabled governments to transform their response to the pandemic, fundamentally changing the risk-reward calculus for lockdowns and allowing countries to open their economies. Clean energy will prove even more transformative in the future. Governments will be able to use green technology to remake their economies in response to climate change.

These three modes of resilience—absorption, adaptation, and transformation—can operate alone or in combination. Often, they work on different timelines. For example, when China abruptly cut off exports of rare-earth elements to Japan in 2010 amid tensions in the East China Sea, Japan used all three modes of resilience to minimize harm. In the short term, it used careful inventory management to absorb the initial shock of the disruption and stretch existing supplies as far as possible. In the medium term, it adapted by recycling old rare-earth elements and finding substitutes for them. And in the long term, it took advantage of a transformation in the market for rare-earth minerals as new mines opened outside China.

#### THE RISE OF RESILIENCE

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, policymakers are beginning to appreciate the importance of resilience, which requires weighing polarities such as centralization and decentralization, diversification and concentration, and independence and interdependence. When it comes to free trade, for instance, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai has said that it is "critical" to "incentivize resilience as opposed to just efficiency." Sabine Weyand, the European Commission's director general for trade, has identified a similar rebalancing of priorities in policymaking, arguing that "it is not just about efficiency in trade relations today; it's about resilience."

The key is to strike a balance between two extremes. Whereas optimizing for efficiency can create too many risks, optimizing for resilience can generate too few rewards. The scholar and former management consultant Roger Martin has characterized the dilemma well: "Pursuit of all resilience and no efficiency is as problematic as

pursuit of efficiency with no resilience. The only difference is in the nature of the death.” By death, he meant the eventual demise of the system. Systems that are not resilient tend to die suddenly. They work well in the short term and sometimes the medium term, producing impressive rewards. But over time, they accumulate systemic vulnerabilities, eventually reaching a state of extreme fragility caused by factors such as excessive concentration and lack of diversity. When a shock disrupts such a system, its lack of absorptive and adaptive capacities can cause it to fail spectacularly.

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Systems that are not resilient tend to die suddenly.

Inefficient systems, however, tend to die gradually as they compete unsuccessfully against more efficient ones.

To thrive over the long term, systems need to find a middle ground between efficiency and resilience and between the desire to minimize risks and maximize rewards.

Countries that aim to minimize risks in the short term often leave themselves vulnerable to long-term threats. Just as children who grow up without being exposed to viruses can end up with weak immune systems, countries that have never experienced pandemics or other public health emergencies can be ill-prepared for them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries that had previously dealt with respiratory viruses such as SARS and MERS—for example, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—mounted the most effective initial responses to the new disease. The risk analyst Nassim Nicholas Taleb uses the term “antifragile” to refer to systems that grow stronger when exposed to moderate levels of stress as opposed to ones that atrophy when they are shielded from all risks.

Likewise, countries that aim to maximize short-term rewards often make themselves vulnerable to future shocks. Maximizing rewards from just-in-time supply chains may seem economically efficient in the short term, but as the pandemic showed, it can eventually prove catastrophic. Similarly, countries that seek to accelerate their development by offshoring low-cost manufacturing and pivoting their domestic economies to high-end services could wind up forfeiting the industrial capacity needed to power the sectors of the future, including clean energy. And countries that rely heavily on their most profitable industry risk creating a monoculture that makes money in the short term but is vulnerable to the effects of environmental or market changes.

WALK THE LINE

So what is the right balance between peril and payoff? Where high risks promise high rewards, countries should abide by a simple rule: run the risk only when the relevant system has sufficient resilience to absorb, adapt, or transform if that risk becomes reality.

With 5G networks, for example, countries have taken clear steps toward decoupling because they perceive high risks and low resilience. The Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei is a cheap provider of leading 5G technologies that have the potential to generate strong economic rewards. But for many Western governments, the risks that the Chinese government would abuse access to 5G networks to engage in espionage or sabotage were too high to discount. Laying 5G networks is also expensive, and 5G network providers are almost always the service providers. These features of the technology mean that it would be extremely difficult for a government to adapt and find a new 5G supplier should Beijing weaponize Huawei's networks. In areas where countries cannot adapt during a crisis, they often seek to reduce their exposure, even if that means forsaking possible rewards.

By contrast, where countries have sufficient resilience—for instance, in the trade of basic commodities, where global markets are deep and diversified—they are more likely to maintain interdependence, despite the risks of economic coercion. Many Australian exporters depended heavily on the Chinese market before Beijing instituted trade bans and other coercive economic measures in 2020, following Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. But not all these exporters proved resilient. Those selling high-end products such as lobsters and fine wines struggled to find alternative markets, whereas those trading basic commodities such as coal, barley, and cotton were able to adapt and redirect their inventory to global markets.

It is telling that Australia's response to Chinese economic coercion was not to decouple. Even after the risks had been laid bare, the potential rewards of continued economic engagement were too great. Australia continued to trade in goods that were unaffected by the bans, such as iron ore, while seeking to reopen export markets with China in the industries that were affected. But the Australian government also advised exporters to adopt a more diversified "China plus" strategy to make pivoting markets easier in the event of future disruptions. When resilience is high, countries can take greater risks

in pursuit of rewards because they have something to fall back on if their fears are realized. For many traded goods, including agricultural products and raw resources, diversification rather than decoupling is the more practical and prudent path.

Another advantage of systemic resilience is that it can help governments and firms proactively adapt to changing circumstances. Greater resilience often makes it easier to maintain something close to the status quo. But sometimes the status quo is the problem, in which case more transformational approaches are needed to ensure long-term resilience. That is why many Western countries are turning to industrial policy—official encouragement of specific domestic economic sectors—as they attempt to address climate change and heightened threat perceptions from increased geopolitical tensions.

In some cases, governments are using industrial policy to promote transformative innovations that will reduce risks and build resilience. For example, the U.S. government has invested in developing Open Radio Access Networks, new mobile network technology that runs on the cloud and would break the connection between 5G network providers and 5G service providers, allowing users to mix and match providers. If successful, this technology would reduce some of the risks inherent in 5G networks and increase resilience. The 5G markets would be more open and competitive, making it easier for countries and companies to switch service providers if networks are weaponized.

In other cases, governments are using industrial policy so they can reap future rewards as well as limit risks. The United States is subsidizing the development and deployment of green technologies not just to address the dangers of a changing climate but also to ensure that American companies capture a sizable share of important emerging markets, including the one for electric vehicles. The CHIPS and Science Act, which aims to boost the domestic semiconductor industry; the Inflation Reduction Act, which made historic investments in clean energy; and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which has upgraded infrastructure in areas such as bridges, rail, and broadband are also designed to transform the U.S. economy and society. These laws, passed in 2021 and 2022, reduce supply chain vulnerabilities; provide incentives to manufacturers of renewable energy, batteries, electric vehicles, and semiconductors; and enhance access by building a national network of electric vehicle chargers and overhauling the nation's power grid to improve clean energy transmission.

NO MAGIC FORMULA

There is no magic formula for balancing risk, reward, and resilience. The best calibration is subjective; different actors have different risk appetites. What countries see as the right balance also depends on how optimistic they are about the future. Expectations are important because decisions that may be optimal in stable and predictable environments can be disastrous in turbulent and unpredictable ones. When turbulence is low and predictability is high, countries can often focus on maximizing rewards. This is what they did after the Cold War, a placid period when globalization was on the march. But when turbulence is high and predictability is low, they turn to resilience.

Standard approaches to risk management focus on calculating the probability and likely impact of different risks. But many risks and rewards involve events whose probability and impact are unknowable. It is impossible to calculate the odds or likely effects of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, for instance. When uncertainty is high, actors often prefer to stay flexible and minimize potential losses. As the world becomes (or is perceived to become) riskier and more turbulent, countries are increasingly adopting these kinds of conservative strategies. As a result, they are focused on protecting their most important needs—critical infrastructure, critical supply chains, critical minerals, and critical technologies. This approach reflects a pessimistic outlook that prioritizes mitigating risks in bad times over maximizing rewards in good times.

The world is facing enormous challenges, from great-power rivalry to the climate crisis. To survive and thrive as best they can, countries will need to understand the drivers of risk, reward, and resilience; how these forces are connected; and what tradeoffs and synergies they create. Great-power competition may undermine cooperation on climate change while supercharging the clean energy race. Efforts to increase resilience may require reducing interdependence among rivals while accelerating it among allies. Resilience may sometimes require rebuilding national capabilities and other times require forging alliances.

Taking a systemic approach to resilience will not be easy, particularly in a world characterized by polarization and specialization. Government officials are often focused on the next election, while their departments are busy engaging in bureaucratic turf wars. But failing to embrace systemic resilience will not just mean forgoing many of the rewards of economic integration; it will also mean creating new vulnerabilities that could prove catastrophic down the road. 🌐

# What America Wants From China

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## A Strategy to Keep Beijing Entangled in the World Order

RYAN HASS

In recent years, American officials have spoken publicly at great length about competition with China. In February, U.S. President Joe Biden declared in his State of the Union speech that the United States seeks “competition, not conflict” with China. But despite all the speeches, press conferences, and panel discussions, policymakers have not directly answered an essential question: What is the outcome they seek in this competition? When pressed, they often highlight the result the United States hopes to avoid: a new cold war or, even worse, a hot one. Privately, they add that the goal is to tilt the global balance of power toward the United States and its partners as much as possible.

The absence of a compelling vision of success for the United States’ strategy with China is dangerous. First, if the American people do not

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know the purpose of their country's strategy, they will be less likely to support U.S. policy or make sacrifices in service of it. The absence of a vision also creates a vacuum in which American demagogues can frame the competition in ethnic terms, sowing the seeds of xenophobia and racism and tearing at the country's social fabric. Likewise, framing the contest in existential terms pushes the United States to pursue policies that seek China's collapse, while airbrushing the danger and self-harm that such a strategy would invite.

The absence of a clear goal also risks squandering the United States' greatest advantage in a long-term competition with China: the cohesion of its global network of allies and partners. Governments aligned with Washington will hedge when they do not know the desired destination of U.S. strategy. They will not want to get trapped in a confrontation with China only to see the United States abruptly shift course and leave their countries exposed to Beijing's retaliation.

To overcome this limitation, Washington needs to set an objective on China that would enjoy durable domestic support and be compatible with foreign partners' priorities, allowing them to anticipate the direction of U.S. policy and its guiding logic. And despite U.S. leaders' seeming inability or unwillingness to articulate it, the right objective is relatively easy to explain: Washington should aim to preserve a functioning international system that supports U.S. security and prosperity—and that includes China rather than isolates it. Meanwhile, the United States should maintain a strong military to deter China from using force against the United States or its security partners and seek to sustain an overall edge over China in technological innovation, particularly in fields with national security implications.

This strategy departs from the Cold War goal of aiming to isolate the Soviet Union and compel its collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Today, Washington's goal should be to keep China entangled in a global system that regulates interstate behavior and pushes Beijing to conclude that the best path to the realization of its national ambitions would be to operate within existing rules and norms.

Preserving a functioning global system that includes China will not be simple or straightforward. Washington has grown increasingly ambivalent in recent years about upholding the existing system, which it played an outsize role in designing. It cannot credibly keep China inside the tent if it is uncomfortable being there, as well. On trade, global health, climate change, and arms control, the United States has shown diminishing tolerance for accepting the requirements and

limitations imposed by the current order. China will also seek to leverage its growing strength to revise elements of the existing system that it finds threatening to its illiberal form of governance. Beijing is determined to block intrusions on what it defines as its internal affairs. It wants to degrade the agenda-setting power of advanced democracies and take the lead in setting international standards. China is also working to make the world more economically dependent on Chinese goods and services and to shift the balance of military power in its favor.

American policymakers will face hard choices on whether to support adjustments that could help the existing system survive. If China ultimately balks at remaining in the system and instead invests its resources in mobilizing an anti-West bloc to oppose the international system, the United States will want the rest of the world to see Beijing as the culprit for the system's fragmentation. For all its imperfections, the existing international system has contributed to preventing major-power conflict and enabled millions of people around the world to rise out of poverty in the decades since World War II. If China decides to chip away at that, it should pay a reputational price.

This strategy does not take for granted that China will emerge as a responsible stakeholder or that the U.S.-Chinese relationship will be anything other than intensely competitive. There is no reason for hope that further economic development will build pressure in China for political reform. This approach takes China for what it is: an aggressive, repressive, and selectively revisionist actor on the world stage. But following this path would take advantage of China's craving for recognition as a major power that deserves a say in global affairs. The idea is to sharpen the choice for Beijing: China can enjoy broad acceptance of its continuing rise if it invests in preserving and adapting the existing system, or it can exit the order and prompt its fragmentation. Under the latter scenario, China could become the leader of a loosely organized and overmatched bloc of developing countries facing off against a more ideologically aligned grouping anchored by developed democracies.

#### LIFE AFTER XI

The speed of China's rise has been alarming to many Americans. In the post-World War II era, no country has gotten as close to rivaling the United States' comprehensive national power and influence as China has. Alongside its rapid economic growth, China has embarked on a massive military buildup, intensified its intimidation of Taiwan, asserted control

over Hong Kong, expanded military outposts in the South China Sea, drawn blood at the border with India, and launched a campaign of brutal repression against ethnic minorities and dissidents in China.

To some observers, the Xi era represents a return of the authentic China, whereas the post-1979 era of “reform and opening” under the Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping was an aberration. In this telling, China was briefly a collective leadership one-party state led by the CCP but has now reverted to its natural state of one-man rule as Xi has embraced his new title as the “core” of the party-state, a status the party endorsed in October 2022. According to this logic, there is no longer any check on Xi’s instincts, however reckless they may be.

It is true that Xi is impatient, ideological, and aggressive. But he is also mortal. Xi is now 70 years old, and it is impossible to predict whether his reign will extend for another five years or 15. But it will end. The United States needs a strategy that is capable of both contending with the present and looking beyond Xi to prepare for a future in which China will confront mounting structural constraints.

If history is any guide, there is a strong possibility that the pendulum of Chinese politics will swing when Xi leaves the scene. In 1976, the death of the longtime CCP leader Mao Zedong ushered in an unceremonious end to his Cultural Revolution, which had wreaked chaos on the Chinese people in service of consolidating Mao’s control of the country. In the years that followed, the party reinstated cadres that Mao had expelled, including Deng, who along with younger leaders, pivoted away from Mao’s ideological rigidity and concentration of power. A similar erasure of Deng’s legacy has unfolded in recent years as Xi has discarded the pragmatism, orderly transfers of power, division of authority between the CCP and the government, and modest foreign policy that were hallmarks of the Deng era.

The more that Xi’s inveterate Leninist instincts and lust for control hobble China’s economic and technological ambitions, the more likely China’s leaders will be to take a hard look at the country’s direction when Xi is gone. When that day comes, China’s leaders will need to decide whether they can better reach their goals by integrating into the global economy or by turning toward self-reliance and limited partnership with developing countries. Of course, a future Chinese leader may adopt Xi’s tendencies. But China’s political trajectory has not, and likely will not, travel a straight line for long.

China’s path after Xi also depends on other trends. The economist Derek Scissors has forecasted that China’s economy will grow briskly in the

2020s but slow down in the 2030s as it experiences the effects of an aging population, growing debt, and self-imposed constraints on private-sector innovation through government-directed allocation of capital, talent, and technology. He expects the gap between U.S. and Chinese GDP, which currently stands at \$7 trillion, to narrow to \$4 trillion by 2030 but then begin to widen again by midcentury. In other words, Beijing is neither on the cusp of peaking nor on a road to hegemony. It will be an enduring but constrained competitor to the United States.

#### INSIDE THE TENT

The American leaders who developed an international system out of the ashes of World War II were not driven by benevolence; they were guided by an aggressive pursuit of national interests. The victors of World War II appointed themselves permanent members of the UN Security Council, cementing their influence over future interstate disputes. Washington also secured buy-in for a proscription against the use of force to alter international boundaries, helping lock in place a status quo that has benefited the United States.

To this day, the United States sits at the center of many of the international institutions that govern the global commons, mediate disputes, and facilitate free trade. The United States' positioning has allowed it to field the most powerful military in the history of the world and to amass roughly 25 percent of global GDP with only around four percent of the world's population. Washington must hold on to the outsize benefits it derives from this system and keep China entangled in it.

Isolating China might feel satisfying, but as history shows, it would not serve U.S. interests. From the late 1940s through the 1970s, China was cast out of the U.S.-led system. During that period, Chinese leaders became embittered, unconstrained, and eager to foment revolution. Beijing aspired to bring down the system, including by arming Washington's adversaries. China was poor then, so its interventions had limited effects. Today, however, U.S. rivals such as Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela could benefit from less restrained Chinese support in ways that would seriously harm U.S. national security.

Even short of arming hostile states, Beijing could withdraw contributions to Western-led institutions and invest significantly in organizations that could rival and ultimately replace today's system. It could leverage its national resources to seek broad international backing for making the BRICS group, encompassing Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South

Africa, the premier global agenda setter, displacing the G-7 and the G-20. Although China secured support for expanding the membership of BRICS at the group's annual summit in August, it remains to be seen whether adding more members will add substance to what has thus far been a largely symbolic forum. Beijing could also redirect support for global development efforts to its preferred institutions, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, and withdraw support for the World Bank.

To reduce the risks of these outcomes, the United States will need to accept several uncomfortable truths. The first is that many people in poorer countries and non-Western countries see the current “rules-based order” as a predominantly white, Western system that is insufficiently attentive to their priorities and concerns. Leaders in some of those countries want to alter a system that they see as privileging a status quo that disadvantages them, and they view China as a champion of their cause. They see hypocrisy when Washington protests Russia's invasion of Ukraine despite the many military interventions carried out by the United States—in Haiti, Iraq, Panama, and the Balkans—without UN Security Council authorization. Even as American officials reject the suggestion of equivalence between their actions and those of Russia, they should recognize the frustration of people and governments buffeted by crises not of their making, such as rising temperatures, global pandemics, food and energy insecurity, and economic instability.

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Beijing is neither on the cusp of peaking nor on a road to hegemony.

Institutions and conventions will also need to adapt to power shifts within the international system. The Security Council will have to adjust to the redistribution of power since the end of World War II by giving permanent seats to Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan, the countries of the G-4 and the main aspirants to permanent council membership, which each exercise regional leadership and global influence. Washington should push for their admittance and force China to either go along or issue a public veto. At the same time, the United States should not continue blocking China from exercising a voting share in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that reflects its economic weight.

The balkanization of the postwar international system that would result from China's exit would damage the United States' long-term interests. There is no Western solution to climate change or pandemic prevention, for example. Those are global challenges that require the mobilization of

global resources. Additionally, a breakdown in the trading system would leave all countries poorer, including the United States. A green energy transition would take longer and cost more if the United States and China were unable to coordinate. A bifurcation of global information systems into Western and Chinese blocs would hamper innovation and economic growth. Even as the United States works to safeguard Americans' data, it must avoid preventing its companies from competing in the growing number of markets where Chinese technologies have made inroads.

For some, shaking up the existing international system is a risk worth taking, even if it winds up splintering the structure in place. In a speech earlier this year, the U.S. national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, asserted that the existing neoliberal economic order had failed American workers, fraying "the socioeconomic foundations on which any strong and resilient democracy rests." Therefore, Sullivan argued, the United States must break with decades of international economic orthodoxy to ensure that the country can rebuild its manufacturing base, develop more resilient supply chains, and limit China's ability to hold American security at risk.

Sullivan's solution to the United States' domestic challenges is misguided. In the aggregate, the United States has grown dramatically wealthier and more powerful through internationalized trade, but the rewards have been unevenly distributed in American society. Many countries in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere have recognized that free trade is not free and have developed social safety nets to help their workers handle the disruptions of globalization. The United States has performed poorly in this regard—a deficiency that is a symptom of its domestic politics rather than of the perils of globalized trade.

It would be a mistake for the United States to disavow the global trade architecture that it played a leading role in constructing. Doing so would break faith with the partners that bought into the doctrine of trade liberalization. This, in turn, would diminish Washington's ability to set the agenda for the global economy. Today, many countries around the world are lowering barriers to trade, but the United States is raising them. If Washington continues down this path, it will hurt its own long-term competitiveness.

#### INTERNATIONAL ORDER 2.0

Rather than relying on past policy experiments in protectionism and industrial policy, American policymakers need innovative ways to make today's global system better serve U.S. interests, address the concerns of U.S. partners, and incentivize China to stay on board. The best leaders

have willing partners, not ones who must be coerced into compliance. The stronger the support the United States can attract for its vision, the costlier and riskier it will be for China to break away and fragment the system. Many of the United States' partners understand the challenges China poses, but they also must contend with more immediate problems, such as mitigating the effects of climate change, providing adequate food for their populations, creating opportunities for economic development, and enhancing health security. Unless the United States can elicit contributions from China and other capable powers for addressing these challenges, it will bear the blame for failing to lead.

American policymakers therefore have the difficult task of convincing China to invest in multilateral solutions, even though Beijing often prefers to deliver assistance bilaterally so it can enjoy undiluted appreciation from recipient countries for its contributions. One way the United States can do this is by encouraging emerging powers and regional organizations to take the lead on collective responses to some global problems. It would be far easier to imagine the United States and China both supporting an African Union-led project to expand access to technology training, for example, than it would be to envision either of them supporting such a project led by the other.

Washington should also work with Beijing to develop norms of acceptable state behavior in ungoverned and undergoverned spaces. For example, the two countries could agree to refrain from activities in space that create orbital debris. This could lead over time toward norms against the use of kinetic antisatellite weapons in outer space. Both the United States and China would also benefit from establishing limits on the use of AI-enabled autonomous weapons systems in conflicts. Washington and Beijing could each work, for example, toward an understanding that humans must remain in control of all nuclear launch decisions. Similarly, even as each side engages in aggressive cyber-espionage against the other, both would benefit from identifying out-of-bounds targets for cyberattacks. Both countries should agree, for example, that hospitals and critical infrastructure are off-limits.

Washington must also work with partners to fortify other cornerstones of the international system, such as the principle that all states are equal under international law and that arms control supports global stability. These elements of global order have been under duress in recent years, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's decision to flout a 2016 ruling by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea that Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea were illegal.

The United States must also make clear that as the world's sole superpower, it has a vital interest in preserving its security commitments and upholding the freedom of navigation. Those are potentially "go to war" issues, similar to China's definition of its own "core interests." To uphold the credibility of that posture, Washington needs to develop a more agile and integrated defense doctrine, invest significantly in long-range missiles and small dispersed weapons systems in East Asia, harden its bases in Asia, and build as broad and capable a coalition as possible to deter China from attacking the United States' security partners or impeding lawful access to international waters and airspace.

#### COURSE CORRECTION

Even as it remains firm in upholding its vital interests, Washington needs to give Beijing cause to respond favorably to its efforts to keep China embedded in the international system. U.S. leaders should more openly acknowledge that they would welcome a more prosperous and less belligerent China—one that is responsive to the rights of its citizens and contributes more to addressing global challenges.

This affirmative framing of U.S. policy would signal that the United States is not hostile to China's rise and would welcome a healthier relationship in the future. Biden should consider delivering a message to the Chinese people akin to the one that his predecessor John F. Kennedy sent to Soviet citizens in a commencement address at American University in 1963. Americans found communism "profoundly repugnant," Kennedy said, but could still "hail the Russian people for their many achievements—in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage." Kennedy also appealed to the common humanity of the two sides: "Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." Taking a similar tone when discussing China today could help prepare the ground for a U.S. strategy that looks beyond Xi and the current tensions with Beijing.

The United States will also need to restore discipline to its approach to Taiwan. Symbolic gestures by members of Congress and undisciplined public ruminations about the timing of possible future conflict by military leaders have unnerved U.S. allies and allowed Beijing to paint the United States as the instigator of escalation, when in fact Beijing's tightening pressure on Taiwan is the main cause of rising tensions. American leaders should return to encouraging dialogue between China and Taiwan

without preconditions and express openness to any peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences that enjoys the support of the Taiwanese people. They should also disavow any suggestions that the United States views Taiwan as a critical node or part of the United States' defense perimeter. Taiwan is not an object of contestation between the United States and China: it is a society of 23 million people who should retain agency when it comes to their future.

Washington also needs to strengthen the incentives for fence-sitting countries to work with the United States by offering better access to the American market. Trade agreements are effective vehicles for pulling key countries closer and advancing the United States' vision of rules-based, market-oriented trade. Trade agreements were used to powerful effect during the Cold War but have been largely discarded for domestic political reasons in recent years. Future American presidents will need to restore the strategic rationale for such tools of statecraft if the United States hopes to keep the influence it aspires to on the world stage. This will require enough political courage to make the national security case for drawing partners closer through trade rather than succumbing to populism and protectionism—currently the paths of least political resistance.

Finally, Washington will need to reinvest in multilateralism. Addressing global challenges through institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the G-20, and the UN can be cumbersome and inefficient. Decisions made in such forums occasionally go against U.S. preferences. But that is the price of preserving a global system that lowers barriers to transnational cooperation and sets boundaries for acceptable state behavior. The more the United States withdraws its leadership and its resources from multilateral bodies, the higher the likelihood that the international system will fragment and give way to a “might makes right” world, which would remove restraints on Chinese belligerence and raise the odds of direct military conflict between the United States and China.

#### IF IT AIN'T BROKE

Some critics of this approach will object to it on moral grounds, given the scale of China's human rights violations, and instead urge Washington to isolate Beijing. But outrage is a weak weapon in diplomacy. And when the United States isolates countries, as it did Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela, they tend to even more flagrantly ignore American complaints about human rights because there is no longer any cost or consequence for doing so. A diplomatic decoupling with China would yield a similar result.

Others will argue that instead of tolerating China, the United States should seek to contain it or even engineer the downfall of the CCP. But any American pursuit of a Chinese collapse would backfire. It would alienate the United States from its partners, virtually none of whom have an interest in pursuing such a course. And it would expose American leaders as being dangerously naive about the limits of their leverage: China is too strong for the United States to invade or effect a regime change, and the opposite is true, as well.

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Isolating China  
might feel  
satisfying, but it  
would not serve  
U.S. interests.

Still others will question whether China would be amenable to such a relationship, given its leaders' conviction that Washington's endgame is to destroy Chinese communism. China's leaders will never publicly embrace any U.S. strategy. They will chafe at Washington's efforts to preserve its military deterrent and technological edge, and they will seek to undermine liberal features of the existing international system, most notably its privileging of individual liberty above social stability. But several factors could push Beijing toward grudging acceptance. Chinese leaders privately acknowledge that they are not prepared to assume responsibility for developing and leading an alternate international system. Beijing would like to nudge the existing international order so that it is more favorable to Chinese interests. It believes it is entitled to more power than it currently enjoys. These would be adjustments, however, not wholesale revisions. Indeed, what differentiates Beijing and Moscow most is that Moscow is prepared to act as a system-breaking power, whereas Beijing is not—at least so far.

China's rise since the late 1970s has coincided with its decision to integrate with the world and the institutions underpinning the global order. The country's substantial economic and social progress over the past four decades would not have been possible if China had persisted in its Mao-era isolation. China's national development goals in the coming decades likewise depend on remaining networked within an inclusive international system that sustains its access to foreign capital, technology, and markets.

Da Wei, one of China's leading international relations scholars, has written that a collapse of the international system or its fragmentation would devastate China's ability to modernize. Many other top Chinese experts with whom I regularly interact consistently underline this point. So, too, does the International Monetary Fund. The IMF has warned that severe

fragmentation of the world economy could shave up to seven percent off total global output. Since China is the world's largest trading power, it would be more exposed than most countries to the fallout under such a scenario.

So even though China's leaders clearly want more recognition, insulation, and room to maneuver in the current international system, they must contend with the fact that any fracturing into rival blocs led by the United States and China would place Beijing at a deep disadvantage. In such a scenario, the United States presumably would lead an ideologically aligned group of major economies that control many advanced technologies and military capabilities, with China left leading an ideologically diverse grouping of developing countries that lag in military and technological capacity.

To keep China attuned to and sobered by that potential outcome, Washington must sustain and deepen coordination with as broad a coalition of countries as possible, not just advanced democracies in Europe and Asia. The goal is not to isolate or encircle China but to disabuse any notion that Beijing could succeed in forming a cohesive anti-Western coalition that could fulfill China's development and security requirements. Washington will have the greatest effect along these lines by addressing other countries' top challenges, not by attempting to organize efforts in opposition to China or Chinese initiatives.

Washington can afford magnanimity. It enjoys a sizable lead over China in national competitiveness. And as the political scientist Stephen Walt has argued, China has no viable path to achieving hegemony. The United States is a source of attraction for other countries when it looks to the future with optimism, manages its own affairs, and acts on its responsibilities as a global leader. These are factors within its power to control, not China's.

Despite their respective ambivalence about certain features of the current international system, and the intensifying rivalry between them, the United States and China both want to avoid war and maintain stability. They both derive wealth and security from the existing system. And as the world's two strongest countries, they are better able to contribute to collective problem-solving with existing institutions than they would be without them.

China's ambitions will pose a sharp challenge to the United States well into the future. The best way for Washington to contend with this challenge is to keep China entangled in the international system while nurturing American alliances and bolstering the U.S. technological edge. If the United States can advance a patient but firm long-term strategy toward this end, it will be well positioned to sustain its leadership, prosperity, and security. 🌐

# Japan's Nuremberg

## The Tokyo Trial and the Birth of Postwar Liberalism

JENNIFER LIND

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*Judgment at Tokyo: World War II on Trial and the Making of Modern Asia*

BY GARY J. BASS. Knopf, 2023, 912 pp.

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On May 3, 1946, a warm spring morning in Tokyo, the marshal bellowed for the audience to rise, and 11 judges filed into the courtroom for the opening of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. The judges, from numerous Allied countries, were watched by well over a hundred Japanese spectators and nearly that many Japanese and foreign journalists. Less than a year had passed since Japan's surrender to the Allies; a few days prior, the tribunal's chief prosecutor had handed down a 55-count indictment of Japan's wartime military and civilian leaders.

Twenty-eight defendants sat before the judges. Among them was Tojo Hideki, Japan's prime minister until mid-1944. Tojo knew his surroundings well. During the war, the building—Japan's Army Ministry—had housed

his office. Now that office was occupied by the judges who held his life in their hands. This irony, and many of the tribunal's other ironies, was not lost on Tojo, or on anyone else.

Especially compared with the Nuremberg trials, "the Tokyo trial," as it became known, has received little attention in the West. When Westerners remember World War II, they focus on the European theater: the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, and D-Day. When they do glance toward Asia, they tend to linger on Western experiences there, such as the United Kingdom's loss of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942 or the blood-soaked beaches of Saipan and Iwo Jima. Americans remember the atomic bombardments of Japan, but less to mourn civilians' suffering than to mark the war's end or to ponder the dawn of the nuclear age.

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Gary Bass's magnificent *Judgment at Tokyo* encourages a deeper understanding of the Asian experience under war and occupation. He shows how the trial played formative roles both in postwar Asian politics and in the formation of the postwar global human rights regime. A professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton, Bass has deeply studied the intersection of human rights ideals and politics; a past life in journalism—he was a reporter for *The Economist*—brings clarity and sparkle to his text. *Judgment at Tokyo* is written with the gravity the topic deserves, yet with winks of wit. (The Soviet judge's English was not so bad, Bass reports; at least he knew the phrase "bottoms up.")

Held over the course of 1946–48, the trial lasted almost three times as long as Nuremberg. Readers learn the judges' extraordinary stories and distinctive perspectives. The trial's multinational cast of characters includes familiar names such as Japanese Emperor Hirohito and U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur. But lesser-known supporting players emerge as pivotal, too—Bass brings to life the tragic Togo Shigenori, a "peace-minded Japanese foreign minister" who tried to prevent Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor yet wound up on trial as a war criminal. Famous figures appear in startling cameos: Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew as a university student; China's last Qing emperor, Puyi, as a witness.

More than 400 witnesses recounted Japan's campaign of imperialism and a chilling litany of atrocities. The defendants also took the stand. In a particularly vivid chapter, Bass describes Tojo's poised, defiant testimony; he "wipe[d]

the floor" with chief prosecutor Joseph Keenan. Tojo's testimony—and the dissent issued by the Indian judge, Radhabinod Pal—helped create a powerful counternarrative championed by Japanese conservatives after the war.

These Japanese conservatives, and many others, have scorned the Tokyo trial as "victor's justice." But *Judgment at Tokyo* presents the trial as a flawed yet admirable endeavor. Neither a starry-eyed idealist nor a curled-lip cynic, Bass shows how liberal ideals shaped the Allied effort to bring World War II to a just end. But he also reveals how these ideals were sacrificed to political and military realities, most prominently in the Allies' decision to grant impunity to Hirohito.

A question at the heart of *Judgment at Tokyo* is how history should judge a trial that was neither a kangaroo court nor an exemplar of the principles it sought to represent. This question is not only of historical interest; it has profound relevance to contemporary debates about a "rules-based international order" championed by the United States and its liberal partners. Critics of this order dismiss its language of "rules" as cold realpolitik dressed up as idealism. Bass's exploration of the Tokyo trial gives readers a surprising lens for considering that debate. His depiction shows that in international politics, the pursuit of idealism has always competed with pragmatism and self-interest, requiring tradeoffs and fueling resentment.

#### WAR STORIES

The end of World War II unleashed an era of fantastical narrative creation. Americans and Western Europeans

identified the 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy as the war's turning point, although it was the Soviets who defeated the bulk of the German army in the East. In August 1944, Charles de Gaulle paraded down the Champs Élysées as if he had just liberated France. In the war's aftermath, the Italians remembered their soldiers as *brava gente*—fine, upstanding people not responsible for the kinds of brutalities the German military inflicted.

Politically useful narratives also emerged about postwar Asia. Today, American schoolchildren learn that after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hirohito surrendered unconditionally to the United States. But Bass shows how, even after the U.S. military burned down more than 60 Japanese cities and destroyed two

remaining cities with atomic weapons, the war's end was still a negotiation. In that negotiation, the victor was forced to make clenched-jawed compromises. (This section is important reading for those discussing how the war in Ukraine might end, particularly for those who insist Russia can be forced to give up every one of its goals.)

The key condition of Japan's "unconditional surrender" was impunity for Hirohito. The decision to leave him off the tribunal's indictment outraged many judges and incensed Allied publics, who viewed Hirohito as the mastermind of Japanese imperialism. But U.S. military leaders feared a violent Japanese insurgency would emerge after the country's defeat. Hirohito is "a symbol which unites



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all Japanese,” MacArthur warned. “Destroy him and the nation will disintegrate.” As a result, Bass writes, “despite Hirohito’s involvement in much of his government’s deliberations for expansion across Asia and the attack on Pearl Harbor, . . . the war ended with Hirohito staying in the Imperial Palace while his underlings were hauled into the dock.” The decision to spare Hirohito led Japanese elites and the U.S. officials who established Japan’s postwar occupation to join forces in creating a myth about Hirohito’s innocence: to “sanitize,” as Bass puts it, Hirohito’s wartime role. The Japanese media—which U.S. officials influenced and censored after the war’s end—along with Tokyo trial defendants, spun the story of a helpless figurehead forced into war by aggressive military leaders. To play his part in this mythmaking, Hirohito said in 1946 that he “was virtually a prisoner and powerless.”

Bass isn’t having it, and *Judgment at Tokyo* adds to the shellacking that the Hirohito myth has already received from Herbert Bix’s *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* and John Dower’s *Embracing Defeat*. Bass most powerfully illustrates that Hirohito’s helplessness was a myth by recounting a moment in which that myth was accidentally punctured—ironically, by one of its most committed supporters. During his testimony, Tojo at one point “slipped up catastrophically,” Bass writes, stating that the Japanese government went to war “in accord with the will of the emperor.” The chief justice pointed out Tojo’s slip, and “a stunned hush fell” in the courtroom.

#### MOCK TRIAL

Many have considered Hirohito’s impunity to be the original sin that rendered the Tokyo trial a political project. Indeed, the French judge, Henri Bernard, issued a dissent in which he argued that if Japan’s military leaders were guilty of conspiracy, then that conspiracy “had a principal author who escaped all prosecution.” In addition to demonstrating how the trial violated the principle of individual accountability in the case of the emperor, Bass shows the many other ways it failed to live up to proper standards of jurisprudence.

Early on, defense attorneys offered a “spirited challenge to the court’s very jurisdiction,” arguing that “the court itself was not properly constituted and that some of the offenses in its charter were not crimes.” In response, Bass writes, a bumbling Keenan turned red (nearly purple, observed the Chinese judge, Mei Ruao) and protested that mankind should not “place itself in a straightjacket of legal precepts.” The chief judge, William Webb, eventually declared that a justification for the court’s jurisdiction would be “given later.” It never was.

The trial also violated the norm of judicial independence, as many judges consulted closely with their governments. And it flouted the legal norm that one should not be a judge in one’s own case. In Chongqing, Mei had suffered under Japanese bombardment, and the Philippine judge, Jaranilla, had endured the 1942 Bataan Death March.

The trial selectively overlooked human rights abuses, too. Nobody was indicted for Japan’s wartime “comfort women” program in which hundreds

of thousands of Asian women were imprisoned and repeatedly raped in frontline brothels. If the trial had spotlighted these atrocities, it could have helped strengthen norms forbidding violence against women and sexual trafficking. Instead, in the ensuing decades, Asian women's bodies continued to be commodified in sex tourism in Southeast Asia and in the prostitution that flourished around regional U.S. military bases.

The list of omissions goes on and on. The tribunal spared Japanese Lieutenant General Ishii Shiro, the head of Unit 731. This secret biological weapons program conducted horrific medical experiments on Chinese civilians and soldiers and killed 250,000 people by deliberately releasing bubonic plague into Chinese cities. Spared from indictment, Ishii made a deal with the U.S. military so that it could learn from what Bass calls Ishii's "ghastly expertise."

The tribunal also erased Japanese victims of atrocities. With a Soviet judge on the stand, no Soviet officials were brought to justice for the crimes they committed against Japanese prisoners of war, who, Bass writes, "perished in staggering numbers in Soviet captivity." *Judgment at Tokyo* also explores Japanese suffering under conventional and nuclear U.S. bombardments: in a different postwar settlement, Bass notes, these bombings might have been deemed war crimes. "Fortunately," U.S. General Curtis LeMay mused years later, "we were on the winning side."

Bass depicts the trial as often shaped by empire and permeated by racism. "Japanese leaders would be booked,"

he argues, "not for attacking Burma, Malaya, or Singapore but for attacking the British Commonwealth." Empire drove who had a voice at the trial. "The Indonesians would be spoken for by Dutchmen and the Vietnamese by Frenchmen, and the Koreans not at all."

The "monumental dissent" by the Indian judge, Pal, pulled back the curtain on such themes. Running over 1,000 pages, Pal's dissent was "the only Tokyo judgment that explicitly treats both racism and imperialism as major themes in world politics," Bass notes. Pal lambasted Soviet hypocrisy given the Soviet Union's postwar brutalization of Eastern Europe. But he "was equally withering on Western colonialism," Bass points out. "If the domination of one nation by another was an international crime," Pal wrote, "then many of the powerful nations would be criminal."

Pal gave voice to ideas that the architects of the tribunal preferred to obscure. But Bass also shows that Pal's dissent included troubling themes. India's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was "appalled by Pal's opinion," which he called a "monumental justification of Japan's conduct during the last three decades." Pal's glossing-over of Japanese atrocities, Bass writes, became a prominent feature of a postwar Japanese conservative counternarrative.

#### FAIR PLAY

And yet, despite the trial's shortcomings, Bass notes that "the fact that there was a trial at all was remarkable." One of *Judgment at Tokyo's* profound contributions is how it illuminates the roads that were not taken. MacArthur wanted a tribunal comprising only

U.S. judges to try Tojo and others for attacking Pearl Harbor. Vengeful Allied publics—as well as the Chinese and Russian leadership—favored “a simpler way of dealing with Japan’s leaders: just kill them.”

Instead, thanks to its extensive witness testimony and its variety of judges, the trial helped establish a richer—incomplete, but richer—history of the war in Asia. The judges were not somebody’s nephew on a boondoggle but were, for the most part, their countries’ best legal minds. The Dutch, French, and Indian judges held steadfast to legal principles and issued dissents that defied their governments’ preferred rulings. Defendants received “some version of due process and legal procedure,” Bass writes, and the defense attorneys—Japanese and U.S. lawyers—had a “strong sense of professionalism” and gave “full-throated representation to their Japanese clients.” The Japanese were shocked when Ben Blakeney—a lawyer and major in the U.S. Army who served as a defense attorney for two Japanese defendants—questioned his own government’s indictment, which asserted that the killing of U.S. troops at Pearl Harbor was equivalent to murder. If that was so, Blakeney argued, then “we know the name of the very man whose hands loosed the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.”

Bass argues that the Tokyo trial performed a vital educational role for the world and for Japan. The trial “shined a harsh light on such calamitous decisions as invading China and attacking the United States,” Bass writes. And “the Japanese people recoiled in shock” when they learned from eye-

witness testimony about “the horrific sacking of Nanjing and Manila” and their military’s “mass rape of civilian women.” To be sure, the historical record would have been much more enriched if the trial had done more to foreground Asian countries instead of their colonizers and to expose Allied violence as well as Allied suffering. But by illuminating these human rights violations, the trial contributed to the historical record, helping to discredit a militarist foreign policy in Japan and empowering liberal scholars and political leaders to push back against those who tried to deny Japanese human rights abuses.

An intriguing element of *Judgment at Tokyo*, however, is its attentiveness to the way that departures from liberal idealism may also have promoted post-war stability. In the case of impunity for Hirohito, Bass encourages readers to consider the virtues of pragmatism. Nobody can know whether trying Hirohito would have triggered an insurgency. But after the war, “there was virtually no sign of organized resistance,” Bass writes; the Japanese themselves oversaw the massive enterprise of demobilization. Japan later achieved the stunning economic growth that allowed it to join the ranks of the world’s most prosperous countries.

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Bass writes that his book “is meant to allow readers to make up their own minds about how the trial worked and what it meant.” He is too modest. His contribution extends far beyond Tokyo in the 1940s, shedding light on an enduring debate about liberalism and international politics.

As the Allies did during the Tokyo trial, U.S. leaders and their allies and partners today often describe their foreign policies as aimed at upholding a set of objective laws that can promote peace worldwide rather than as rooted in self-interest. In 2022, for instance, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared in these pages that Western governments only intend to maintain “a global order that binds power to rules and that confronts revisionist acts.” That same year, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the liberal international order as one “that the world came together to build after two world wars to manage relations between states, to prevent conflict, to uphold the rights of all people.”

After World War II, many Japanese believed that “all the fancy talk about law was eyewash,” writes Bass. Today, too, critics around the world respond to liberal rhetoric with a curled lip. On the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Wang Wenbin, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, scorned the U.S.-led “rules-based international order” as no better than “the law of the jungle.” In October 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin complained that “all we hear is the West is insisting on a rules-based order,” adding, “Where did that come from anyway? Who has ever seen these rules? Who agreed or approved them?” Putin has also argued, as he did in 2007, that “the use of force can only be considered legitimate if the decision is sanctioned by the UN.”

One might think that these Chinese and Russian leaders are on weak

ground given Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is tacitly supported by China and, of course, not authorized by the UN. Yet their critiques resonate in a world in which, according to an ongoing study run by the Fletcher School at Tufts University, the United States has used force more than 100 times since 1990, frequently without UN authority. They resonate when the United States extols the principle of sovereignty in Ukraine, despite having ignored it in Afghanistan and Iraq. And they resonate when Washington touts its adherence to a global rules-based trade order while using its influence within that order to smash the Iranian and Russian economies, cut China out of the global semiconductor supply chain, and impose tariffs on Chinese products that the World Trade Organization deems illegitimate.

Proponents of a liberal international order argue that its contradictions and hypocrisies are, in fact, grounds for hope. As the scholar Matias Spektor wrote earlier this year in *Foreign Affairs*, “Western hypocrisy can be beneficial” because it “requires policymakers in the Western alliance to get their response right whenever they are confronted with their failure to live up to their moral commitments.” As a result, Spektor argued, “the Western international order is capable of learning, adapting, and evolving.” In this call for the benefit of the doubt, one thinks of a Tokyo court that assured the world that its jurisdiction would be explained later. Despite that astonishing failure, the trial went ahead anyway. But in today's world, the United States no longer runs the courtroom. 🌐

# Why Smart Leaders Do Stupid Things

## Is Foreign Policy Rational?

KEREN YARHI-MILO

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*How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*

BY JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER AND SEBASTIAN ROSATO  
Yale University Press, 2023, 304 pp.

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To many observers, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine was, obviously, irrational. Ukraine is Europe's largest country, and Russian President Vladimir Putin was short on both good troops and quality weapons. No other state (aside from Belarus) was sympathetic to the idea that Moscow should control Kyiv, and the United States had uncovered Putin's invasion plans and then released them to the entire planet. Most of the world's biggest economies threatened to hit Russia with sanctions if it went ahead with its attack, and NATO countries made it clear that they would arm Kyiv.

But to the political scientists John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, Putin's decision still makes sense. In their new book, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*, they argue

that Putin and his advisers "thought in terms of straightforward balance-of-power theory," viewing Ukraine as a bulwark against NATO and Kyiv's possible membership in the organization as a "redline." Keeping Ukraine in Russia's column, the authors write, was a "matter of life and death" for the Kremlin. If Russia goes on to lose the war in Ukraine or if Putin loses power because of the conflict, the authors contend, it will therefore not be because the invasion was irrational. It will, instead, be a result of Russia's military incompetence and NATO's effort to help Ukraine balance against Russia.

There was a time when Mearsheimer and Rosato's beliefs would have been conventional wisdom, or at least quite popular, among scholars of international relations. For much of the

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twentieth century, “realism”—a theory made broadly popular by figures such as Kenneth Waltz, Henry Kissinger, and George Kennan—dominated the discourse. Realist scholars believe that states behave according to the same, inexorable logic. They behave rationally, working to maximize their power and protect themselves from attack in an anarchic world. To these experts, the psychology of leaders mattered little. It was the shape, contour, and distribution of power of international systems that dictated how states behaved.

But over the last several decades, the field has seen a quiet revolution. Political scientists began studying how leaders think, what biases they hold, and how these characteristics shape decision-making. They found that, overwhelmingly, psychology has an enormous effect on leaders’ behavior on the international stage. Leaders frequently rely on heuristics to make choices—especially during crises. Leaders’ beliefs, their personalities, and their impressions of their peers influence how they see the world. And their feelings shape how they approach different problems and situations. Putin’s emotional fixation on controlling Ukraine, for example, is frequently cited as the reason he invaded the country.

*How States Think* tries to undermine these claims and resurrect the older way of thinking. The authors argue that most international decisions are, in fact, rational. They work to poke holes in the scholarship of various political psychologists but also of rational choice theorists, whose definition of rationality (that leaders make decisions based on the expected value of the outcome) differs from the authors’ more circum-

scribed definition. The very title of the book is a play on a pathbreaking volume of political psychology—*How Statesmen Think*—edited by the late Robert Jervis. (Full disclosure: Jervis was my mentor.) Personalities, Mearsheimer and Rosato argue, may not be entirely irrelevant in international politics, but they do not matter nearly as much as scholars think.

Mearsheimer and Rosato’s book is an important entry into the debate over rationality in international relations, and it does a decent job of showing why academics struggle to determine which decisions can be considered rational. But the book ultimately fails to establish that countries behave in rational ways. The authors cannot come up with a compelling definition of rationality. They do not explain why what is rational for a leader is also rational for a state. They ignore vast primary and archival data that cuts against their arguments. They come up with post hoc explanations for what they deem rational, highlighting their own bias. And the examples they use to prove their claims frequently undermine them—including the invasion of Ukraine.

#### EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Mearsheimer and Rosato are not upstart insurgents in their discipline. Mearsheimer is one of the most famous political scientists in history. His seminal 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, established the idea of offensive realism, which argues that states always maximize their power to guarantee their survival. Rosato, Mearsheimer’s former pupil, made his name by logically dismantling democratic peace theory: the idea that democracies tend not to go to war with each other.

Their new book is sweeping. In *How States Think*, Mearsheimer and Rosato examine policymakers' collective choices from World War I to the present. They revisit major choices from the past that have often been considered nonsensical and argue that they were, in fact, quite rational. Even Germany's disastrous 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor that same year are cited as rational decisions.

Some of Mearsheimer and Rosato's criticisms are valid. The authors correctly point out that "rationality" is a foggy term, and they are rightfully dismissive of commentators who decide whether an action was a success "and then reason backward" to determine whether it was rational. The authors also effectively pick apart overly narrow definitions of rationality that make almost every leader come off as a cartoonish madman.

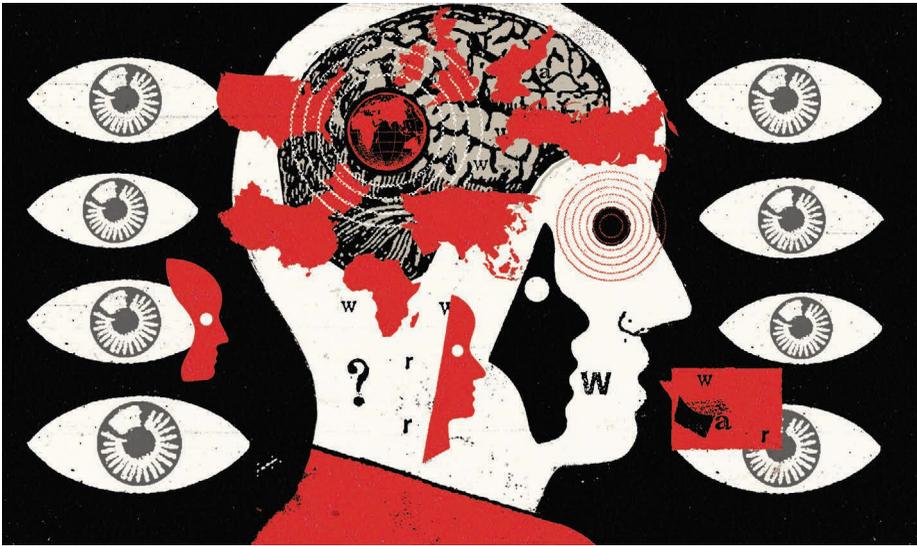
But when Mearsheimer and Rosato begin to spell out their own theory of rationality, the book's claims unravel. They write that rationality is "making sense of the world for the purpose of navigating it in the pursuit of desired goals" and that rational decisions are those based on theories supported by "realistic assumptions," "compelling causal logic," and "evidentiary support." It is a formulation that is just as squishy as the definitions they take down. All leaders, after all, think their theories, ideas, and choices are consistent, logical, and well supported—and there is rarely an objective test that can prove otherwise or that does not rely on post hoc reasoning.

The authors unintentionally illustrate this problem when they explain

which theories they consider credible and which ones they do not. They dismiss as unconvincing the domino theory, which holds that if one country becomes a democracy or a communist dictatorship, then its neighbors would quickly make the same switch. Yet they argue that Putin's belief that Russia and Ukraine are part of one country is credible because, historically, Ukraine has been Moscow's strategic buffer against the rest of Europe. There is no objective reason why decisions guided by domino theory are irrational and Putin's attack on Ukraine is not. But there is a subjective one. Mearsheimer and Rosato are both realists, and according to their version of realism, Putin's decision was the natural response to NATO expansion. A theory's credibility, in other words, is in the eye of the beholder.

In trying to illustrate their argument, Mearsheimer and Rosato also ignore a strong body of literature in international relations on the topic of how leaders think—literature that draws from psychology and behavioral economics, uses primary source materials, and features experimental data on elites. Even as they try to pick apart opposing research, Mearsheimer and Rosato barely mention foundational studies that demonstrate how leaders are motivated by emotions, preexisting beliefs, concerns about reputation, and other factors.

And even if Mearsheimer and Rosato are right about which decisions are rational, it does not mean that leaders are making them for rational reasons. Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, for example, may have had little to do with balance-of-power calculations.



Instead, Russia's president could have invaded because he perceived himself as being in a domain of losses, making him less risk averse, or because he wanted to avoid a domino effect in which Ukraine's admission into NATO would prompt more countries along Russia's border to join the organization. Both are explanations the authors would not consider rational. Leaders can hold multiple, sometimes competing, theories at one time. The Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, for instance, believed the United States was too worried about casualties to invade his country. But he still feared the possibility of invasion, so he hinted that he might have weapons of mass destruction in an effort to deter attacks. Scholars simply do not have enough information to determine which theories leaders are following or whether they are doing so in ways experts would predict.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's infamous appeasement of Adolf Hitler provides another case in

point. Mearsheimer and Rosato say that Chamberlain's decision to let the Nazi leader annex large swaths of Czechoslovakia in 1938, rather than fight against the German war machine, was rational and driven by balance-of-power reasoning. Appeasement, they argue, was consistent with the British government's theory that Hitler's expansionist intentions were limited and that Berlin wanted to avoid war. But when he flew to Munich, Chamberlain had mounting evidence that Germany wanted far more territory and would use force to get it. He was, therefore, aware of a different theory about Hitler's behavior, one holding that Berlin was a revisionist power that would not stop expanding of its own volition. The prime minister nonetheless clung to his belief that he could personally dissuade Hitler.

#### FAST AND FURIOUS

Mearsheimer and Rosato acknowledge that people can be irrational and can be guided by psychological biases. But they argue that personal capriciousness

is rarely a problem in foreign policy. “When the stakes are high, as they are in matters of national security,” they write, leaders “have powerful incentives to think in theoretical terms.” It is a simple argument: when put under pressure, people tend to be rational.

But this claim does not hold up to scrutiny. In fact, one could just as easily argue the opposite: when the stakes are high and policymakers are in a crunch, they are more likely to succumb to cognitive shortcuts, emotions, and other nonrational behavior. This is especially true if leaders do not have enough data, or do not have time to sift through and deliberate on data, to make an informed decision. Israel, for example, had human intelligence signaling that Arab states were planning to attack it in 1973. But the Israeli government believed its neighbors were not foolish enough to invade without air superiority. It ignored the evidence and was therefore caught off-guard when Egypt attacked.

Even if leaders do make rational choices when the stakes are high, it does not mean that the country will behave rationally; there is often a difference between what is rational for a state and what is rational for its leaders. A desire to stay in power, for example, may motivate leaders to carry out diversionary wars or other costly actions that undermine their state’s interests. Research shows that Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982 partly because the military junta, facing rising unpopularity at home, theorized that the invasion would create a rally-around-the-flag effect that would shore up their support. At first, it did, staving off the toppling of the military. But the war was clearly not in the interests of Argentina, even

when hopes for a negotiated settlement on the British territory faded and even though the junta mistakenly believed that the United Kingdom would not intervene. Buenos Aires quickly lost, and shortly after, the junta fell.

Mearsheimer and Rosato try to get around the difference between a leader’s interests and the national interest by emphasizing the role of deliberation in decision-making. For a choice to be rational, they write, leaders must both adhere to a reasonable theory and make their decision after consultations. But the authors’ definition of deliberation is flawed. It simply requires that relevant policymakers enter a room and engage in “robust” debate, with the principal decision-maker breaking any deadlocks. But much like the authors’ description of what makes a theory credible, this criterion is both vague and difficult to conclusively determine, particularly in autocracies.

Part of the reason why the book fails to convince readers about whether deliberation is present or absent is because of its methodology. The authors rely on analytical narratives, not primary data, and do no real process tracing (studying a sequence of events over time and ruling out different explanations) for the cases they highlight. As a result, they miss clear evidence that contradicts their conclusions. When readers go through many of the cases the authors cite as deliberative, they will find not careful debates but leaders engaging in performative discussions. Advisers either spin their arguments to make them seem compatible with the leader’s beliefs or they simply endorse what the leader has already decreed. This behavior is especially prevalent in autocracies,

in which leaders rarely search for new information or alternative viewpoints. When dictators run their ideas by others, they are not asking for a gut check. They just want to be told that they are right.

Consider, again, Russia's invasion. Mearsheimer and Rosato conclude that the process by which Moscow decided to invade was deliberative because Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, told reporters that Moscow's "decision-making mechanism" was "fully employed." But the facts show that no such process exists. According to reporting by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, the U.S. intelligence community believed Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine as early as March 2021, but he told most of his senior advisers about it only days before the invasion. Dissenting ministers and military officers were shown the door, went into exile, or disappeared. Putin did hold a televised meeting with his advisers before starting the invasion, ostensibly to discuss whether Russia should recognize the independence of Ukraine's easternmost provinces. But it was clearly just for display. "I would like to underline that I did not discuss anything in advance with any of you," Putin said to his officials, who looked visibly nervous. They then rose, one by one, to endorse their president's plan. When one deviated from the script by saying that Russia should annex the territories, Putin snapped at him, and the adviser quickly corrected himself.

The decision to invade Ukraine is hardly the only one Mearsheimer and Rosato misrepresent. The authors code the decision to invade Iraq as non-deliberative, arguing that U.S. President

George W. Bush "was not deeply involved in the relevant debates inside his administration." The war in Iraq may well have been irrational; it certainly ended poorly. But entire shelves of books have been written about the botched decision to invade, and they all show that Bush and his team had real conversations. The president met and discussed the idea with his advisers before making up his mind. The U.S. military planned it out well in advance, and it did not hide its intentions from top commanders. And the administration followed a clear theory: that it needed a preventive war to stop Iraq from acquiring nuclear weapons. They did it based on U.S. intelligence, however flawed, and a perception that Saddam was once again deceiving the United States. The reason Mearsheimer and Rosato saw the invasion of Iraq as nonrational, then, is not because it fails to tick off all the items on their checklist. It is because the invasion cannot be explained by their realist theory of the balance of power.

#### THEORY AND PRACTICE

Despite its logical flaws and lack of compelling evidence, Mearsheimer and Rosato's book holds important value for scholars and policymakers. Their work shows that international politics is an important discipline by proving that leaders rely on theories, both credible and not, to help them make decisions. American leaders' belief in liberal hegemony drove U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War. Similarly, the West's decision to expand NATO was driven, in part, by democratic peace theory. The book also proves the importance of process, something

overlooked by scholars, in determining whether a leader or a state made a rational decision. Deliberation, the authors write, is essential if policymakers are to avoid engaging in groupthink or falling prey to biases and misperceptions. It is why democratic societies typically have a geopolitical advantage.

Washington should remember this fact as it figures out what to do about Beijing. There is still a debate in the United States about how to handle China, but increasingly, American discourse on China is dominated by aggressive rhetoric. Today, as Jessica Chen Weiss noted in these pages, “individuals feel the need to out-hawk one another” when it comes to Beijing. “The result,” she said, “is groupthink.”

Given how central U.S.-Chinese relations are to modern-day politics, one would expect a book about “how states think” to discuss the subject at length. And yet present-day China is curiously absent from Mearsheimer and Rosato’s work. Presumably, as realists, the authors believe Washington’s growing efforts to check Beijing are logical. But determining whether the current course of action is rational requires knowing whether China is a selectively opportunist or an expansionist power, which, in turn, requires divining Beijing’s intentions. It is something the authors probably do not want to admit. If, after all, the country is purely defensive, then Washington’s aggressive stance makes little sense, and what it needs to do instead is provide reassurance that it will not try to weaken Beijing.

Unfortunately, the reality is that U.S. policymakers and the American intelligence community know little about how Chinese President Xi Jinping actually

thinks, making it difficult for them to use theories to predict Beijing’s behavior. Without such information, American leaders must instead default to other measures: selecting evidence consistent with their own views, using mental shortcuts, or relying on U.S. President Joe Biden’s personal impressions of Xi. (The same is true for U.S. assessments of many other autocracies, including Russia.) They must remember that because the stakes are high, great powers and their mercurial leaders may miscalculate or act in irrational and neurotic ways.

The war in Ukraine made this point readily evident. The United States should keep it in mind when it considers Taiwan, as well. As with Russia and Ukraine, Taiwan is bound up in historical grievances that may prevent Xi from thinking clearly before launching an invasion. (Beijing sees the island as a renegade province.) Taiwan is, relatedly, a deeply emotional issue for China’s leaders. In fact, Xi seems to view taking the island as his personal mission. He has declared that seizing Taiwan is essential to “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”—which he wants to achieve before leaving office.

Xi, therefore, is unlikely to apply cold, hard logic when it comes to Taipei. In fact, it may be wishful thinking to expect that he will be rational about Taiwan at all. He is, instead, more likely to decide what to do based on his emotional state of mind, his subjective assessment of China’s strength, or his reading of U.S. resolve. He is likely to disregard evidence suggesting that his goal is unattainable or that the costs of his actions would be astronomical—just as Putin did with Ukraine. That is the real tragedy of great-power politics. 🌐

# The Long Unipolar Moment?

Debating American Dominance

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## The End of the American Era

JOSHUA SHIFRINSON

**I**n “The Myth of Multipolarity” (May/June 2023), Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth challenge the idea that the United States is in free fall down the great-power ranks. Washington, they say, “remains at the top of the global power hierarchy—safely above China and far, far above every other country.” In their view, the world “is neither bipolar nor multipolar, and it is not about to become either.”

The authors are correct that the United States is still the most powerful country in the world. But their basic argument—that the current distribution of power is unipolar—is off. In fact,

a closer look at the authors’ preferred indicators of power and their underlying assumptions suggests just the opposite. Unipolarity is an artifact of the past.

Brooks and Wohlforth base their argument on three fundamental claims. One is that the crude distribution of power—or a country’s overall economic and military capabilities—shows that the United States and China are the only two plausible great powers today. The second is that the United States’ technological advantages, combined with the high barriers China must surmount to catch up, mean that China is not a peer competitor. The authors’ final claim is that the international system lacks meaningful balancing against the United States, as other states have neither created formal alliances nor armed themselves in ways that constrain U.S. freedom of action. In bipolar and multipolar systems, they contend, the poles engage in pervasive balancing against each other, so the current dearth of balancing suggests that unipolarity endures.

But each of these points is suspect. For one thing, requiring that other

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powers have rough parity with the leading state is a strange way to define or count poles. Throughout history, great powers have never been thought of as quantitative peers. Rather, they are states with sufficient economic and military resources, diplomatic reach, and political acumen to influence other leading countries' calculations in peace and make a good showing against them in war. This broader definition is why the Austro-Hungarian Empire, imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union have all been judged as "poles" of their respective international systems. Even though each of these states was far weaker than the strongest state of the time, they were still capable enough to factor mightily into questions of war and peace.

Ultimately, there is a threshold—sometimes significantly lower than one might expect based on crude measures—reflecting how states compare across the board in their economic, military, technological, and diplomatic attributes, and above which states qualify as poles. Polarity, after all, captures those state attributes that allow some of them to influence the course of world politics on core matters. And although overall economic and military output matter, they take analysts only so far in judging power. Today, a diverse economy, a favorable geographic position, and the possession of nuclear weapons are especially important factors in such assessments. India, for example, with its large economy, favorable geography, and strong nuclear arsenal, gets a boost relative to crude power measures. So does Japan, which has almost all the same advantages as India, albeit with

a latent nuclear capability. China, meanwhile, merits a similar—and perhaps even greater—boost, with its less favorable geography offset by its impressive conventional military and growing nuclear arsenal.

Nor is China's relative technological backwardness nearly as much of an impediment to its great-power status as Brooks and Wohlforth allege. Putting aside questions about how difficult it is for countries to develop cutting-edge technology, countries do not need to be technological leaders to qualify as leading powers. Austria-Hungary and Russia, for instance, were backward by the standard of 1914, yet they were central to European multipolarity. The United Kingdom failed to leverage the second Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the extent that Germany did, but it was still a pole in the same era. The Soviet Union was never close to net technological parity with the United States, but it was considered a peer competitor throughout the Cold War.

Instead, what a country needs is to produce a sufficient quantity of "good enough" technological material to influence major international decisions. On this score, it is notable how far China has come in a short period. The country had almost no domestic computer industry in the late 1980s, but today China is a major producer of the computer chips that run much of the global economy. The same is true in other fields. It is thus unsurprising that U.S. policymakers are increasingly worried about China's technological prowess: given that China is

producing a lot of good (if not great) material, it is not clear that the United States' technological lead would be decisive if the two states went to war.

In fact, the United States appears to have its hands full with China as is. Brooks and Wohlforth are right that any one country can be balanced by the United States more readily than the reverse. Yet it is the existence of balancing, rather than its intensity, that tells us about the distribution of power. This distinction is important because Washington's own behavior indicates that the United States faces growing geopolitical constraints and counterbalancing pressures, all of which imply that the system is not unipolar. Despite a defense budget approaching \$1 trillion, policymakers and experts routinely argue that China's growing economic and military footprint means that the United States can no longer simultaneously meet its commitments in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The result has been many fraught conversations over where and how Washington should spend its finite resources. Meanwhile, the United States is redoubling its efforts to enlist India, Japan, and other Asian countries against China. Such efforts would not take place if the world were still dominated by Washington—and by Washington alone.

Judging power is a fraught game. Yet Brooks and Wohlforth's claims are exceedingly difficult to square with both U.S. policy today and a more comprehensive view of what constitutes a great power. Analysts can debate whether the world is bipolar or multipolar. But unipolarity is no more.

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## Beyond Poles

ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

I have a recurrent nightmare about global politics. At the end of this century, or even midway through it, life as we know it is forever transformed for the worse through a combination of flames, flood, disease, drought, famine, and continual conflict caused by hundreds of millions of migrants. And atop the ruined globe, Uncle Sam is waving a flag, declaring victory over China and insisting that the United States is still “number one.”

Brooks and Wohlforth's article deepens my pessimism. It is as if they are writing in 1985 or 1945. They approach international politics as if it were a game of great powers, where the distribution of different kinds of power among various states determines the size, location, and tilt of the playing field. The point of their article is to demonstrate that the world remains unipolar, with the United States as the dominant pole, even if its measurable military and economic power has diminished relative to other countries. “The world is neither bipolar nor multipolar, and it is not about to become either,” they argue. But those who are dying from heatwaves and fleeing floods and fire might beg to

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differ. The world has two poles: north and south. The ice at both is melting rapidly, with untold dangers for all of us.

As the Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy points out, existential "transnational" threats such as climate change, pandemics, and energy shortages exist side by side and on equal footing with the traditional geopolitical threats that Brooks and Wohlforth address. The distribution of power captured by unipolarity, bipolarity, or multipolarity is thus still a key background condition for officials to consider as they formulate policy.

The question, however, is what counts as a pole. And curiously, Brooks and Wohlforth seem to have determined that the answer is limited to states. They therefore write as if the European Union simply does not exist. That is a major omission. Even according to their own calculations, the EU is a major power. And it may be the one doing the most to stem existential risks.

#### STATE OF AFFAIRS

Brooks and Wohlforth offer a straightforward definition of multipolarity: a system in which the international order is "shaped largely by the three or more roughly matched states at the top." At present, they write, "the United States and China are undoubtedly the two most powerful countries, but at least one more country must be roughly in their league for multipolarity to exist." They then present two charts, one showing data on GDP and the other showing military spending, to demonstrate that the United States and China are far ahead of France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom. The data, they argue,

also show that the United States is far ahead of China.

Add the EU to these charts, however, and the authors' claims become harder to support. According to the International Monetary Fund, the United States' GDP is \$26.9 trillion, China's is \$19.4 trillion, and the EU's is \$17.8 trillion. Among the other biggest economies are India and Japan, which both have GDPs between \$3 and \$5 trillion. The United States may be well ahead of its nearest competitors, but the top three global economies are an order of magnitude ahead of all the others.

The United States still far outpaces both China and the EU with regard to military spending. But the EU's spending is in the same range as China's: the European Defense Agency reported in December 2022 that the defense expenditures of the 26 EU member states that provided data totaled roughly \$214 billion for 2021, compared with China's \$242 billion in 2022. Given the war in Ukraine, the EDA's 2022 numbers will be substantially higher. Collaborative EU defense procurement is steadily rising (although it started from a very small base), and the EU is engaging in 12 civilian and nine military missions around the world under its Common Security and Defense Policy.

All in all, Brooks and Wohlforth's argument is at its strongest when analyzing pure military power. The United States is indeed far ahead of other countries, spending three times as much as its nearest competitors. Still, if the United States had to support Ukraine against Russia or Taiwan against China without the European members of NATO or the EU at its side, Washington's odds of success would

be significantly diminished. As the war in Iraq demonstrated, the United States cannot simply command its allies to fight. NATO runs on the consent of its members, including important European powers. The EU plays an essential role alongside NATO in forging this consensus.

Brooks and Wohlforth are hardly alone in their insistence that only states count in calculations of international power. It is a view shared by the larger U.S. national security community, which consistently ignores and underestimates the EU. Yet the EU has many of the attributes of a state: a currency (which serves as the world's second-largest reserve currency), lawmaking abilities, diplomatic representation, and a common foreign and security policy. And regardless of what kind of entity it is, the EU is an extremely powerful player. It is the world's most influential regulator, a status that is ever more important as climate crises expand and multiply. It is the world's leader in the transition to green energy. The EU's economic aid kept Ukraine afloat between 2014 and 2022, and the bloc will provide the bulk of reconstruction funds after the war ends. And the EU's sanctions against Russia are more significant than the United States', given the bloc's major trading relationships with its eastern neighbor.

Critically, the EU is a deeply stabilizing force. To see why, imagine the world without it. The bloc's countries would still be military allies through NATO, but they might otherwise be economic competitors. China would have been able to move many eastern and southern European states into its orbit, as it was doing before Russia invaded

Ukraine. And Moscow would have had a better chance of splitting European governments from one another. Some major EU countries, for instance, would have been far more reticent to reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas, even during the Ukraine war, without the EU compromise machine.

#### UNDER THE INFLUENCE

The EU challenges analysts to rethink the definition of a state. But so did the United States when it was founded; the U.S. Constitution was designed to form "a more perfect union" among its member states. There are critical differences between the EU and countries such as the United States, of course. Australia, Canada, Germany, the United States, and many other countries are federated unions, ultimately subordinate to a national government, whereas the EU is a networked union that allows its members to act together in some ways and apart in others. The EU certainly has less power over its constituent parts than does the United States. Yet the EU still has far more power over its members, which remain sovereign states, than any other regional entity. It is one of a kind.

That may not be the case forever. In pioneering its networked form, the EU has developed a template that other regional organizations are following and customizing in various ways. The African Union, which replaced the Organization of African Unity in 2002, seeks increased social and economic integration for its continent. To better figure out how it can achieve this end, AU and EU ministers and commission members meet regularly. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, established in 1967, was controlled almost entirely

by networks of national ministers, with very little central authority. But in recent years, ASEAN has established more coordinating mechanisms, including a strong free trade agreement among its members. The body also created the ASEAN+3 forum—which includes China, Japan, and South Korea—through which all the members' foreign affairs ministers discuss security issues.

Foreign policy practitioners should hope these blocs succeed. Powerful regional unions are the necessary intermediaries between international or global institutions and state and local governments. They will be essential to the world's ability to meet global challenges that require the cooperation of all states (or at least the vast majority of states) to solve. Even the mighty United States will have to act in concert with Canada and Mexico to strengthen the resilience, biodiversity, health, and security of North America. This fact became readily apparent this summer, when the U.S. government sent firefighters to Canada to control wildfires, whose smoke was choking major American cities.

Brooks and Wohlforth might still dismiss regional blocs, even as those blocs aspire to become unions. In their article, the authors distinguish between mere influence—"the ability to get others to do what you want"—and power, which they suggest demands statehood and must be quantified. But this division is meaningless. Power has multiple components; influence is certainly one of them. Thankfully for the planet, and for humanity's ability to address a variety of existential threats, the influence of institutions that balance sovereignty and unity will help determine the future.

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## Polarity Is What States Make of It

BILAHARI KAUSIKAN

**B**rooks and Wohlforth argue that the United States, though not as dominant as before, is still unquestionably at the top of the international order. Almost all the world's "real alliances," they contend, "bind smaller states to Washington, and the main dynamic is the expansion of that alliance system."

These claims are correct but beside the point. The United States will, indeed, remain dominant in many, perhaps most, economic and military metrics for quite some time. Yet to conclude that multipolarity is a myth is to conceive of multipolarity in superficial, overly formalistic, and largely obsolete ways. For their part, Brooks and Wohlforth define the concept based on the experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by emphasizing formal alliances and hard measurements of power—such as a country's military expenditures or gross domestic product—and ignoring everything else. But today, power depends as much on the way different states control critical resources, and how they informally collaborate, as it does on the size of formal alliances or military forces. And by these standards, the world is

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much more multipolar than Brooks and Wohlforth believe.

#### NO WAY OUT

The contemporary international system is characterized by a global web of supply chains of a complexity and density never seen before, one that links friend and foe alike and frequently makes that distinction ambiguous. The U.S.-Chinese rivalry and the war in Ukraine may have stressed this system, but aside from some specific technologies with national security implications, neither challenge has reversed globalization. Nor will they. The costs of abandoning interdependence are simply too high to be realistically entertained.

Some U.S. policymakers would like to see the United States and its allies separate their economies from China's. But whatever their concerns about Beijing, no government, even the closest U.S. ally, will stop engaging with China, even as many states try to mitigate the risks of interdependence. The country is simply too big an economic actor. According to China's official statistics, for example, the country accounted for about 30 percent of global manufacturing output in 2021, and there is a limit to how much any country, including the United States, can diversify away from what is in effect the factory of the world. (This statistic also indicates that China is highly dependent on exports, and so it, too, will have serious difficulty becoming more self-reliant.)

As Brooks and Wohlforth note, the United States has a far more powerful military and a larger economy than China does. But in today's interconnected world, multipolarity no longer requires approximate military and

economic symmetry. Any state that controls an important international resource or plays a significant international role in some domain cannot be dismissed as a bit player. For example, based on the size of its military or GDP, it is absurd to consider tiny Singapore any kind of global "pole." But as a financial center, a port in global trade, and a critical hub for oil refining (even though it produces no oil), Singapore has a consequential international position. Larger states, such as Australia, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea, have even more global influence.

#### TWISTING IN THE WIND

Brooks and Wohlforth are right that the United States has no peer. No other country poses an existential threat to it. Russia is clearly a dangerous power, but it is in decline. China is a formidable competitor, but it is perhaps the biggest beneficiary of post-Cold War globalization and therefore has little incentive to kick over the table and seek radical new arrangements. And even if it wanted to, it is doubtful that China has the power to totally rewrite global rules. Beijing may want to dominate the international system in order to recover the position and status it believes it lost during a century or more of weakness, but those are different matters.

Still, the lack of an existential threat is not proof that, as the authors argue, multipolarity "will remain a distant eventuality." Indeed, in the absence of an existential challenge, the United States has no strong reason to work to uphold international order—and therefore to try to maintain its leading position. As a result, since 1991, most

administrations have looked inward and focused on domestic issues over international ones. This new emphasis has made even the closest U.S. allies and partners anxious about the strength of Washington's global commitments, as has the highly polarized, and therefore unstable, nature of American domestic politics. Concerns about Chinese and Russian behavior may keep these governments clustered around Washington for now, but they cannot trust the United States to be the ally that it used to be. In the long term, U.S. friends and partners will likely seek more autonomy from Washington and greater flexibility in their relations with China, Russia, and other countries.

These countries will not, of course, abandon the United States. Washington will still be their primary partner. But in the twenty-first century, primacy and unipolarity are not the same thing. There are many ways to measure influence, so multipolarity has become as much a subjective as an objective phenomenon. It is defined mostly by how countries—regardless of their relationship with the United States—perceive their strategic choices and exercise their agency. When Washington withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example, the trade deal did not collapse. Instead, Japan took the lead in organizing a successor that features the rest of the TPP's original members. China has since applied to join the trade bloc, and some members have suggested they are willing to let Beijing in. It is not hard to see why: they want further access to China's market.

The international order is therefore indeed multipolar. Clusters of countries

form, dissolve, and reconstitute themselves around different issues in order to promote their interests. Even on matters of great significance, no one state—not even the United States—can run the show.

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## The Ties That Bind

ROBERT O. KEOHANE

**B**rooks and Wohlforth are correct that the United States remains the most powerful country in the world. They are likely also right that China will not overtake it anytime soon.

But although their description of the world is largely correct, it is of limited use to policymakers—especially those focused on trying to prevent a U.S.-Chinese war. This frightening possibility would most likely arise from disagreements between China and the United States escalating into conflicts, not from a shift in the balance of power between the two countries. Analysts should therefore pay more attention to the characteristics of the U.S.-Chinese relationship than to whether the world is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. They must think about how the two states—and the states in their regions—are interdependent. And in the context of the U.S.-Chinese relationship, the very fact of interdependence creates the potential for conflict since the effec-

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tive pursuit of each side's interests affects the other side's behavior.

As they monitor the contours of their countries' relationship, American and Chinese policymakers should remember that Washington's and Beijing's interests, and thus the patterns of interdependence, are partly subjective. These are shaped as much by their perceptions of each other as by their material resources. The world may stumble into conflict even though one country still dominates.

#### MOVING PARTS

In *Power and Interdependence*, Joseph Nye and I argued that global power politics is defined not by the material resources held by various countries but by the characteristics of their relationships with each other. According to this conception, power in an interdependent relationship flows to the less dependent actor. "A less dependent actor in a relationship often has a significant political resource, because changes in the relationship will be less costly to the actor than to its partners," we wrote. But the significance of asymmetrical interdependence with respect to a specific political resource—such as military capability, economic strength, or the appeal of a country's values—varies depending on the nature of the relationship. And because relations between major powers are multidimensional, a country can have the advantage in one area while being subordinate in another. Yet which country has the advantage in which area is unlikely to become evident until the relationship is put under stress.

To understand how the power resources that Brooks and Wohlforth

attribute to China and the United States affect these countries' strategies and the likely outcomes of their interactions, analysts need to understand the multiple contexts that will affect how the two countries operate. In particular, they need to assess perceived conflicts of interest, whether institutions are in place to limit or manage conflict, how domestic politics intersect with geopolitical strategy, and the soft-power effects of great-power behavior.

On three of these four dimensions, the world is a much more dangerous place than it was 20 years ago. The perceived conflicts of interest between China and the United States have clearly become more severe since Xi Jinping became China's president in 2013. In particular, China now seems to indicate more urgency in its desire to control Taiwan, and the United States has edged toward a firmer commitment to Taiwan's defense. As China's military power has grown during this time, its capacity to attack Taiwan has increased. The combination of increased Chinese ambition and increased Chinese power has raised the chances of a cross-strait war that could draw in the United States.

At the same time, U.S.-Chinese relations lack the searing memories of barely avoided nuclear war, the institutional guardrails, and the established patterns of restraint that characterized U.S.-Soviet relations for the years after the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Domestic politics in both states are also growing more dangerous. In the United States, politicians of both parties have been competing to show how tough they can be on Beijing. In China, proponents of

“Wolf Warrior” diplomacy—in which Chinese officials aggressively berate external critics—have become more active and appear to receive support from the country’s top leadership. The dangers of a competition in toughness are obvious: loud political voices are pushing in the same direction, creating political incentives for leaders to refuse compromise for fear of seeming weak. Only on the soft-power dimension—the ability of each country to appeal to the populations of other countries and persuade them that one’s own country is more peace loving than its rival—do the incentives seem to work in favor of moderation and compromise. It is all too easy, then, to imagine China and the United States blundering into military conflict.

Brooks and Wohlforth’s assessment of hard-power relations may well be right. But the authors miss more significant relational issues. Drawing a balance sheet of hard-power resources held by China and the United States does not answer crucial questions about the most important potential sources of war. Power is contextual, so the implications of such a balance sheet will depend on the situations in which conflict arises. The United States can more easily deter a Chinese attack on its mainland or on its Australian or Japanese allies than it can a Chinese attempt to conquer Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of China.

Ultimately, the uncertainty created by rising Chinese power and ambiguous American power is more important than the balance of hard-power relations between the two states. If analysts don’t understand why, they

should look back to July 1914. Experts from that era would have been wise to pay more attention to the dynamic uncertainty and the potential for unanticipated interactions inherent in the international system than to the relative economic or military capabilities of various countries. In 2023, the foreign policy community should also direct more attention to the potential for dangerous and unpredictable interactions resulting from changes in military technology and crisis dynamics rather than conduct an inventory of power resources.

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## Brooks and Wohlforth Reply

In “The Myth of Multipolarity,” we showed that if the term “polarity” is defined as it was by the scholars who invented it—namely, as the distribution of power resources that states can use to pursue their aims—the international system remains closer to unipolarity than to bipolarity or multipolarity. One country, the United States, is still far more powerful than even its closest competitors. It boasts the world’s strongest military and the world’s biggest economy. It is home to a vast proportion of the world’s leading technology firms. It dominates the world’s alliance systems. No other country, not even China, will be in the same league in the foreseeable future.

We labeled the current system “partial unipolarity” to emphasize that although Washington’s lead remains substantial, the power gap has narrowed from the

“total unipolarity” that existed right after the Soviet Union’s demise. But this characterization of the world still earned objections from several notable scholars. In their responses to our piece, Joshua Shiffrin, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bilahari Kausikan, and Robert Keohane take issue with our assessment of Washington’s power and what it means. They write that the world is no longer unipolar—or that if it is, this unipolarity is irrelevant.

But these authors fail to present compelling alternative definitions of multipolarity. They cannot prove that unipolarity is of little international consequence. They do not show that U.S. leadership is insignificant. And appearances notwithstanding, none of the responders ultimately contests our core claim: that the United States remains, far and away, the world’s most powerful country.

#### DOUBLE STANDARDS

How can this be, when Shiffrin flatly concludes that “unipolarity is no more”? The answer is that Shiffrin’s critique is largely semantic. He does not argue that other states have become true peers of the United States and indeed suggests they have not. Instead, he simply redefines unipolarity as a world “dominated by Washington—and by Washington alone.”

This definition is not unfamiliar. Analysts have a penchant for using implausibly high standards for judging U.S. power while using easy-peasy thresholds for other countries. Shiffrin, for example, says that if a state can “influence other leading countries’ calculations in peace and make a good showing against them in war,” it is a

pole. But there has never been, and will never be, a country that can win against all others across all contingencies without much of a fight, just as there has never been, and will never be, a country that does not have to think about the potential influence of any other states when it makes foreign policy.

Consider, for example, the immediate post-Cold War years, when everyone agreed on the United States’ unprecedented preeminence. China and Russia still had what Shiffrin would describe as “good enough” technology to influence U.S. foreign policy choices. They would have been able to make a decent showing against the United States in a war had Washington been foolish enough to attack either of them. And they were hardly the only countries that challenged U.S. authority.

A quick glance at this magazine’s articles in the two decades after the Soviet collapse makes it abundantly clear that U.S. freedom of action was sometimes constrained and that Washington’s dominance was routinely contested by all kinds of unruly powers, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Serbia. These countries took steps such as developing nuclear weapons, funding terrorists, and staring down the United States in tense conflicts. Balky allies jumped ship when Washington wanted to move against Iraq, and various countries formed regional trade blocs that created tension with the U.S.-led global economic system. Leaders across Asia and Europe talked about multipolarity and established new “anti-hegemonic” initiatives. Using a definition of unipolarity essentially

the same as Shiffrin's, the political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote an article admonishing U.S. officials "to stop acting and talking as if this were a unipolar world." That was in 1999.

For Shiffrin, the requisites of a "pole" are so low that a lot of states qualify. Ukraine has proved it can "influence other leading countries' calculations in peace and make a good showing against them in war." States such as Iran and North Korea have been able to meet these thresholds since the 1990s. France and the United Kingdom both qualified in the early part of the Cold War, and by the Cold War's later years, China, Germany, and Japan did as well. But during the Cold War, there was a near-universal consensus that the world had just two poles: the Soviet Union and the United States. It would be revisionism to suggest that other countries occupy anywhere near the same position. In defining unipolarity out of existence, Shiffrin waved away bipolarity as well. By his lights, all systems are multipolar.

The problem with Shiffrin's thesis—changing the standards for what counts as a pole depending on the country—is endemic to debates over U.S. power. At any given moment, observers are struck by the limits of Washington's influence and the challenges the United States faces. They are rarely as taken with the more severe constraints on Washington's competitors. To use a baseball analogy, analysts ask the United States to consistently hit home runs and fixate on the moments it cannot. Meanwhile, they admire other powers for their ability to bunt. It makes sense that

policymakers, defense planners, and defense contractors would use this double standard as they argue for their preferred priorities. But it is less clear why academics would adopt it, too. These analytical flaws do not mean Shiffrin is wrong about the obstacles the United States faces today. Indeed, we agree with his succinct summary of today's strategic constraints, and we share his view that they are tougher than the ones the United States faced in the 1990s and the following decade. We stressed that in the age of total unipolarity, China and Russia were unwilling to even minimally challenge the status quo, whereas in a time of partial unipolarity, they are prepared to test Washington. They can even succeed if they choose small, easy, and less consequential targets (as Russia did with Crimea, and China is doing in the South China Sea). But the revisionist challenges the United States faces now pale in comparison to those faced by the most powerful countries in multipolar and bipolar eras.

These constraints are readily apparent when considering the worst-case scenario for U.S. interests. If matters go very badly for the United States and its allies, and very well for revisionist actors, Russia could successfully conquer around a fifth of Ukraine and China might acquire Taiwan. As tragic and unwelcome as those developments would be, they would not truly transform China's or Russia's international positions. But worries about such portentous revisionism were routine in past systems, as during the Cold War, which, as our article explained, would have fundamentally changed the balance of power.

INTERNATIONAL  
AUTHORITY

Slaughter, Kausikan, and Keohane—unlike Shiffrinson—do not attempt to contest our description of U.S. power. They all agree that by the standard metrics used to measure power resources, the United States remains in a class by itself and that it will be a long time before China could be a peer. Their arguments instead center on a different point: that our argument is, effectively, immaterial. The United States' standing as the sole superpower, they write, does not really matter in a world beset by a wide variety of transnational problems. And although they agree that the United States remains the dominant global force, they assert that we overlook other important international actors.

Slaughter, for example, takes a particular interest in the European Union, which she views as another pole. She points to its U.S.-sized economy and its members' powerful armed forces as evidence of its weight. And she argues that the EU has shown it is an essential global player.

We agree the EU is a major force on trade, global regulation, international norms, international development, and other issues. But it is no pole. As we wrote in these pages 21 years ago, Brussels could only become a pole if it developed "impressive military capabilities" and wielded "its latent collective power like a state." To do so, it would have to create "an autonomous and unified defense and defense-industrial capacity" that would be "under the control of a statelike decision-making body with the authority to act quickly and decisively." Such a body could "be

purchased only at the price of a direct frontal assault on European nations' core sovereignty." Unsurprisingly, Brussels never created it.

In fact, the EU has a smaller pool of power resources today, relative to the United States, than it did in the first decade of this century. And as one of us (Brooks) wrote in *International Security*, the EU's ability to act decisively in foreign policy is hamstrung by the continued independence and "strategic cacophony" of its members. They diverge in many important domains, such as threat perceptions, constraining coordinated action. Real poles have the potential to mobilize resources at all times to act in all areas, not just sometimes in some areas.

The other responders might disagree with our conclusion about the EU, given that they are dismissive of raw calculations of power and instead focus on influence. Kausikan in particular suggests that any state with global sway should count as a pole and that there are, accordingly, many of them. It is easy, after all, to find anecdotes featuring the United States not getting what it wants as a comparatively poor actor exerts substantial influence. This fact is why Kausikan says our analysis of U.S. strength vis-à-vis China and other states is "correct but beside the point" and insists that the international order is "indeed multipolar."

But Kausikan, like Shiffrinson, makes the case against unipolarity by defining it out of existence. If unipolarity means that the United States must "run the show" and polarity is defined by how countries "perceive their strategic choices and exercise their agency," then it is hard to think of a system that is

not multipolar. This approach creates the same problem that Shiffrin's does: multipolarity becomes a constant, not a variable, and the shifting balance of power therefore cannot be used to explain change.

#### THE POWER OF POLES

Like Kausikan, Keohane seems to suggest that polarity is an unhelpful concept and that analysts would be better off not reckoning with the power resources of states. If so, we strongly disagree: polarity remains a critical tool for understanding international relations for all kinds of reasons. Analyzing poles may be a simple way to describe the world, but basic explanations of global politics can help analysts uncover critical insights. By isolating the effects of polarity, analysts can also better understand the significance of variables that have little to do with the balance of power. And by focusing on polarity, experts can track how international politics changes over time.

For our part, we have used the same standard to measure polarity for more than two decades: How much of a lead does the United States have in the military, economic, and technological realms? We focused on that gap because it reflects the core insight from scholars, most notably Kenneth Waltz, who popularized the idea of polarity: international politics works differently depending on the number of roughly comparable states at the top. For all its bluntness, this approach does help experts see some key distinctions about the world today compared with the world of 1945, 1985, and even 2000.

Most foreign-policy analysts and policymakers grant that polarity is important; they would not frequently discuss it and make claims about it if they believed otherwise. In her response, Slaughter even writes that polarity is a "key background condition for officials to consider as they formulate policy." Nonetheless, Slaughter's main problem with our article seems to be that it is about polarity. It is not hard to infer why. Her critique—like Kausikan's and Keohane's—suggests that we think other factors do not matter in explaining the world. But at no point did we assert that polarity is the master variable that explains everything, and we are fully aware that the study of polarity is no substitute for careful consideration of webs of interdependence and relationships. We certainly accept that international institutions, norms, ideas, the global economy, technology, and new forms of interdependence are shaping the world. We simply believe that a careful focus on the balance of power is valuable, as well.

So why do these three responses all interpret our article as making extravagant claims about polarity's importance? The answer may lie in the tendency of some prominent realist scholars to assert that polarity is far more important, empirically, than other variables. In our view, that claim was wrong even in the mid-twentieth century when the concept was invented, and it is less true now. Kausikan stresses that middle and smaller powers can and often do play key roles in important events; we certainly agree. Smaller powers exert more sway today than they did in the

past, especially compared with the era when large empires ruled much of the planet. Yet the fact that lesser powers matter more does not mean that the world is multipolar or that polarity no longer influences global politics.

#### AMERICA FIRST

There is a final reason why polarity is worth studying and why the endurance of American unipolarity is important. Although Keohane is right that polarity alone does not prevent major war, and although Slaughter is correct that transnational threats receive insufficient attention, interstate conflicts and transnational threats would be even scarier if the world were bipolar or multipolar—and if the United States were not its leader.

To an extent, analysts can be forgiven for forgetting these facts. Washington has been leveraging its massive power resources to provide leadership for so long that people have trouble thinking about what the world would look like without U.S. oversight. In our 2016 book, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the Twenty-First Century*, we carefully examined this counterfactual. The picture was ugly: more states had nuclear weapons, the risk of war between major powers was significantly higher, the prospect of international cooperation was much lower, and disruptions to the global economy were more frequent and more harmful. Russia's war in Ukraine offers a small taste of what life under those circumstances might be like, and it is so dangerous and destabilizing that it is easy to underestimate how exceedingly rare wars of territorial conquest have become. Great-power war has

been completely absent in the nearly 80-year period since World War II, during which Washington has pursued a global grand strategy.

The deployment of U.S. power is not the only reason for this relative peace, but it is an important one. If the United States were not using its immense power to shape the world, global stability would likely hang by even more tenuous tenterhooks than it does now. The fears and apprehensions Keohane identifies would be even more intense, all exacerbated by the presence of dozens more nuclear weapons states than exist today. A world without the United States at the top of the global power heap would also be less likely to attain the international cooperation needed to address important transnational threats such as climate change and migration. After all, threats alone are rarely enough to compel states to cooperate.

For those who want more concerted action on transnational problems, our article's findings should therefore offer hope. As Keohane stressed in a 2012 article in these pages, "Leadership is indeed essential in order to promote cooperation, which is in turn necessary to solve global problems ranging from war to climate change." Yet for a leading state to promote international cooperation, it must want such cooperation to occur. Although there are many reasons to be disappointed in U.S. efforts to tackle transnational challenges, there is every reason to think that Beijing would be doing much less as the world's leader. If the world truly had shifted away from unipolarity, its problems would likely be much more acute than they are now. 🌐

# Who Killed the Chinese Economy?

## The Contested Causes of Stagnation

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### Fall Guy

ZONGYUAN ZOE LIU

In “The End of China’s Economic Miracle” (September/October 2023), Adam Posen describes China’s recent economic challenges as a case of “economic long COVID.” Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “extreme response to the pandemic,” he posits, triggered “the general public’s immune response” and “produced a less dynamic economy.” Posen’s analogy is creative and insightful. But his diagnosis misses the chronic diseases that afflicted China’s economy well before the COVID-19 pandemic: an exhausted growth model, stunted population growth thanks to the “one-child policy,” and, most notably, Xi’s failures of leadership.

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Xi is not to blame for the Chinese economy’s deepest structural problems. He is, however, responsible for the government’s failure to deal with them. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated sweeping economic reforms after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Standing apart from previous Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, particularly Mao Zedong, Deng took an open and pragmatic approach toward economic development. He rebooted China’s relationship with the United States, observing in 1979 that “all countries that fostered good relations with the United States have become rich.” When China’s economy faltered after the government’s crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, he headed off a downward spiral by clearly reiterating the party’s commitment to economic reforms, especially during an influential 1992 tour of southern China.

Over the last 45 years, China has transformed from one of the world’s poorest and most isolated countries into the heart of the global supply chain. That economic rise, however, was built on a system of financial

repression that prioritized investment and exports over domestic household consumption, leading to harmful stagnation on the demand side of the economy. Posen identifies the first quarter of 2020 as the “point of no return” for the Chinese economy, but it has faced looming problems for at least a decade. The workhorses of its growth model were already tiring years ago.

When Xi became president, in 2013, he had an opportunity to focus on domestic demand-side economic reform by shifting government policy to promote consumption over investment and by developing a more robust social welfare system. Instead, the cumulative policy shocks of Xi’s first two terms worsened the structural challenges that were dragging down—but not yet crashing—China’s economy. They also badly weakened the confidence that undergirded Deng’s opening-up era.

Xi focused on projects that prioritized state-led investment and diverted resources from supporting households, such as the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative and the 2015 “Made in China 2025” strategic plan, which aimed to reduce China’s dependence on foreign technology. He greatly expanded the role of state-planned industrial policies and, by emphasizing the role of the CCP and the government in commanding capital management, diminished the space consumer-oriented private entrepreneurs need to flourish.

Posen is justified in warning that Xi’s mishandling of the pandemic will likely “plague the Chinese economy for years.” But he is wrong to imply that historians will look back on the COVID-19 era as a critical juncture for

China’s economy rather than one step on a long path. Well before the pandemic, Xi’s aggressive promotion of a military-civil fusion strategy prompted U.S. leaders to enhance investment screening and export controls; these Western restrictions have raised the cost of his drive for technological supremacy, requiring the state to commandeer additional national resources.

China’s stepped-up military activity around Taiwan, which also predated the pandemic, has stoked a gloomy perception in China that armed conflict is inevitable. China’s one-child generation would shoulder the weight of such a conflict, an immense threat that few families are prepared to cope with. Many China watchers underestimate the degree to which the souring of Western confidence in China has negatively affected Chinese people’s willingness to spend and to take economic risks. Pessimism from abroad contributes to the Chinese population’s mass loss of confidence, which James Kynge of *The Financial Times* has aptly characterized as a “psycho-political funk.”

In essence, Xi did not assemble China’s economic time bomb, but he dramatically shortened its fuse. Posen argues that for ordinary Chinese people, the CCP has now become “the ultimate decision-maker about people’s ability to earn a living or access their assets.” To some degree, this has always been the case in China; what has changed is the way the party reacts to economic difficulties. In the past, it responded with reform and pragmatism. By contrast, Xi’s instinct has been to meet every challenge with political and economic retrenchment.

Still, it is premature to imagine that China's economy has peaked. Xi abruptly reversed course on his "zero COVID" policy when its costs became untenable; he should do so on his economic and political strategies, as well—and he may. Historically, the Chinese people have tended not to look back on political upheavals after moving past them.

Posen suggests that the West might benefit from a Chinese decline. But the West has a genuine interest in preventing China's economic downfall. Given the size and importance of the country's economy, a full-blown financial crisis in China would have far greater consequences than other previous emerging-market crises. And a crisis would complicate the West's transition to clean energy since China is the dominant producer of the technologies and minerals needed for that transition.

Instead of looking for opportunities in China's economic struggles, U.S. and European Union leaders should communicate their interest in preventing a Chinese economic crisis. One necessary first step is to create a shared entity list to coordinate investment screening and export controls on potential dual-use technologies. This move could minimize the potential that strategically motivated investors will access sensitive technologies. If Washington and Brussels fail to clarify the intentions of their "de-risking" strategies, however—or if they meet Xi's aggression with chest-thumping—they may legitimize his claims that economic containment is to blame for China's economic woes and that further isolation is the only antidote.

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## Inherited Trauma

MICHAEL PETTIS

Posen correctly identifies the problems the Chinese economy faces, including weak consumption, anemic business investment, surging debt, and rising financial uncertainty among Chinese households. But his explanation of what has gone wrong misses the mark, neglecting the structural sources of China's economic malaise.

Posen writes that China's economic troubles are the result of President Xi Jinping's turn against the private sector in recent years, especially in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Under Xi, he argues, the Chinese Communist Party "has reverted toward the authoritarian mean." He proposes that in response to "the government's intrusion into economic life" and the increasingly visible "threat of state control in day-to-day commerce," an anxious Chinese public is saving more and spending less, yielding a "less dynamic economy."

This account gets the causality backward. The problems facing the Chinese economy are not the consequence of recent policy shifts; they are the almost inevitable result of deep imbalances that date back nearly two decades and were obvious to many economists well over a decade ago. They are also the

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problems faced by every country that has followed a similar growth model.

In the 1970s, the economist Albert Hirschman argued that any successful growth model has obsolescence built into it, because it is designed to address and resolve particular economic imbalances. This is the case for the Chinese growth model. In the late 1970s, the Chinese economy was stunted by decades of civil war, conflict with Japan, and Maoism. It was among the most severely underinvested in the world for its level of social and institutional development. The high-savings, high-investment model that the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping implemented in the 1980s and 1990s succeeded because it closed, faster than in any other country in history, the gap between the existing level

of investment and the level the country could productively absorb.

China closed this gap around 2006. Once it did so, however, it should have switched to a different growth model, one that prioritized consumption over investment. This would have required developing a new set of business, legal, financial, and political institutions to promote the higher household income and stronger social safety net that undergirds a more consumption-driven economy. But like similar countries that reached this pivot point, such as Brazil in the 1970s and Japan in the 1980s, China did not reform its growth model. In fact, from 2006 through 2011, its household consumption as a percentage of GDP fell even faster than it had in the 1980s and 1990s, to 34 percent,

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compared with over 50 percent, on average, in the rest of the world.

Hirschman would have predicted this. A successful growth model, he noted, develops its own set of institutions, along with powerful constituencies that benefit disproportionately from these institutions, making the model politically difficult to transform. As the elites who benefit from the model expand their wealth and power, Hirschman argued, they become motivated to entrench it.

This is what happened in China. In the past two decades, investment in China has continued to rise as rapidly as ever, even as it has progressively generated less and less value for each dollar invested. Overall growth has increasingly been driven by asset bubbles, especially in real estate, and an unsustainable rise in debt. Worse, over this period, business investment has become constrained by China's extraordinarily low consumption rate, as shaky domestic demand discouraged private businesses from expanding production.

At the same time, the locus of Chinese economic activity shifted away from sectors of the economy constrained by hard budgets and a profit imperative, mainly the private sector, and toward sectors that are not so constrained, such as the public sector and those parts of the private sector with guaranteed access to liquidity—real estate, for example. The turn against the private sector was not the result of Xi's particular ideology. It may have been accommodated by his rhetorical and policy shifts, but it was driven by something deeper: the growing imbalances in China's economy and Beijing's need to maintain high GDP growth rates.

Some economists presume that any rapid growth is, by definition, a consequence of private-sector initiatives and that any slowdown arises from excessive government intervention. But that was certainly not the case in China. On the contrary, government intervention drove China's ferocious growth in its first decades of economic reform. Beijing enacted policies to force up the savings rate and corral the resulting savings into a highly controlled financial system that heavily subsidized infrastructure and the manufacturing sector with very low interest rates, preferential lending, an undervalued currency, and other direct and indirect transfers. These subsidies made China's logistical and transportation infrastructure the best in the world and its manufacturers the most competitive, albeit at the expense of Chinese households. Posen writes of "government intrusion" as if it is something new and unwelcome, but it in fact created the conditions for China's spectacular growth through the middle of the first decade of this century.

Today, even as it raises costs for businesses, government intrusion is not China's biggest problem. Its biggest problem is that it has not substantially adjusted its growth model. Retaining its current high-investment model distorts the distribution of income and keeps domestic demand too weak to support domestic business investment. And because this weak demand constrains the growth of private businesses, China has had to rely on an expanding public sector to deliver the level of growth Beijing deems politically necessary.

Government intrusion, in other words, is the consequence of weak private investment, not its driver. This distinc-

tion matters enormously when thinking about how China can fix its economic woes. It must address the demand side of the economy by strengthening the share of its GDP that Chinese households retain. Until Beijing does so, or until it is willing to accept much lower growth rates, the role of the government in the economy must necessarily expand relative to that of the private sector. Even if Beijing decided to reduce government intrusion, growth would not pick up except at the margin, and China's overall growth rate would continue to decline, probably to below two to three percent.

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## Posen replies

**T**wo things can be true at once: China's structural economic issues have reduced its growth rate over time, and increased intrusion into everyday life by the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping has changed the economic behavior of the country's people, reducing the growth rate even further. As any economy develops, its growth rate slows because of the accumulation of capital (including infrastructure), a diminishing rate of urbanization, and, usually, a declining birth rate. This slowdown is expected and inevitable over the long term, and it typically does not disrupt normal commercial life. The emergence of "economic long COVID" in China, however, is a special case. The abandonment of autocratic self-restraint by Xi and the leadership of the CCP was not inevitable, and it drove a marked change in the behavior

of Chinese households, as well as in their responses to government policies.

My analysis is supported by data gathered since Xi took office—and especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic—on Chinese savings, investment, capital outflows, and durable goods consumption. In their responses to my article, Zongyuan Zoe Liu and Michael Pettis go doggedly narrow; they neglect the importance of Xi's behavior in shaping outcomes and even seem to deny that the economic regime has changed.

Pettis's claim that "government intervention drove China's ferocious growth in its first decades of economic reform" sets the stage for his argument that increased and arbitrary government intervention is merely a continuation of past practice. The important role of government investment in Chinese development in the 1980s and 1990s is undeniable; China's industrial policies, which the CCP borrowed from Japan and Singapore, did help it up the value chain in trade. Those actions alone, however, did not deliver the miraculously high Chinese growth rates from 1980 to 2008.

Total investment, public and private, remains elevated, but it declined as a share of GDP from 47 percent in 2011 to below 43 percent in 2016, where it remained before declining further this year after the collapse of China's real estate sector. Pettis is thus incorrect when he claims that "in the past two decades, investment in China has continued to rise as rapidly as ever." And the evidence does not support his claim that "China has had to rely on an expanding public sector to deliver the level of growth Beijing deems

politically necessary.” Nonprivate fixed asset investment—the best available proxy for public investment—began to decline in 2016, when it was at 26 percent of Chinese GDP. By 2021, it was down to 21 percent, rising only slightly in 2022, to 22 percent. And it was government regulation that, in 2020, killed the long-running residential property boom, steps the CCP took because the private sector was driving growth in ways the party did not like.

Simply put, Chinese growth has not been largely, let alone entirely, driven by public and government-directed investment. On the contrary, as the economist Nicholas Lardy established in his 2014 book, *Markets Over Mao*, the market-oriented reforms led by Deng Xiaoping drove growth and restrained the party. The clearest evidence is that between 1980 and 2013, the year Xi took control, China’s private investment grew at 2.6 times the pace of state investment. And during that same period, the share of state investment fell from 80 percent to roughly 33 percent of total investment. Similarly, private urban firms employed only 150,000 Chinese workers in 1980, or 0.2 percent of urban workers; by 2012, that number had grown to over 252 million, or 68 percent of urban workers. Put another way, between 1980 and 2012, private firms accounted for 95 percent of the growth in urban jobs in China.

More fundamentally, it makes little sense to lump together the state infrastructure investments in the pre-Xi era and Xi’s draconian government intrusions, including the arbitrarily applied “zero COVID” policy and its abrupt lifting, which induced economic and

social whiplash. From 1978 to 2012, the Chinese leadership undertook a number of policies that were explicitly market-oriented or supportive of private markets: China’s 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization, which allowed the private sector the right to trade internationally; its 2002 “Three Represents” amendment to the CCP charter, acknowledging the need to develop the private sector; a law instituted in 2007 that codified private property rights; a program of state-owned enterprise reform that took place between 1998 and 2002 and reduced state-sector employment in cities by 30 percent; and many moves over the decades that opened the country to foreign investment.

By contrast, the CCP’s policies under Xi have rapidly increased the investment going to state-owned enterprises, and the share of credit going to the private sector peaked in 2015 and has declined steadily since. The party has also intruded more and more into the operations of private companies, including through a September 2020 directive to expand the CCP’s role in private firms’ corporate governance. Between 2012 and 2019, cumulative growth in credit to private firms was 10 percent, a huge slowdown that brought it in line with growth in state investment. And between January 2022 and June 2023, growth in private investment declined to half the level of growth in state investment, a change driven by the residential real estate collapse.

Liu makes an argument similar to Pettis’s—that the structures of the Chinese economy driving growth have remained largely constant. But even she notes additional policy areas in which Xi

has increased government intervention at the expense of the private sector and raised barriers to private international commerce, notably the “Made in China 2025” strategic plan and the Belt and Road Initiative. These points support my argument that the present is a deviation from more than three decades of the preceding Chinese leadership’s relative self-restraint on economic intervention.

When discussing political economy, it is always wise to cite Albert Hirschman, but Hirschman’s logic does not support Pettis’s case. If, as Pettis’s paraphrase of Hirschman suggests, a successful growth model “develops its own set of institutions, along with powerful constituencies that benefit disproportionately from these institutions, making the model politically difficult to transform,” then China’s enormously successful private-sector elites should have better entrenched their economic position. But they cannot because the autocratic rulers of China have decided to take away their property rights and livelihoods at will. The relevant Hirschman insight is from his profound 1970 treatise, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, which explains the three choices citizens have when forming a relationship with their rulers. Voice, as in criticism of government policies that could lead to civic political action, has always been severely limited by the CCP, and its use of electronic surveillance and repression has only grown in recent years. Loyalty, essentially accepting that what the party leadership does on policy is right, was and largely remains the default. But that has been the case only as long as everyday commercial life was productive and undisturbed—

which it has not been in recent years. That leaves only exit, and people in China have increasingly resorted to that option under Xi’s autocracy: Chinese households are building up their liquid savings instead of consuming durable goods; small enterprises are remaining liquid and investing less, to reduce the risk of expropriation; and, in many cases, better-off Chinese citizens are physically exiting by moving their assets, some of their production, and their families abroad.

All the structural problems Liu and Pettis identify in China’s economy exist and have long existed. But Xi’s deliberate and widening violation of his predecessors’ “no politics, no problem” compact, particularly during the pandemic, changed the game. My critics’ structuralist approach to analyzing China misrepresents the sources of the country’s astonishing past growth and fails to explain the shifts unfolding today. A narrow, structuralist reading would predict that the Chinese economy would react especially well to measures that stimulate consumption and private credit, since the relative benefits to households of those measures versus government investment would be high. In fact, Chinese consumers have been notably sluggish in responding to the stimulus measures introduced since the end of 2022, even when they targeted subsidies for auto sales or mortgage payments.

China developed economic long COVID thanks to Xi’s shift to a more autocratic approach to managing the economy. This syndrome was not inevitable, and it was not foreseen. And it will be very difficult for the autocrat who caused it to cure it. 🌐

# Recent Books

## Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

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*Geopolitics and Democracy:  
The Western Liberal Order From  
Foundation to Fracture*

BY PETER TRUBOWITZ AND BRIAN  
BURGOON. Oxford University Press,  
2023, 264 pp.

In this groundbreaking study, Trubowitz and Burgoon argue that the current backlash against the Western-led liberal international order can be traced to the 1990s. In the wake of the Cold War, Washington and European governments decided to globalize markets and expand multilateral cooperation while relaxing social and economic protections at home. This combination of actions enlarged the liberal international order at the cost of generating domestic discontent and division. During the Cold War, Western publics accepted the tradeoffs that came with market liberalization. The threat of Soviet communism encouraged a compromise between free-market capitalism and social democracy. But in the post-Cold War decades, as governments entered into more multilateral commitments and encouraged economic globalization, this

cost-benefit calculation began to change. Citizens felt a keen sense of economic insecurity, and political spaces opened up for once marginalized groups to pursue antiglobalist and nationalist agendas. Established, mainstream political parties on the center-right and center-left—the backbone of the Western liberal order—are now on the defensive, facing electorates that want less globalization and more social and economic protection. As Trubowitz and Burgoon show, many people in the West will embrace liberal internationalism only once the social democratic system is rebuilt at home.

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*Building States: The United Nations,  
Development, and Decolonization,  
1945–1965*

BY EVA-MARIA MUSCHIK. Columbia  
University Press, 2022, 392 pp.

In this fascinating inquiry, Muschik explores the role of the United Nations in the great post-World War II transition from a world of empires to a post-colonial system of nation-states. The UN was founded in 1945 with 51 members, but within two decades its ranks had doubled as peoples across Africa, Asia, and the Pacific joined campaigns for self-determination and statehood. As Muschik shows, the UN was a pivotal

actor in this unfolding drama, as international civil servants and expert advisers worked closely with postcolonial elites to build functioning governments. This was a deeply political and contested undertaking in which the UN Secretariat found itself caught between two competing demands: its commitment to the trusteeship system, which reflected the interests and legacies of the old imperial powers, and the Third World's quest for self-determination and respect for state sovereignty. Muschik argues that the UN succeeded by acting as a purveyor of development-oriented technical assistance, which in turn helped build these new states. The Cold War did not so much paralyze the UN as move its real activities from the high politics of the Security Council to the technical work of experts.

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*Soft Power and the  
Future of U.S. Foreign Policy*

EDITED BY HENDRIK W. OHNESORGE.  
Manchester University Press, 2023,  
280 pp.

The political scientist Joseph Nye famously defined the “soft power” of a country as the ability to shape the behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. The authors of this collection of essays reflect on the character, changing role, and significance of American soft power in recent years. They are in wide agreement that the Trump administration's rejection of multilateralism and the concurrent political turbulence in the United States damaged the country's image abroad. Several authors note that the Biden administration's eagerness to

return to multilateralism is a sign that it understands the value of soft power. The book's most interesting debates focus on soft power as a facet of the U.S.-Chinese rivalry, which will increasingly hinge on both countries' capacities to attract allies and partners. The book makes clear that a lot of U.S. soft power resides in civil society, in American universities, media, and technology companies. The rise of China, which does not have a civil society to rival that of the United States, will test the importance of soft power in the long-term global contest for influence.

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*The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate,  
and the Burden of Power*

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN.  
Yale University Press, 2023, 152 pp.

In this eloquent meditation on war, geopolitics, and the human condition, Kaplan makes the case for foreign policy informed by a “tragic sensibility,” offering a world-weary vision of the inability of leaders and states to solve problems and make life better. Even the most well-intentioned and far-sighted statesmen cannot always right wrongs. Kaplan quotes Herodotus in suggesting that the human tragedy is to “know much and control nothing.” The book traces an intellectual journey through Western literature to unearth and illuminate this way of thinking. To “think tragically” is not to be cynical or pessimistic but to heroically push forward to discover the horizon of possibility while maintaining a sober awareness of one's limits. Kaplan explores the tragic sensibility as it played out across the last century in world wars, revolutions, military interventions, and domestic struggles between citizens and

states. In each episode, Kaplan argues that although hubris, ambition, and hatred always lurk in the background, the knowledge of human imperfection and the limits of progress can liberate people to seek greater self-awareness and avoid idealist misadventures. The history of tragedy counsels prudence.

## Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

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*The Economic Government  
of the World, 1933–2023*

BY MARTIN DAUNTON. Farrar,  
Straus and Giroux, 2023, 1,024 pp.

**D**aunton has written a sweeping history of international economic cooperation and of the meetings and institutions through which it is organized. The author's original design for this book, many years in the making, was evidently to begin his narrative with the London Economic Conference of 1933, which failed to preserve an open international order, and conclude with the more successful G-20 summit in London in 2009, which mobilized international efforts to contain the 2008 global financial crisis and stabilize the world economy. Whereas the first of these conferences was sunk by doctrinal disagreements and international political disputes, the second benefited from the intellectual and political convergence that followed the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War. Developments in the past decade, however, have thrown the author's opti-

mistic narrative a series of curve balls: the resurgence of populism, tensions between China and the United States, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which put an end to political convergence and inaugurated what some call a "new Cold War." Progress in strengthening global governance, it turns out, is not inevitable. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization retain a role in fostering international cooperation, but Daunton insists that they must not interfere too extensively in domestic policy choices lest they spark a backlash. To sustain international cooperation, governments must complement openness with policies that create good jobs, provide social insurance, tax footloose corporations, and avoid destabilizing capital flows.

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*A Crash Course on Crises:  
Macroeconomic Concepts for Run-Ups,  
Collapses, and Recoveries*

BY MARKUS K. BRUNNERMEIER  
AND RICARDO REIS. Princeton  
University Press, 2023, 136 pp.

*Macroeconomics and Financial Crises:  
Bound Together by Information Dynamics*

BY GARY B. GORTON AND  
GUILLERMO L. ORDOÑEZ. Princeton  
University Press, 2023, 208 pp.

In his 2003 presidential address to the American Economic Association, the economist Robert Lucas, Jr., famously observed that the "central problem of depression prevention has been solved, for all practical purposes, and has in fact been solved for many decades." The global financial crisis of 2008–10 and the European debt crisis from 2009 to

the mid-2010s exposed Lucas's conclusion as premature. Two recent books parse the dynamics of financial crises. Brunnermeier and Reis provide a compact, accessible introduction to efforts to understand and prevent economic crises, the task Lucas referred to as "depression prevention." Ten short chapters explain concepts used to analyze economic and financial crises, such as bubbles, leverage, and contagion. The authors then put these concepts to work, showing how they shed light not just on the 2008–10 and 2010–13 episodes but also on the German banking crisis of 1931, the East Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, and the Argentine crisis of 2001, among others.

Gorton and Ordoñez's more technical approach focuses on the roles of credit and information in financial turbulence. In contrast to Brunnermeier and Reis, they reject the emphasis on psychological factors in certain interpretations of crises, arguing that credit booms and busts are intrinsic to the operation of market economies. Disagreements aside, together these two books show that economists have made considerable headway in the last 20 years in understanding financial crises, if not necessarily in preventing them.

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*Economics in America: An Immigrant Economist Explores the Land of Inequality*  
BY ANGUS DEATON. Princeton University Press, 2023, 280 pp.

The 2015 winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, Deaton reflects on the state of the field, the pervasiveness of inequality, and the condition of the United States, the country he emigrated to from the United Kingdom. He takes

a critical approach, including to the practice of economics. Economists are not as influential when it comes to policy as is sometimes alleged, he argues, but neither are they powerless. The discipline would make faster intellectual progress if it were organized less hierarchically and would abandon its combative, testosterone-fueled seminar culture. Above all, Deaton is critical of "economism," that is, of the naive belief that the world truly works as described in introductory economics textbooks. This assumption informs, or at least justifies, the presumption that individual choices are optimal, market outcomes are best, and government intervention only makes things worse—arguments that are widely invoked by the opponents of universal health insurance, legislated minimum wages, and antipoverty programs. Drawing on his influential book with Anne Case, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, Deaton documents the widening extent of income and wealth inequality, as well as growing disparities in health outcomes, access to opportunity, political influence, and human dignity. His attention to these additional dimensions leads him to recommend rejecting a narrow focus on money as a measure of individual well-being. Economists, he urges, must reacquaint themselves with how sociologists and philosophers think about inequality and welfare.

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*Fiscal Unions: Economic Integration in Europe and the United States*  
BY TOMASZ P. WOZNAKOWSKI. Oxford University Press, 2023, 192 pp.

Economists puzzle over why Europe has failed to combine its monetary

union with a fiscal union; there is a European Central Bank but no European Treasury. Wozniakowski compares the European Union with the United States, where the power to tax and spend was transferred from the states to the federal government within two decades of independence, thanks in part to the urgings of leaders such as Alexander Hamilton. The author argues that governments acquire political prerogatives, including the power to create money, in response to external threats. U.S. states delegated additional powers to the federal government in the 1790s in response to military threats from Great Britain; after World War II, European states formed what became the EU in response to the Soviet threat. Fiscal unions, by contrast, are formed in response to internal threats. U.S. states empowered the federal government to tax and borrow when domestic uprisings such as Shays's Rebellion threatened the viability of the union in 1786–87. For a time, it seemed that the European debt crisis from 2009 to the mid-2010s, which pitted northern and southern European states against one another, might similarly rise to the level of an existential crisis for the EU and induce movement toward fiscal union. But Europe found other ways of papering over the cracks, such as the bond-buying programs of the European Central Bank. It is too early to tell, the author concludes, whether the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, or the security threat posed by Russia will occasion Europe's "Hamiltonian moment."

## Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

*November 1942: An Intimate History of the Turning Point of World War II*

BY PETER ENGLUND. Translated by Peter Graves. Knopf, 2023, 496 pp.

*The Devils Will Get No Rest: FDR, Churchill, and the Plan That Won the War*

BY JAMES B. CONROY. Simon & Schuster, 2023, 432 pp.

*Road to Surrender: Three Men and the Countdown to the End of World War II*

BY EVAN THOMAS. Random House, 2023, 336 pp.

These three books explore key moments in World War II through the eyes of participants who could not know what the future held for them or their countries. This approach humanizes history by allowing readers to better appreciate the people who made it and the considerations that influenced their actions.

Englund's book focuses on a single month in 1942, which began with the war's outcome uncertain but then saw the Axis powers suffer a string of reverses—at Guadalcanal and Stalingrad and in North Africa. Englund wants to reveal how those directly involved experienced the battles and how civilians at home made sense of the news coming from the front. He places these events in the broader context of a widening air war, the use of concentration camps, the development of the atomic bomb, and

the making of the classic movie *Casablanca*. This is history from the bottom up, told from the perspective of an anxious mother worried about her sailor son, a Korean sex slave, an inmate of the Treblinka concentration camp, as well as soldiers from all sides caught up in intense, vicious battles. Englund succeeds in conveying the sheer range of wartime experiences. But the book makes clear the limitations of the bottom-up approach: the cast of characters is so large, and their stories so intermingled, that the narrative lacks coherence.

In January 1943, as the tide was turning in the war, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in recently liberated Casablanca to develop a strategy for the next stage. The Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was too preoccupied with the fight against Germany to leave Moscow. Unlike Englund, Conroy takes a top-down approach. But his story also has a substantial cast, including the highest-ranking officers from both sides. The British sought to persuade the Americans not to rush into a hazardous cross-Channel landing and instead settle on easier pickings—they eventually decided on taking Sicily as the next step. With vivid portraits of the participants, this is a book about frictions in alliances and how they were overcome. The U.S. admirals, many quite Anglophobic, wanted to focus on the Pacific or at least dispose of the Nazis quickly with some heavy direct punches, whereas the British wanted to stretch the enemy and look for its areas of weakness. The deciding factor against agreeing to an early landing in France was that such an invasion would take the Allies at least a year to prepare.

By the spring of 1945, with Germany defeated, the Allies turned to an obdurate Japan. They did not know whether atomic bombs would be ready in time to compel a Japanese surrender or whether the weapons would have such an effect. Thomas's gripping account of the decision-making in Washington and Tokyo at the close of the war concentrates on the perspectives of three people—Henry Stimson, the aging U.S. secretary for war; General Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, the American officer in charge of the Pacific air campaign; and Japanese Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo. Of these, the taciturn Spaatz's role is the least consequential because he was acting on instructions. Stimson's misgivings about the bomb and his determination to spare Kyoto are well known. What distinguishes Thomas's account is his use of Togo's diaries, along with other Japanese materials, to show how the foreign minister led proponents of peace against those determined to fight on indefinitely and how the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki galvanized his efforts. Japan would surrender to the United States in September 1945.

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*Spies: The Epic Intelligence War  
Between East and West*

BY CALDER WALTON. Simon & Schuster, 2023, 688 pp.

Walton engagingly charts the complex interactions between the intelligence services of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union (and its successor, Russia) over more than a century. He finds remarkable continuity in the antagonism between East and West, a hostility and suspicion

that abated only somewhat during the shared fight against Nazi Germany and for a brief period after the end of the Cold War. Many of Walton's stories are familiar but are enlivened by original research and sharp writing. At the book's heart are a number of well-known spies: the German physicist Klaus Fuchs, who passed nuclear secrets to the Soviets; the British double agent Kim Philby; the CIA agent Aldrich Ames, who was well compensated by the KGB for slipping its agents information; and Soviet defectors such as the military intelligence colonel Oleg Penkovsky and the KGB double agent Oleg Gordievsky. At times, these sagas of betrayal seem to exist in a self-contained world, but Walton shows their influence on key political moments, including the Bolshevik efforts after the 1917 revolution to consolidate power, the successful management of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's ongoing war against Ukraine.

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*Age of Danger: Keeping America Safe in an Era of New Superpowers, New Weapons, and New Threats*

BY ANDREW HOEHN AND THOM SHANKER. Hachette Books, 2023, 368 pp.

Hoehn and Shanker seek to understand why U.S. national security systems have often failed to keep up with events. The authors divide the problem into "the warning machine," which should alert policymakers to emerging threats, and "the action machine," which should then deal with those threats. Having interviewed many government insiders and Beltway analysts, they reveal how

the United States is often let down by poor administrative coordination, uncertainties over who is in charge, and regulatory and resource constraints. The authors discuss a wide variety of threats, including those posed by China, Russia, germs, and storms. The book is consistently interesting on the government's evolving understanding of these problems and how attitudes and efforts to address them have developed over time. The authors could say more about how policymakers should set priorities, given that governments will always have limited capacity, and should acknowledge that the United States is not alone in addressing these issues but has allies who might make helpful contributions.

## The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

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*We've Got You Covered: Rebooting American Healthcare*

BY LIRAN EINAV AND AMY FINKELSTEIN. Portfolio, 2023, 304 pp.

**T**he U.S. health-care system, according to Einav and Finkelstein, cannot just be repaired; it needs to be torn down. Many expensive patches have produced more problems than they have fixed. Since health care accounts for just under one-fifth of the country's GDP, this is a mountainous claim. The authors are not principally concerned with the plight of the 27 million or so uninsured Americans but rather the other 90 percent of Americans who do have health insurance but

are underinsured, drowning in medical debt, or tied by their insurance to jobs they want to leave. In this system, both the sick and the healthy spend endless unproductive hours navigating the tortuous and often cruel maze of insurance bureaucracy. On a broader level, the U.S. health-care system operates without a budget and spends 50 to 100 percent more per capita than many European and Asian systems that produce better outcomes (including lower infant mortality, less time spent in the hospital, shorter wait times, and so on). In an eminently readable account, the authors argue for a wholly new approach consisting of genuinely universal, free, basic care overlaid with the option to buy fancier supplemental care: to provide, in short, adequate treatment for all if not complete equality.

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*The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860–2020*

BY KENNETH JANDA. Columbia University Press, 2022, 344 pp.

Political analysts and commentators have variously traced the prehistory of the Donald Trump era to the rise of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1994 or to the presidential runs of the populist Pat Buchanan from 1992 to 2000. Janda looks further back in time and relies on history as written by the Republican Party itself, in the planks of each of its party platforms since 1856. He analyzes 2,722 party platforms, in which he finds ideas about what he calls the four principal benefits of government—order, freedom, equality, and public goods—and

several secondary groupings, including military and foreign policy. The data set he produces allows him to construct what he sees as the Republican Party's passage through three eras: an "illustrious nationalism" from 1860 to 1924, a neoliberal era from 1928 to 1960, and an ethnocentric era beginning in 1964 that favored white Christians over others and turned abruptly away from support of the federal government. He uses survey data to identify transitions and changes in voter behavior as the party morphed from a looser tribe into what it is now, something more akin to a cult. Janda makes no secret of his own preferences, aiming to "help restore the party to its former grandeur"—that is, to the nationalist spirit of its first era. But his analysis of the usually ignored planks of the party platforms reveals that the party's current incarnation has very long roots indeed.

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*The Supermajority: How the Supreme Court Divided America*

BY MICHAEL WALDMAN. Simon & Schuster, 2023, 400 pp.

Waldman believes that the United States and its Supreme Court are separated by a widening gap, with lifetime appointees on the bench entrenching what is a distinctly minority view among the citizenry. The Court's legitimacy is therefore threatened, and a broader political crisis looms. Democrats have won the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections, but Republican presidents have chosen six of the nine current justices. Without a crucial swing vote to be won over, the tenor of the Court has changed. In the last two

years, the six-person supermajority has embraced a radical view of originalism divorced from history or tradition that would tie the country to the views of property-owning white men who lived at a time when leeches were considered state-of-the-art medical care. Instead, at a time of rapid demographic and cultural change, Waldman argues that the country has to be able to see the Constitution as a living, modern document. The book takes readers through a brisk history of the Court's past highs and lows and then, in some detail, through three momentous decisions of 2022: abortion rights, gun rights, and the government's ability to protect public health and safety and address climate change.

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*Democracy Awakening:  
Notes on the State of America*  
BY HEATHER COX RICHARDSON.  
Viking, 2023, 304 pp.

The book's title, presumably chosen for its optimism, is misleading. The political history of the United States that it traces is nothing like a steady movement toward the light. Rather, it is a series of great leaps forward, beginning with the immense courage and political imagination of the founders, followed by crises, drastic backsliding, and the same shuffling cycle repeated again and again. Rather than one of awakening, Richardson weaves a dialectical story of conflict between those who, in whatever guise, want power over others and those who insist on the "common right of humanity" to choose its own government. Richardson begins and ends with a discussion of how authoritarianism arises, noting that "democracies die

more often through the ballot box than at gunpoint." Seamlessly intermeshed with historical chapters are detailed discussions of the Trump era. Taken together, these treatments of the past decade and of the past two and a half centuries show American democracy not as a triumphant accomplishment but at best a work in progress, one remarkably resilient to its own powerful flaws.

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*The Deadline: Essays*  
BY JILL LEPORE. Liveright, 2023,  
640 pp.

Lepore's newest collection of essays spans the biggest political issues of the past few decades, as well as some of the biggest events of her personal life. The vast majority of these pieces have already been published and are several years old, but such are her erudition, her literary gifts, and her penetrating eye that they all seem timely and fresh. According to her own rules, everything she writes must have "hidden within it, an archival Easter egg." Whether dealing with the history of impeachment (beginning in 1376), polling, presidential archives, torture, or constitutions, she generally delivers not just a bright egg but a basketful of revelations. Her treatment of the widely hailed report of the House select committee on the January 6 attack on the Capitol is particularly noteworthy. Many hailed the report as a triumph. Lepore calls it "dreary, repetitive, and exhausting" and "a shambles" as history because it failed to ask why anyone could believe U.S. President Donald Trump's claims about the election. "It blames Trump," she concludes, which in the end, "explains very little."

## Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

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*Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire, and Race in the European Project*

BY HANS KUNDNANI. Hurst, 2023, 248 pp.

**K**undnani, a noted commentator on European affairs, recently decided that he no longer believes in the EU. He turned on Brussels because he feels the EU espouses a type of regional nationalism that defines itself against the “other,” actively seeking to exclude (or convert) all those who are not Catholic, Christian, or white. The author does not explain why this supposedly racist and religiously intolerant form of regional nationalism should be viewed as the primary motivating force underlying European integration, a claim for which he provides next to no empirical evidence or scholarly backing—beyond the obvious fact that Europe limits immigration. Yet the book remains instructive because, as with so many polemics, a flawed central premise hints at some important truths. To survive in an interdependent world, any wealthy polity, especially a democratic welfare state, must necessarily regulate flows of goods, finance, and people in its own interest—even if its inhabitants are sincere cosmopolitans. And Kundnani is right that some Europeans—although never a majority and now vanishingly few—cling to the misguided idealist belief that the EU should be hailed as a “universal model” that can eradicate genocide, war, colonialism, human rights abuse, and other global problems. This

book remains a useful counterpoint to such complacency by showing how the world’s most peaceful, egalitarian, green, and increasingly diverse continent is still far from utopia.

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*National Questions: Theoretical Reflections on Nations and Nationalism in Eastern Europe*

BY ALEXANDER MOTYL.  
ibidem-Verlag, 2022, 312 pp.

Motyl, an eminent scholar of nationalism and central Europe, has of late established himself as a valuable analyst of the war in Ukraine. This book assembles some of his most influential essays on the role of nationalism, particularly in eastern Europe. In one essay, he argues with reason and rigor why Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime might best be described as “fascist.” In another, he discusses the beliefs and rhetoric of Ukrainian nationalists before the 2022 invasion, which were troubling for their exclusionary character. Elsewhere, he analyzes the memory of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s deliberate and genocidal starvation of millions of Ukrainians in 1932–33, known today as the Holodomor. An engaging essay asks why New Yorkers tolerate the existence of a Soviet-themed bar called KGB in the East Village, whereas the existence of a bar named after the SS—the infamous Nazi paramilitary organization—would surely elicit howls of protest; he reaches the provocative conclusion that the first helps preserve the myth that the second is historically unique. Motyl’s essays are engaged scholarship at its best, with deep intelligence wedded to great concern for the concrete problems of global politics.

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*Southern Europe in the Age of Revolution*

BY MAURIZIO ISABELLA. Princeton University Press, 2023, 704 pp.

From the American Revolution to the current war in Ukraine, a fundamental force in world politics has been revolutionary nationalism. This path-breaking book examines revolutions in southern Europe—Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and elsewhere—in the 1820s. Revolutions are often imagined as spontaneous popular upheavals, but these uprisings began with local elites dissatisfied with centralized control. Educated and influential people formed secret societies, studied the constitutional models of other countries, kept up with similar events abroad, and sought international support. Eventually, these southern European elites helped mobilize their societies into rebellion, leading to remarkably widespread public participation in a visible public sphere. That process, in some cases, spurred civil wars between supporters and opponents of change. At the core of these conflicts lay the tension between those who held a civic and constitutional view of politics and those who held a religious worldview, backed by an established church hierarchy. The revolutions produced a set of political systems that balanced the privileges of property-owning elites, professional groups, and the church with broad popular sovereignty and individual rights—a balance that characterizes many political revolutions to this day.

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*Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Britain and the American Dream*

BY PETER MOORE. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023, 592 pp.

Much that Americans value came from Europe. In this meaty yet readable book, the author, a nonacademic historian, sketches the prehistory of Thomas Jefferson's famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." He explores how these specific words were chosen, what exactly they meant to Jefferson's contemporaries, and their origins in earlier British political thought and experience. This is not a work of original scholarship—for a century, professional historians have explored the British origins of the political ideas that inspired the Declaration—as much as a distillation of existing work. Yet those willing to accept the author's penchant for writerly clichés and his almost exclusive focus on individual biography—especially that of Benjamin Franklin—to the exclusion of broader factors may well find this a lively, intelligent, and colorful introduction to the topic.

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*National Dish: Around the World in Search of Food, History, and the Meaning of Home*

BY ANYA VON BREMZEN. Penguin Press, 2023, 352 pp.

Trying different national cuisines is perhaps the most common way people experience modern globalization. Yet it is paradoxical. Many people imagine their willingness to eat foreign food as

evidence of their cosmopolitanism. At the same time, they crave unfamiliar food as ways to experience ostensibly authentic historical and indigenous cultures as if they were natives. In this work, a veteran cookbook writer visits six global cities—four in Europe—and uncovers the hollowness in this quest for authenticity. Iconic national dishes are almost invariably artificial constructs of recent invention. In Naples, the pedigree of the pizza margherita, supposedly concocted to celebrate the queen of a newly united Italy, proves to have been invented in the 1930s. In Seville, tapas turns out to be a twentieth-century upper-class luxury, and beloved regional cuisines a politically constructed bulwark for Franco's authoritarian rule. Turkish cuisine is revealed to be an amalgam of Armenian, Greek, and Iraqi recipes. Borsch(t) is Ukrainian or Russian or perhaps Tatar. If one skims the chatty travelogue and conversations with local intellectuals, this book of tall tales about food makes for an engaging read.

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*Mussolini's Grandchildren: Fascism in Contemporary Italy*

BY DAVID BRODER. Pluto Press, 2023, 240 pp.

Broder starts by hinting that, beneath the surface, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her associates are unmistakably fascist. They come from a political tradition dating back to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in the early twentieth century. They promote a resentful nationalism and express concern about the dilution or extinction of *italianità*, or Italian identity. They occasionally invoke postwar extreme-right symbols as “dog

whistles.” Yet the author, an extremely well-informed nonacademic historian of the Italian and French far right, does not seem to believe his own thesis. Soon he concedes that the Italian right has embraced democracy, renounced fascism, rejected anti-Semitism, left behind violent tactics, lost interest in grand projects for reorganizing society, and turned to generic global conservatism. Politically, Meloni got where she is by moving far to the center; she is now a staunchly anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, pro-European, and pro-NATO leader. Now that Meloni's Italy has made its peace with the European Union, he concludes, the worst one can expect is an effort to transform Brussels from within—a quest that seems destined to fail. Far from harking back to the dark days of the 1920s, Italy today is, according to the author, firmly “post-fascist,” although it is unclear what that means.

## Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

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*The House on G Street:  
A Cuban Family Saga*

BY LISANDRO PÉREZ. New York University Press, 2023, 344 pp.

In pre-revolutionary Cuba, Pérez's extensive family made its fortune marketing tobacco leaf to New York-based cigar manufacturers. In this nostalgic and reflective multigenerational story, Pérez proudly recalls a joyful family life built around sumptuous Sunday barbecues, exclusive country clubs, bilingual private

schools, nannies, and chauffeurs. He lauds the integrity and work ethic of his prosperous ancestors: their relationships were rooted in mutual trust not just with business partners but also with factory workers and tobacco growers. Drawing on his earlier book *Sugar, Cigars, and Revolution: The Making of Cuban New York* (2018), Pérez, an accomplished academic, recognizes the irrepressible contradiction between the promises of the Cuban independence hero José Martí—who demanded national sovereignty and social equality—and the rampant Americanization and corrupt politics that characterized mid-twentieth-century Cuba. Initially, Pérez's father welcomed the 1959 revolution, but the rebel leader Fidel Castro's escalating radicalism drove the family to seek refuge across the Florida Straits. The new government repurposed the family's stately house into a daycare center, renamed Vietnam Heroico (Heroic Vietnam). Like much of Havana, it has since fallen into disrepair.

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*The Wind Knows My Name*

BY ISABEL ALLENDE. Translated by Frances Riddle. Ballantine Books, 2023, 272 pp.

Now 81 years old, the prolific Allende is skilled at weaving historical drama rich with meaning for today's troubled world. In this novel-cum-political polemic, Allende draws emotive parallels between the Nazi atrocities that ruptured Jewish families in Europe and the Trump-era separation of migrant families at the U.S. southern border. Allende colors her historical comparisons with her trademark magical fan-

tasies—haunted old homes, departed souls, and fateful chance encounters—punctuated by critical swipes at U.S. foreign policy. The Chilean American author finds redemption in family love and social empathy; admirable pro bono lawyers and dedicated nonprofits make a decisive difference in the lives of desperate migrants. Some may question the way Allende equates Nazi crimes with U.S. border brutalities or fault her somewhat stereotypical characters and rushed, formulaic plots. But others will welcome her imaginative storytelling replete with strong women, powerful denunciations of sexual abuse, and exhortations for the humane treatment of migrants fleeing untenable circumstances.

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*Travels in the Americas: Notes and Impressions of a New World*

BY ALBERT CAMUS. Edited by Alice Kaplan. Translated by Ryan Bloom. University of Chicago Press, 2023, 152 pp.

In the aftermath of World War II, the French government sent Camus to the United States and South America to rejuvenate France's tarnished image. As recorded in this sketch-like, impressionistic travel journal, the philosopher-novelist spent two exhausting months in 1949 lecturing and hobnobbing with local literary elites. Suffering from insomnia and a nasty respiratory illness (possibly his chronic tuberculosis), the existentialist Camus ponders loneliness, suicide, and death. He regularly judges his hosts as either witty and intelligent or boring and vulgar but rarely reports their

thoughts or words. Although deeply immersed in his own country's political struggles and in questions of colonialism, the Algerian-born Camus shows remarkably little interest in Latin American political affairs. In Santiago, he encounters labor strikes sparked by a hike in bus fares, but Camus, who was so articulate on the politics of rebellion, appears uninterested. Possibly, his mere celebrity presence and oratory skills overawed his audiences. But Camus's notebooks suggest a stark distance separating this icon of midcentury French intelligentsia and Latin America.

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*Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands*

BY KELLY LYTLE HERNÁNDEZ.  
Norton, 2022, 384 pp.

*William F. Buckley, Sr.: Witness to the Mexican Revolution, 1908–1922*

BY JOHN A. ADAMS, JR. University of Oklahoma Press, 2023, 320 pp.

Two recent books offer sharply contrasting perspectives on the Mexican Revolution, one of the most bloody and consequential upheavals of the early twentieth century. In her breezy retelling of the origins of the 1910 insurrection, Lytle Hernández elevates the role of the intrepid anarchist leader Ricardo Flores Magón and his dissident Mexican Liberal Party. Fighting to oust the aging Mexican autocrat Porfirio Díaz, the rebels took advantage of the U.S.-Mexican border, which was quite porous at the time, to seek sanctuary in the United States, where they could print broadsheets, organize militias, and conduct daring cross-border raids.

It was the Díaz administration—not the U.S. government—that dubbed these insurgents “bad Mexicans,” but Washington did collude with Díaz to protect U.S. investors and harass, jail, and deport the radical Magonistas. Lytle Hernández strives to reframe these well-substantiated stories as foundational to U.S. history—in terms of the United States' domestic as well as foreign policy—and as exemplary of an ongoing violent clash between “white settler supremacy” and dispossessed peoples of color. But she does not provide compelling evidence for her revisionist thesis. Although her book offers an engaging narrative, those looking for a rigorous, multi-dimensional analysis of Díaz's hotly contested 30 years in office and the maelstrom that followed will have to turn elsewhere.

William Buckley, Sr., was the father of William Buckley, Jr., the influential founding editor of the reactionary magazine *The National Review*. As a young lawyer and petroleum entrepreneur, the senior Buckley was an eyewitness to and sometimes a participant in the various phases of the tumultuous revolution. Adams's sympathetic yet worthy biography relies heavily on Buckley's voluminous personal papers. Having grown up in a rural Texas populated by Mexican Americans, Buckley spoke fluent Spanish and mixed easily in Mexican political and business circles. “Guillermo” Buckley courted Díaz and the business-friendly U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, but also met with the peasant leader Francisco “Pancho” Villa. Buckley walked the corridors of power in Washington, where he witnessed the sharp debates

and utter confusion so characteristic of U.S. foreign policy decision-making. As a corporate lobbyist, he disdained President Woodrow Wilson's liberal idealism. In assessing the causes of the Mexican upheaval, Buckley acknowledged grinding rural poverty and Mexicans' distrust of unchecked foreign investments—and, begrudgingly (as a devout Catholic), popular antipathy toward the wealthy Catholic Church. Unlike Lytle Hernández, Buckley made little mention of racial divides as a driving force in history.

## Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

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*Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*

BY DOMINIQUE AREL AND JESSE DRISCOLL. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 320 pp.

**A**rel and Driscoll offer a meticulous and nuanced account of the developments in Ukraine that preceded the Russian invasion of 2022. After the antigovernment Maidan revolution in 2014 in Kyiv, Russian President Vladimir Putin moved to annex Crimea in a bloodless operation enabled by the popular local rejection of the Maidan revolution and by the defection of Crimean elites to the Russian state. Events were quite different in the eastern region of Donbas. There, opposition to the Maidan

revolt sparked violent insurgency in the streets, but the local elites chose not to break with the Ukrainian government. Initially, the Russian role in the conflict was limited to information warfare. (The Kremlin only got involved militarily several months later.) Populations were also divided elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, precipitating bloody conflict. At the root of this violence, the authors emphasize, was not Russian aggression, as is commonly believed in the West, but real divisions between those Ukrainians who aligned with Ukraine and those who aligned with Russia. At that stage, the authors claim, the current war might have been avoided. Several months after the beginning of the civil conflict, Russia began direct military intervention but never admitted to it, which was one reason European attempts to mediate were stymied. Another was Ukraine's steadfast refusal to grant electoral legitimacy to its de facto breakaway territories in eastern Donbas. After a six-year stalemate, Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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*Defectors: How the Illicit Flight of Soviet Citizens Built the Borders of the Cold War World*

BY ERIK R. SCOTT. Oxford University Press, 2023, 328 pp.

Drawing on archival documents from several former Soviet republics and from the United States, this highly persuasive work studies defection as an important element of the Cold War. The United States championed freedom of movement and personal choice and condemned the Soviet government

for keeping its citizens in captivity. But even as it encouraged all Soviet people to escape to “the free world,” the United States maintained strict immigration restrictions and showed a clear preference for defectors it deemed valuable, such as Soviet diplomats. The Soviet Union sought to repatriate those defectors who had begun to regret fleeing to the West, stressing the comforts of family and homeland. This effort was more successful than is commonly known, especially since ideological defections were, in fact, quite rare. Illustrated with fascinating stories of individual defectors, Scott’s book also documents the surprisingly productive cooperation of the two superpowers in deterring unwanted migrants, including those who sought asylum in foreign embassies, smuggled themselves aboard “capitalist” Western vessels, and hijacked planes. Cooperation between Washington and Moscow from the 1960s to the 1980s led to the codification of diplomatic representation and behavior on the high seas and the treatment of acts of hijacking as terrorism.

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*Intermarriage and the Friendship of Peoples: Ethnic Mixing in Soviet Central Asia*

BY ADRIENNE EDGAR. Cornell University Press, 2022, 300 pp.

For many decades, Soviet authorities encouraged intermarriage between ethnic groups as part of a social engineering project aimed at building a Soviet nation, one free of ethnic or racial biases. Edgar’s absorbing historical study of intermarriage is based on policy documents, Soviet ethno-

graphic research, and over 80 in-depth interviews with members of mixed marriages and their adult children in the ethnically diverse Soviet republic of Kazakhstan and less diverse Tajikistan. During the last three decades of the Soviet Union, the policy on intermarriage backfired: instead of erasing national distinctions, it contributed to the rise of a racialized notion of nationality. Identity documents required all citizens to list their “nationality,” and “Soviet” was not an option. At the age of 16, the offspring of mixed marriages had to choose one of their parents’ ethnicities. This made young people keenly aware of their bloodlines and descent and promoted an increasingly primordial concept of nationality. As the Soviet Union collapsed, nationalism in the Central Asian republics was ascendant.

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*The Soviet Sixties*

BY ROBERT HORNSBY.

Yale University Press, 2023, 496 pp.

Based on an immense body of scholarly literature, Hornsby’s narrative is broad rather than deep. His “sixties” begin in 1953, with the death of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, became his castigator, putting an end to Stalin’s rule of terror and releasing hundreds of thousands of political prisoners. Khrushchev radically expanded the Soviet Union’s international ties and promoted anticolonialism. Concerned for public welfare, he launched a mass housing program and allowed a breath of freedom in the arts and culture. He oversaw amazing successes in the

exploration of space. Hornsby also discusses the more negative aspects of Khrushchev's leadership, including the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and, at home, the bloody suppression in 1962 of workers' protests in Novocherkassk, a harsh antireligious campaign, and the Soviet leader's angry distaste for modern art. In 1964, Khrushchev was ousted by his Politburo rivals, who opted to further harden the regime. Only about a quarter of the book, which is ostensibly about the 1960s, is devoted to the six years of the decade that followed Khrushchev's ouster. The book is rich in material, but those familiar with Soviet history will find few new facts or interpretations.

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*Communism's Public Sphere:  
Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland  
and East Germany*

BY KYRILL KUNAKHOVICH. Cornell  
University Press, 2023, 354 pp.

Kunakhovich presents a richly detailed chronicle of the relations between political and cultural actors in the East German city of Leipzig and the Polish city of Krakow during the Cold War. He shows how artists and artistic spaces contributed to the evolution of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. After World War II, Stalinist regimes forcefully shaped art and imposed it on the masses in the hope of building socialism. Stalin's death in 1953 eased the dependence of Eastern European leaders on Moscow and heralded a shift in those countries toward "national communism," with governments seeking to engage the people and cater to local

needs and desires. Communist leaders granted more freedom to artists, expecting to turn them into political allies. But those hopes were dashed. As the only civil actors allowed to address the public, artists endured close state scrutiny, but they never stopped pushing boundaries. The repression that followed the quashing of the Prague Spring in 1968 in Czechoslovakia gave rise to broad resistance in Eastern Europe, with artists and cultural places at the forefront. The push for artistic and political freedoms was more radical in Poland than in East Germany, but this process was also transnational: the two societies' interactions led to the simultaneous collapse of both communist regimes in 1989.

## Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

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*A New Vision for Islamic Pasts  
and Futures*

BY SHAHZAD BASHIR.  
MIT Press, 2022.

In this dazzlingly creative and thought-provoking digital book, Bashir argues that Islam needs to be understood not as a monolithic, unchanging faith but as an accumulation of beliefs and practices that people have labeled "Islam" over time and across regions. In Bashir's view, both Muslims and non-Muslims have contributed to this process. Bashir abandons the constraints of the conventionally linear printed book for an online, open-access format. Linking

texts from a dizzying array of sources, including poetry, novels, art, architecture, trinkets, graffiti, and films, the book invites immersion. Readers enter this inventive and fascinating electronic work at various times and places—from contemporary Isfahan to fourteenth-century Samarkand, from the skyline of modern Istanbul to the expanse of the Arabian desert—and can make unexpected connections, experiencing Bashir’s vivid elaboration of the breadth of Islam with each click.

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*The Egyptian Economy in the Twenty-First Century: The Hard Road to Inclusive Prosperity*

EDITED BY KHALID IKRAM AND HEBA NASSAR. The American University in Cairo Press, 2022, 476 pp.

A collection of essays by many of the most distinguished social scientists working on Egypt today, this book provides a detailed and sobering picture of the country’s challenges after decades of negligent and inept economic management. The editors stipulate that Egypt’s policymakers must “provide a better life for the country’s citizens [and] minimize vulnerability to external pressures.” The country would certainly be well served if its government shared those ambitions, but its leaders have often failed to realize lofty goals, instead pursuing the baser objectives of staying in power and enriching family and friends. As the authors contend, the road to prosperity will be hard, as Egypt grapples with the staggering size of an informal economy that provides more than half of all employment, self-inflicted impediments to the development of medium-sized

businesses, and a complex public sector that includes not just the central government but also banking, social welfare operations, and enormous state-owned enterprises—not to mention large, off-budget commitments to the military. That said, no government of Egypt could ask for a better roadmap to a more hopeful future than the one outlined in these essays.

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*The Land of Hope and Fear: Israel’s Battle for Its Inner Soul*

BY ISABEL KERSHNER. Knopf, 2023, 384 pp.

An affectionate, often lyrical account of the increasingly numerous and contentious communities that make up Israeli society, this book contains few surprises and little comfort. Eschewing analysis for description, Kershner, a longtime correspondent for *The New York Times* in Jerusalem, conveys the growing complexity of Israeli society through exemplary figures, including a Jewish religious zealot who champions West Bank settlements, a disillusioned kibbutznik who bemoans contemporary individualism, a high-tech entrepreneur who gushes about his visit to Dubai, an ultra-Orthodox journalist who describes his reluctance to accept army assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and an Arab Israeli schoolteacher who worries about the declining language fluency of her students. Such personalities make for entertaining and sometimes enlightening reading, but these emblematic figures seem not to speak to each other or to the larger questions their lives inevitably raise. Kershner points out that, together, the ultra-Orthodox and the

Arab Israeli populations that are exempt from Israel's universal military conscription now constitute about half the population, and they are not Zionists: as the schoolteacher observes, neither the Arabs nor the ultra-Orthodox feel they have to "identify with the values of the state" in order to access government entitlements. It would have been instructive to hear what so knowledgeable a commentator as Kirschner thinks that means for the country's future.

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*A Nearby Country Called Love:  
A Novel*

BY SALAR ABDOH.  
Viking, 2023. 256 pp.

Toward the end of this remarkable novel, one of the characters drives off, "back towards the Gulf and to the bubble of his fathomable world." Guided by Issa, a restless Iranian narrator recently returned to his birthplace in Tehran after a sojourn in New York City, the reader is introduced to a series of such worlds. The novel ventures through global cities, Iranian provinces, and Senegal, following characters who speak Arabic, Turkish, and Persian—and who hail both from families rooted in kinship and from chosen families constructed by misfits and outcasts. Issa recounts the mutual incomprehension of his deceased father, who ran a karate school, and his older brother, a well-regarded theater impresario who died of AIDS. He travels to Beirut to find a woman who translates poetry, only to learn later that she is not Lebanese at all but a young Iranian fleeing an arranged marriage. A Senegalese friend from New York arrives in Iran to start anew.

The stories skate along the edge of the familiar and the inexplicable, recounted with a sort of bewilderment and tenderness that suggests the modern world has made unfathomable misfits of us all.

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*Ben Ali's Tunisia: Power and  
Contention in an Authoritarian Regime*  
BY ANNE WOLF. Oxford University  
Press, 2023, 272 pp.

Drawing on a wealth of interviews, this revealing book traces the founding, development, and demise of one of the Arab world's most infamous autocracies: the regime of Tunisian President Zine el-Abdine Ben Ali, who ruled from 1987 to 2011. The gossip alone is fascinating. Wolf talks to the leader of the human rights movement of the 1980s to find out how Ben Ali won over liberals in the early days of his regime. She speaks with the dictator's favorite daughter (who married one of his trusted lieutenants) about the man Ben Ali was grooming as a successor. And she tracks down his personal pilot to recount the autocrat's departure from the country in January 2011 in the wake of the first revolt of the Arab Spring. But Wolf goes much further still, outlining how Ben Ali consolidated his autocracy and chronicling how the decay of political institutions (such as the ruling party, which was supplanted by Ben Ali's notoriously acquisitive family) ultimately led to the unraveling of the elite bargain that had sustained the regime. In revealing the extent of the divisions within the regime, this book is an important counterpoint to the sometimes romanticized versions of the popular uprising that toppled it.

## Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

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*Sovereign Funds: How the Communist Party of China Finances Its Global Ambitions*

BY ZONGYUAN ZOE LIU. Belknap Press, 2023, 288 pp.

*Sovereign Funds: How the Communist Party of China Finances Its Global Ambitions*

BY ZONGYUAN ZOE LIU. Belknap Press, 2023, 288 pp.

“Follow the money,” Liu advises, and in doing so, she shows that Chinese sovereign funds are so different from better-known sovereign wealth funds, such as those of the governments of Abu Dhabi and Norway, that she prefers to call them “sovereign leveraged funds.” That is because most of their vast foreign exchange holdings (over \$2 trillion as of 2019) are in effect borrowed in numerous complicated ways from China’s immense foreign exchange reserves. These various exotic workarounds, which Liu skillfully traces, produce “shadow reserves.” China uses them to make investments that are riskier, less liquid, and potentially more profitable than the safe investments favored by most sovereign wealth funds. But their mandate has more to do with policy than with profit. At home, the Chinese government uses the funds to stabilize the stock market, bail out failing banks, and invest in priority industries; overseas, it uses them to buy stakes

in natural resources and influential Western firms and to finance the Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative. In these ways, the sovereign funds have created a market tool to supplement the Chinese government’s administrative and political techniques for exerting influence at home and abroad.

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*Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China’s Overseas Development Program*

BY AXEL DREHER, ANDREAS FUCHS, BRADLEY PARKS, AUSTIN STRANGE, AND MICHAEL J. TIERNEY. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 312 pp.

The AidData website at the College of William and Mary has become the go-to source for information on China’s overseas development grants and loans, data that China wants to keep secret. Dreher and his colleagues go behind the scenes of this multiyear, cross-national effort to collect and standardize these data from a wide variety of sources. The book then summarizes and extends the project’s findings. As Chinese overseas funding has increased, it has shifted from grants to mostly loans. Grants and low-interest loans reward the political cooperation of partner governments, which aid from Western governments also tends to do. But most Chinese loans are made at commercial rates. Chinese financing is faster and less technocratic than funding from Western governments and international development banks, and China lends more often to autocratic and corrupt governments, but

it is still wrong to call China a rogue donor. The large-scale infrastructure projects that China likes to fund have helped spur economic growth in most recipient countries. When this is not the case, the responsibility lies more often with the receiving country than with China.

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*The Rise and Fall of the EAST: How Exams, Autocracy, Stability, and Technology Brought China Success, and Why They Might Lead to Its Decline*  
BY YASHENG HUANG. Yale University Press, 2023, 440 pp.

The EAST in Huang's title stands not only for China but for the four keys to its history listed in the subtitle. The imperial examination system dating back to the sixth century forced aspiring elites to unite around the single goal of service to the state. Autocracy grew from the elimination of balancing forces within the state and of societal power centers outside the state. The stability of the authoritarian system was what the Chinese Communist Party achieved—despite self-inflicted episodes of chaos—by adopting its own forms of these ancient traditions. But technological stagnation was the price the Chinese dynasties paid for their supreme stability. Reformist leaders after the death of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, opened up the system enough to allow for innovation, entrepreneurialism, and economic growth. Now, however, Huang predicts that the crackdown on freedom under the Chinese leader Xi Jinping's modernized version of

imperial rule may bring an end to the country's brief spurt of dynamism. Huang's wide-ranging and consistently shrewd analysis suggests that Xi's "China dream" of national greatness may be just that: a dream.

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*Japan's Nuclear Disaster and the Politics of Safety Governance*

BY FLORENTINE KOPPENBORG.  
Cornell University Press, 2023, 234 pp.

Japan's traditionally weak system for regulating nuclear safety, created by the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party and its allies, allowed what came to be known as the 3.11 disaster (after the March 11 earthquake in 2011), when a tsunami spurred the meltdown of one of the nuclear power plants at Fukushima. The disaster happened to occur when the opposition Democratic Party of Japan was in power for the first and only time. (The party has since dissolved.) The Democratic Party government was not able to phase out nuclear power as some of its leaders had wanted. But it pushed through the creation of the independent Nuclear Regulation Authority, which boasted a full-time board, its own technical staff, sanctioning powers against electric utilities, and even the right to draft nuclear safety bills for submission to the Japanese Diet. Later Liberal Democratic cabinets tried to weaken the NRA's powers so they could more quickly restart closed reactors and extend the lives of existing ones. But the NRA defended its independence, with the support of public opinion and the International Atomic Energy

Agency. Koppenborg skillfully traces the politics of the NRA's creation and survival. It remains one of only two authentically independent regulatory agencies in Japan's otherwise politicized regulatory system.

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*Contemporary Japanese Politics and Anxiety Over Governance*

BY KEN'ICHI IKEDA. Routledge, 2022, 244 pp.

The Japanese public's assessments of its government's performance have been anemic for years, but Ikeda finds that the COVID-19 crisis crystallized an even more pessimistic attitude: the fear that the government is not capable of solving potential future problems, such as job insecurity, terrorism, and war. Analyzing numerous cross-national surveys, he shows that the public's anxiety is more intense in Japan than in other countries when measured against actual COVID-19 infection rates, unemployment rates, levels of political violence, and similar objective criteria. The disproportionate anxiety over governance seems to derive partly from a weakening of the social networks traditionally used to mobilize voters and partly from the inability of the Democratic Party of Japan, during its brief stint in power from 2009 to 2012, to deal effectively with the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, followed by what voters perceived as a flat-footed response to COVID-19 by the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Japanese voters remain committed to democracy in principle. Yet 83 percent of respondents in a recent survey agreed with

the statement, "I'd rather spend my time enriching my own life rather than pursuing political goals."

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*I Have No Enemies: The Life and Legacy of Liu Xiaobo*

BY PERRY LINK AND WU DAZHI.  
Columbia University Press, 2023,  
568 pp.

There are very few icons in the chronicles of the Chinese struggle against state repression. This meticulously researched and wonderfully crafted biography will help change that. Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Prize winner who died while incarcerated, lived a life of extraordinary courage, sacrifice, and achievement. He played a critical role in negotiating a safe route for students to withdraw from Tiananmen Square during protests there in 1989, led the post-1989 Citizen Rights Defense movement, and endured frequent periods of detention and imprisonment. The authors trace the personal journey of a very public life that was replete with contradictions: Liu was an eloquent public speaker, but he also stuttered; he was fiercely independent but prone to constant "self-questioning and self-revising"; and a failed marriage paved the way for later happiness in romantic love. Readers will be most moved by Liu's humility in his constant learning of the craft of social protest and his many moral self-examinations. He signed divorce papers in prison on account of his own past mistreatment of his wife; he passed up opportunities for exile from China several times and repeatedly chose to face the state's

repressive machine instead. The book's title aptly captures his quest for love, tolerance, and compassion. His moral example may prove to be his most enduring legacy.

YANG SU

## Africa

NICOLAS VAN DE WALLE

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*The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination*

BY STUART A. REID. Knopf, 2023, 624 pp.

The 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo's first elected prime minister, was one of the emblematic episodes of both the Cold War and the end of colonialism in Africa. This story has been told before, but Reid's account benefits from his access to newly declassified material and his ability to conjure detail with verve. His narrative brilliantly captures the chaos that followed Congo's independence in 1960 after 75 years of Belgian rule. Reid, an executive editor at *Foreign Affairs*, ably traces Lumumba's rise from fairly humble roots to leading a fledgling country, a journey that took him from being a postal clerk and a beer salesman to a nationalist politician. Lumumba did play a role in his own downfall: Reid makes clear that a combination of miscalculations, poorly conceived initiatives, and fiery rhetoric antagonized both

the departing Belgian authorities and the UN intervention force that had entered the country to help maintain law and order. Lumumba's fate was sealed when the United States decided he harbored communist sympathies and shifted its support to Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, a one-time Lumumba protégé, giving him and his Belgian co-conspirators the green light to orchestrate Lumumba's arrest and assassination and helping Mobutu take power.

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*The Scarce State: Inequality and Political Power in the Hinterland*

BY NOAH L. NATHAN. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 348 pp.

Many scholars have focused on the supposed weakness of African states and their inability to project power and control their entire territory. In this insightful book, Nathan makes the counterintuitive claim that a limited state can still have a large impact on local populations. When the state is "scarce" in a region, its policies can have more of an effect on institutions and society than when the state is more present. Nathan's core analysis concerns the hinterland of northern Ghana, focusing on three areas of policy: the state's reliance on local chiefs to rule on its behalf, its efforts to promote education, and its approach to land policy. With the ingenious use of data, Nathan shows very clearly that the thinness of the state in a region can still powerfully shape social inequality and local power relations. For instance, in northern Ghana, the state finances very few schools,

and the small number of people who benefit from this support enjoy outsize advantages; in southern Ghana, on the other hand, where the state is more active in backing schools, government funding provides more limited advantages.

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*Where Credit Is Due: How Africa's Debt Can Be a Benefit, Not a Burden*  
BY GREGORY SMITH. Oxford University Press, 2021, 240 pp.

The sharp rise of sovereign debt in recent years in a dozen or so countries in Africa makes Smith's book very timely. He provides an excellent introduction to the current debt crisis and the policy issues involved. Unlike in the 1980s, when most African sovereign debt was held by Western governments and international financial institutions, the most indebted African countries today have turned in large part to private Western bondholders. Smith acknowledges that low-income countries in the region should speed up their development by securing international financial markets. But many of his case studies smartly illustrate how the African economies with the most worrying levels of debt have on occasion resorted to international finance for the wrong reason: governments have borrowed to prop up their current consumption, often in the run-up to elections. Many countries have failed to use the capital they have acquired on international markets to make investments that would generate long-lasting growth.

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*Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control Before the Genocide*

BY MARIE-EVE DESROSIERS.  
Cambridge University Press, 2023,  
408 pp.

Desrosiers has written an excellent political history of authoritarianism in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the country's political history and, more broadly, for students of authoritarian institutions. She advances two important arguments in this revisionist account of Rwandan political regimes. First, the conventional wisdom that the country has had a long tradition of state control of its citizenry is much exaggerated, and she argues convincingly that the state has aspired to a level of control it rarely has been able to achieve. In addition to the country's poor economic performance, divisions within the regime's security apparatus undermined the state's ability to exercise its power fully; much of the violence that has marred the country's history was not directed or even condoned by the state but resulted from these divisions. Second, most analyses of politics in Rwanda overemphasize the central role of ethnicity; Desrosiers does not deny that the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi groups has been an important political dynamic but stresses that other factors, including the effects of class and region, must also be taken into account to fully understand the country's authoritarian trajectory.

*Human Trafficking in South Africa*

BY PHILIP FRANKEL. Best Red, 2023, 207 pp.

Frankel has produced a careful, nuanced account of various kinds of human trafficking in South Africa, divided into three overlapping categories: trafficking people for sex, trafficking children, and trafficking workers. In all three cases, marginal and poor populations are particularly vulnerable to the cruel exploitation that inevitably characterizes this movement of people, which occurs in many cases with the complicity of family members and neighbors. Trafficking appears to be on the rise throughout southern Africa, the book argues, because of growing inequality,

high poverty, state corruption, and substantial migration both within and across borders. Frankel sketches the well-organized international criminal networks that profit handsomely from the different forms of trafficking while relying on a wide array of local intermediaries to perform their vicious work. He completes his dispassionate account of a grotesque phenomenon with useful policy recommendations, including much tougher law enforcement attention to the problem, increased international police cooperation, and the mobilization of grassroots civil society organizations. 🌐

U.S. Postal Service Statement of Ownership, Management & Circulation (Required by 39 USC 3685)																																																								
1. Publication Title: FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2. Publication No: 204-580 3. Filing Date: 10/1/23 4. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly 5. No. of Issues Published Annually: Six 6. Annual Subscription \$59.95 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Street, City, Country, State & Zip + 4) (Not Printer): FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of the Publisher (Not Printer): FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of the Publisher, Editor & Managing Editor:  <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Publisher:</td> <td>Editor:</td> <td>Managing Editor:</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Stephanie Solomon</td> <td>Daniel Kurtz-Phelan</td> <td>Justin Vogt</td> </tr> <tr> <td>FOREIGN AFFAIRS</td> <td>FOREIGN AFFAIRS</td> <td>FOREIGN AFFAIRS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>58 East 68th Street</td> <td>58 East 68th Street</td> <td>58 East 68th Street</td> </tr> <tr> <td>New York, NY 10065</td> <td>New York, NY 10065</td> <td>New York, NY 10065</td> </tr> </table>			Publisher:	Editor:	Managing Editor:	Stephanie Solomon	Daniel Kurtz-Phelan	Justin Vogt	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	58 East 68th Street	58 East 68th Street	58 East 68th Street	New York, NY 10065	New York, NY 10065	New York, NY 10065																																							
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11. Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders OWNING OR Holding 1 percent or more of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None. 12. For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at special rates: The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Name: FOREIGN AFFAIRS 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: Jul/Aug 2023																																																								
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# Letters to the Editor

## Out of the Trenches

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*To the Editor:*

In “Back in the Trenches” (September/October 2023), Stephen Biddle contends that the war in Ukraine more closely resembles World War I and World War II than a military revolution and does not reflect a revolutionary change in the character of warfare. To support his argument, he asserts that armies lost a greater percentage of tanks in those wars than the Russians and Ukrainians are losing today in Ukraine. Biddle points out that the United Kingdom lost 98 percent of its tanks in the 1918 Battle of Amiens.

What he fails to mention, however, is that 80 percent of those losses were the result of mechanical failures, not damage inflicted during combat. In World War II, hundreds of divisions were engaged in mobile warfare. In contrast, the war in Ukraine now features small infantry-led fights in which tanks play a minimal support role. Even so, tank losses exceed 50 percent for both sides. Clearly, new technology is having an effect. In the entire Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that took place in the fall of 2020, over 75 percent of Armenian vehicle losses were caused by drones, according to the open-source organization Oryx.

In Ukraine, hundreds of videos show vehicles being destroyed by drones. The fact that \$400 drones are laying waste to armor from miles away represents a significant tactical shift.

A core element of Biddle’s argument is that the number of casualties inflicted per round of artillery fired “exceeds the world war rates, but not by much.” Yet Biddle goes on to put the World War II figure at three casualties per 100 rounds fired and the figure for the Ukrainian army today at eight casualties per 100 rounds fired—a 266 percent increase. And the Ukrainians have achieved that gain even though they are firing mostly unguided rounds, some of which are decades old, from a set of global suppliers that have uneven quality-control standards. Something is making these systems much more effective. The answer is drones. As Biddle notes, they permit the army to observe and adjust its artillery missions.

Biddle contends that precision munitions have had little effect on the battlefield. But he neglects to mention the Ukrainians’ highly effective use of extensive surveillance, an agile command-and-control system, and long-range rocket launchers and missiles such as HIMARS and Storm Shadow. He also ignores the dozens of videos showing cheap Ukrainian drones targeting as few as two soldiers. Ukraine certainly

believes that drones have had a huge impact. In May, it ordered 200,000 more of them for delivery by year's end.

Anyone looking at the German and Allied offensives of 1918 would have seen little that was new. Both were based on massed infantry and artillery. The German storm troopers' task-organized infantry-arms teams that pierced through Allied trenches did not appear to foreshadow the breakthroughs in penetration and encirclement of World War II. Nor did the British tank brigades at Amiens foretell the mechanized formations that allowed the Germans to dominate land warfare from 1939 to 1940. Yet in hindsight, it is clear that the new tactics and equipment of armored forces dramatically changed ground warfare in World War II.

Today, by combining satellite surveillance with drones, militaries can precisely target high-value assets deep behind enemy lines and launch mass attacks against even low-value targets such as individual fighting positions. Despite having a limited number of precision weapons, Ukraine has shown how powerful new technologies can be if they are integrated operationally. It does not take great imagination to envision the impact of tens of thousands of drones that orbit over a battlefield until they detect and attack a target.

Between the world wars, visionaries developed innovative new concepts and behaviors, with Germany creating the blitzkrieg combined-arms attack and Japan perfecting aircraft carrier-based warfare. Allied leaders paid a huge price in blood and treasure when they failed to adapt. Success in future conflicts will require integrating new technologies into winning strategies.

The first step is to reject the idea that nothing is changing.

T. X. HAMMES

*Distinguished Research Fellow, Center for Strategic Research, National Defense University*

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*Biddle replies:*

Length constraints preclude a full debate, so I will focus on a couple of key points.

As I argued in my article, artillery has become more lethal, but at a steady, continuous, roughly linear rate of around an additional 0.05 casualties per hundred rounds per year for over a century now, much of it driven by progressive changes in caliber and fuses. The data show no evidence that drones or improved precision have caused any sudden changes in casualty numbers.

Nobody is arguing that nothing changes. The issues are the rate of change in the nature of warfare and the reasons for it. What the war in Ukraine shows is incremental change, because adaptation to new technologies limits their impact on the battlefield.

Consider drones. Ukraine has enough drones today to "swarm" the Russians on key fronts if it wants to. But drones spur adaptation; for example, combatants can counter swarms of cheap drones by using omnidirectional jamming, which discourages swarming. On YouTube, viewers see the drone missions that succeed, not those that fail. But studies show that the latter now far outnumber the former. The Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank, has estimated that only one mission in three succeeds; other sources put the figure at one in every seven to ten. These results do not mean that drones are useless,

but they do not reflect transformational impact on warfare, which would explain the merely incremental changes in observed battlefield outcomes.

It has now been over 30 years since transformation advocates began arguing that warfare is being revolutionized. Yet battle outcomes still differ only by degree from the past. Is this really the right way to think about military change?

## An AI Oversight

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*To the Editor:*

Ian Bremmer and Mustafa Suleyman's essay ("The AI Power Paradox," September/October 2023) warns of the dystopian future that will arrive thanks to artificial intelligence. The authors write that policymakers around the world have only "begun to wake up to the challenges posed by AI and wrestle with how to govern it" with the "Hiroshima AI process," a G-7 initiative launched in May 2023. But Bremmer and Suleyman ignore a huge amount of relevant global policy work on AI.

The Hiroshima process is only the most recent AI policy initiative of the past decade, with Japan having led a global effort to regulate AI since the 2016 G-7 summit. Other initiatives include the widely endorsed 2018 Universal Guidelines for AI, supported by scientific societies and human rights

experts; the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2019 AI Principles; the G-20's 2019 AI Guidelines; UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI; the EU's forthcoming AI Act; and the Council of Europe's forthcoming AI Treaty. There is no discussion of any of these landmark events in AI governance in Bremmer and Suleyman's essay. As a result, instead of having us build on prior efforts, the authors would send us hurtling back to 2015, before governments had begun working together on global AI policy. This approach by Bremmer and Suleyman makes the problems of AI governance appear more intractable than they are. AI policymaking is an evolutionary process that requires paying attention to how governments are already meeting emerging challenges in technology.

MARC ROTENBERG

*Founder and Executive Director,  
Center for AI and Digital Policy*

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### FOR THE RECORD

The article "The End of China's Economic Miracle" (September/October 2023) used the term "savings" when "bank deposits" or "savings in bank deposits" would have been more accurate.

The article "Putin's Age of Chaos" (September/October 2023) referred incorrectly to the new leader of the Wagner paramilitary company. He is Andrei Troshev, not Alexei Troshev. 🌐

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*Foreign Affairs* (ISSN 00157120), November/December 2023, Volume 102, Number 6. Published six times annually (January, March, May, July, September, November) at 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065. Print subscriptions: U.S., \$54.95; Canada, \$66.95; other countries via air, \$89.95 per year. Canadian Publication Mail-Mail # 1572121. Periodicals postage paid in New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Foreign Affairs*, P.O. Box 324, Congers, NY 10920. From time to time, we permit certain carefully screened companies to send our subscribers information about products or services that we believe will be of interest. If you prefer not to receive such information, please contact us at the Congers, NY, address indicated above.

October 1962

# “Friends and Allies”

MCGEORGE BUNDY

*In 1962, McGeorge Bundy, U.S. President John F. Kennedy's national security adviser, took to the pages of Foreign Affairs to grapple with a challenge that his modern-day counterparts would find familiar: How should Washington deal with neutral countries that opted out of the great geopolitical rivalry of the day? Bundy professed a magnanimous approach to the nonaligned states of the Third World, but he hinted that there were limits to America's patience.*

**W**e have chosen neutrality for enough of our history to recognize and respect the similar choice of others—and none of our allies is attached to us by other than free choice. We have a deep interest in the effort toward stable and progressive freedom now so gallantly in course in small states and in great sub-continents; that interest is not removed by the absence of formal alliance—any more than the justified fact of alliance is a reason for perverse suspicion by those who do not choose to join.

But the requirement of reciprocity is as important for friends who are unaligned as for friends who are engaged. Among some of the former there is a tendency to take our good will for granted, and to assume that their special interests and prejudices may,

in the nature of things, be pressed against us to the limit. When the discount is made with all insight and generosity for the special problems and concerns of the ardent new nations, this still remains a global community where the interests of all—even the richer states commanding greater military power—deserve respect. . . .

Fortunately most of our neutral friends are friends indeed. We will continue in our respect for their neutrality, in our concern for their advancement, in our belief that their independent progress is deeply in the common interest of humanity. Because we ourselves are a new people, a recent historical addition to the written record of mankind, we can and do feel with a shock of recognition the pride and purpose of the new countries. 🌐

