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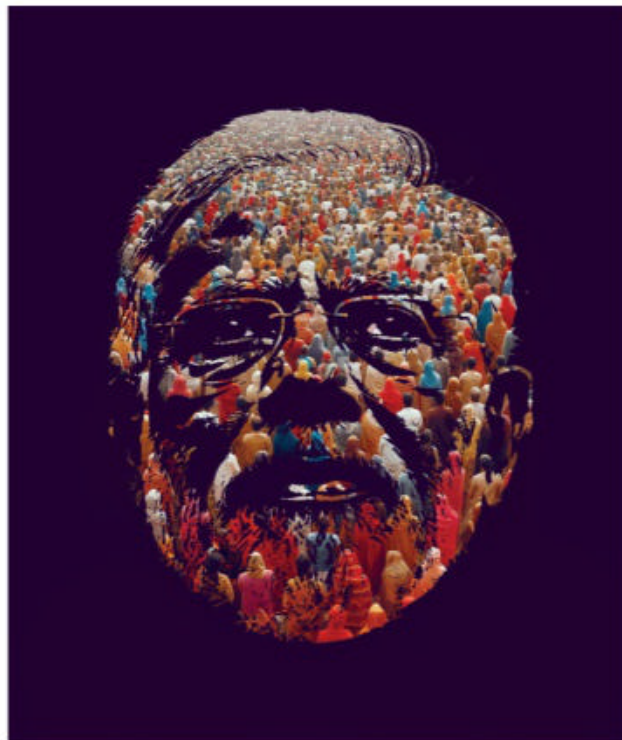
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SPRING 2024

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**WHETHER OR NOT YOU BELIEVE THE UNITED STATES** is in relative decline, one thing is clear—the rest of the world is already acting as if that’s the case. Yes, the White House still controls the world’s most powerful military and presides over its biggest economy, but a growing number of so-called middle powers are looking to see how they can take advantage of an evolving global order.

Exhibit A could be India. New Delhi is increasingly assertive on the world stage, building defense and technological ties with Washington even as it dramatically increases its supply of sanctioned Russian oil. No one is even trying to stop it; everyone seems to want the world’s fastest-growing major economy on its side.

Ahead of India’s elections this year—so big they will be spread out over more than six weeks of voting from April to June—this is an opportune moment to understand what animates this country of 1.4 billion people.

India was always an unlikely democracy. In 1947, its founding fathers stitched together a patchwork of states, many with different languages, cultures, and cuisines, into a union. This new country was meant to be a secular, democratic republic. At its creation, the idea of India—its unifying vision—prioritized liberal democracy over any one culture or religion. As I write in this issue’s lead essay (Page 34), this is now changing. India may still be democratic, but under two-time Prime Minister Narendra Modi, culture and religion are gaining salience over secularism. India is becoming a Hindu-first country. This much is well documented by now. But while the world often sees this as a top-down change led by a charismatic individual, I wanted to advance two provocations: first, that Modi is in fact fulfilling a vision of India that has existed for a century, and second, that the success of this project may be driven by demand as much as it is by supply. If Modi wins a third term, an illiberal India might not be a blip but the norm.

None of this would be possible without an expanding economy. **Arvind Subramanian**, Modi’s former chief economic advisor, argues that there are good reasons to be bullish about India’s fiscal prospects. But even he finds reasons to be wary. Writing alongside **Josh Felman**, a former India-based official for the International Monetary Fund, the two show how New Delhi still needs to conduct significant reforms before it can emulate anything like the sustained growth China undertook for four decades (Page 42).

Cheap Russian oil certainly helps. But for that to work, you need a skilled operator in charge of Modi’s



foreign policy. Look no further than S. Jaishankar, India’s suave, silver-tongued top diplomat who hobnobs with leaders from Beijing to Brussels. FP’s **Rishi Iyengar** has penned a memorable profile of India’s omnipresent foreign minister (Page 46).

No analysis of India can be complete without a look at its youth. Nearly half of the country’s population is under the age of 25. Are they pleased with India’s trajectory? Do they believe they have promising prospects? **Snigdha Poonam** is an astute chronicler of India’s young people, and she spent the last five years traveling the country taking their pulse. Together with the photographer **Prarthna Singh**, the two compile a portrait of a hopeful generation (Page 52).

Finally, do you remember when you first realized a sense of nationhood? It might have been a moment of collective joy or sorrow; perhaps it was a time you had to leave home, compelling you to contemplate your sense of belonging. The novelist **Amitava Kumar** has thought about this subject deeply and shares with us his recollections of when he began to define himself as Indian—and when the country’s identity diverged from that of his own (Page 58).

I hope you enjoy these essays. It has been a while since we devoted an issue to a single country, but we felt the world’s biggest election warranted it. Head to our website to see how we cover all these topics in audio and video in addition to text.

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As ever,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ravi Agrawal'.

*Ravi Agrawal*



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# ARGUMENTS

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Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto (left) and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming, greet supporters in Jakarta on Feb. 14.

## Why Asia's Democratic Leaders Are So Popular

By James Crabtree

Prabowo Subianto secured a thumping victory in Indonesia's presidential election following a hard-fought three-way campaign. Polls going into the Feb. 14 contest suggested his likely victory, but many analysts had predicted a second-round runoff. Instead, the defense minister soared past his opponents on the first try, delivering an unexpected landslide with a projected 58 percent of the votes.

Prabowo's triumph had many causes. But its scale points to a wider trend, namely the surprising popularity of political leaders in many of Asia's emerging-market democracies. Heads of government in rich Western nations are almost universally reviled—and in many parliamentary systems, their dwindling parties often find it increasingly difficult even to cobble together ruling coalitions.

In Indonesia, by contrast, Prabowo will now replace the even more popular



President Joko Widodo, commonly known as Jokowi, who ends his term in office with an 80 percent approval rating. In the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is almost as well liked, as was his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. And in India's election, which is scheduled to begin in April, Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks all but certain to produce his third overwhelming win in a row.

It is tempting to label such leaders as populists. And some, such as Duterte, do fit that term. So does former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose fiery anti-establishment rhetoric propelled independents associated with his party to unexpected successes in Pakistan's recent polls. Yet many do not. Prabowo's campaign featured plenty of gimmicks but little of the assailing of elites that might typically be expected from a populist campaigner. The label certainly doesn't fit Jokowi, a circumspect politician whom Indonesian voters admire for his focus on development, infrastructure, and social services, along with his reputation for clean governance.

These leaders are also clearly the product of their own national circumstances. The scale of Prabowo's victory in part came down to support from Jokowi himself, which in turn followed an elite stitch-up in which Prabowo picked Jokowi's son as his running mate. In the Philippines, voters have warmed to Marcos's calm governing style, partly for its contrast to Duterte's madcap antics. In India, Modi's popularity stems partly from his religious nationalist appeal, a factor that helps him vie with Jokowi for the title of the most popular leader of any major global democracy.

All that said, three factors do help explain why Asia's democrats often sustain approval levels far beyond those of Western politicians, beginning with smart communication. U.S. President Joe Biden made a debut TikTok appearance during the recent Super Bowl. But

his Asian counterparts have long made such platforms the centerpiece of their campaigns. Prabowo, a former army general, used TikTok to soften his military hardman image, running clips portraying him as a cartoonish, baby-faced grandfather. Modi's reelection effort is already up and running with another highly sophisticated digital campaign. All of this is important in countries with youthful populations. Roughly half of Indonesia's 200 million voters are below 40; India's voters are younger still.

A distinctive approach to economic management provides a second linking factor. Often, this involves politicians handing out freebies. Prabowo's campaign promised free lunches and milk for students. Marcos's victorious campaign in 2022 was helped along by promises of a price cap on rice. Modi's electoral support has been bolstered in the past by policies such as handing out cooking stoves or building toilets.

Arvind Subramanian, a former chief economic advisor to the Indian government, describes this as a form of "New Welfareism," in which politicians provide or subsidize tangible goods and services that otherwise would be provided by the private sector. (For more on this concept, see Subramanian's essay with Josh Felman on Page 42.) This strategy is unlikely to win over voters

if economic management is a mess. But when combined with strong growth and leaders who are perceived to be largely free of corruption, it provides a recipe for widespread voter appeal.

The third and final issue is security. Just as in the West, voters in Asia can sense the world around them growing more dangerous in an age of heightened geopolitical risk. In turn, they appear to be rewarding leaders who project international credibility. The appeal here is less that of the traditional "strongman" leader—and more of one who can plausibly claim to keep their country safe on the world stage. In the Philippines, voters have responded well to Marcos's willingness to stand up to China following a series of military clashes in the South China Sea. Modi played cannily on his role as host of last year's G-20 summit to buttress his image as global statesman.

None of this is to suggest that such soaring levels of popularity can be sustained indefinitely, especially in the face of economic setbacks. Marcos's approval ratings dipped somewhat in late 2023, for instance, because of an inflation spike—albeit falling from a lofty 80 percent to a mere 65 percent, according to one poll. Nor are popular politicians entirely an Asian phenomenon. In Mexico, left-wing President Andrés



Supporters of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. cheer during a campaign rally in Parañaque, Philippines, on May 7, 2022.



Manuel López Obrador consistently maintains approval ratings of 60 percent or more as he approaches the end of his six-year term in office. His protégé and designated successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, now leads her opponents by as many as 25 points ahead of national elections on June 2.

Recognizing the popularity of many Asian leaders also doesn't mean underplaying concerns about the state of their democracies. India, Indonesia, and the Philippines all grew more autocratic in the decade leading up to 2022, according to a report from the V-Dem Institute at Sweden's University of Gothenburg. Prabowo's questionable record as a military leader, which saw him banned from entering the United States for alleged human rights abuses, raises plenty of worries about Indonesia's democratic trajectory, as does his backroom deal to install Jokowi's son as his running mate. Modi's Hindu-nationalist policies are watched with increasing alarm by his country's minorities, not least its 200 million-strong Muslim population.

Yet the popularity of Asia's democrats does, at least, suggest a more positive signal about the health of global democracy. In the West, reports of so-called democratic backsliding portray a dire tableau of populism, nationalism, and independent institutions hollowed out by reckless leaders. But the reality is not always quite so grim. Prabowo's victory will not see Indonesia's democracy collapse. The return of the Marcos dynasty in Manila has not augured a return to the dictatorship the family once led.

Asia's democratic leaders are, of course, far from perfect, but voters are happy with their performance. And if democracy is indeed to sustain itself around the world, having a few popular democrats in high office might not be a bad way to start. ■

**JAMES CRABTREE** is a distinguished visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and columnist at FOREIGN POLICY.

## Pakistan Can't Stop the Cycle of Discontent

By *Husain Haqqani*

**T**he results of Pakistan's general elections on Feb. 8 reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the country's civil and military establishment, but they seemed to bring about the opposite of what many voters wanted. Independent candidates affiliated with former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party—barred from running under its banner—won more seats in parliament than any major party but not enough for a majority. Parliamentary arithmetic necessitated a coalition, and Khan, who is in prison on corruption charges, refused to negotiate with his rivals.

Pakistan's new government was instead formed by a coalition of legacy parties, including the center-right Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the center-left Pakistan Peoples Party, led by former President Asif Ali Zardari and his son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. On Feb. 8, Pakistan's entrenched political order—in which parties vie for votes as well as the powerful military's favor—was jolted but did not crumble. Although the PTI's surprising performance damaged the military's reputation and mystique, its ability to influence the course of events remains intact.

The latest episode in Pakistan's game of thrones came amid a serious economic crisis as well as security threats from the resurgent Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and other militant groups. Political polarization makes it difficult

to address Pakistan's swelling debt and deficit. With a GDP of \$340 billion, Pakistan must repay nearly \$78 billion in external debt before 2026. Imposing taxes on key sectors of the economy—agriculture, real estate, retail—is difficult without political consensus. And amid the uncertainty, various loss-making state-owned enterprises, from Pakistan International Airlines to the country's power distribution companies, which collectively cost the government around \$1.7 billion annually, cannot be privatized.

Pakistan also needs a comprehensive strategy to deal with jihadi groups, which are now responsible for terrorist attacks inside the country but were once encouraged or tolerated as part of unconventional warfare against India and as a way to secure influence in Afghanistan. Populist narratives blaming India, Israel, and the United States for holding back Pakistan's progress hinder action against extremists, who portray themselves as Islamist heroes. Meanwhile, peace with India, relations with the West, and ties to economic benefactors in the Arab world are now held hostage to Pakistan's internal divisions: Those holding office at any given time are often accused by their opponents of selling out Pakistan's interests.

If there were ever a time for a national unity government in Pakistan, it would be now. Given the fragmented election results and allegations of vote-rigging, a stable cross-party government could pave the way for the military's withdrawal from politics. It could also help Pakistan transition away from its long-standing tradition of one major politician or another being in jail—such as Khan—while their supporters are harassed. Parliamentary debates on alternative policy ideas could replace the current shouting matches between rival leaders' supporters about who is more corrupt.

But rather than inspiring unity, the current coalition government will face opposition from Khan's supporters.





Supporters of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party wave pictures of the former prime minister during a protest against general election results in Karachi, Pakistan, on March 2.

As things stand, it seems unlikely that Pakistan's divisions will end anytime soon. The results of the Feb. 8 elections confirmed voters' weariness with the political elite and dynastic politics, as well as with the meddling—both overt and covert—by the country's generals. Widespread dissatisfaction with the economy and the absence of opportunities for Pakistan's burgeoning young population have given rise to populist politics that will not lead to reconciliation.

Khan, the cricket star-turned- quintessential populist leader, dismissed the idea of a negotiated settlement with his political opponents. He has built a powerful narrative of victimhood that blames Pakistan's political elites and foreign conspiracies for the country's problems. His grandiloquence may not offer realistic solutions, but it does create an outlet for powerless people to vent their rage and frustration. Khan seems to believe that a revolution could give him greater power than embracing the idea of a new national pact. Instead of using the PTI's electoral success to talk to the other major parties, Khan offered an alliance proposal to two

minor religious parties, one of which refused the partnership.

After his initial arrest in May 2023, the former leader encouraged attacks against military installations, according to an aide; he could have encouraged violent protests against alleged election-rigging in another attempt to ignite a street revolution. But the May attacks by Khan supporters paved the way for a harsher crackdown on the PTI than if there had not been violent turmoil. Hundreds of party activists were arrested while thousands faced intimidation from security services. It would have been irresponsible of Khan to put his supporters' lives and freedom at risk.

Ironically, Khan came to power in 2018 with the help of Pakistan's military and security services as a crusader against corrupt civilian politicians. The generals built up Khan as an alternative to these politicians, many of whom had quarreled with the military at some point in the past. But Khan also ran afoul of the military as prime minister because he defied the generals' wishes and mismanaged the economy; his populism harmed Pakistan's precarious external relations. To remove Khan from office,

the military turned to the same politicians it had sought to discredit.

After his ouster in a parliamentary no-confidence vote, Khan saw an opportunity to continue his anti-elite bombast, adding the country's top generals to the list of villains from whom he would save Pakistan. His supporters lapped it up. The military has influenced the country's politics for decades, but it now faces a unique challenge. Khan has poisoned even traditionally pro-army constituencies by arguing that the generals were acting at the behest of the United States—allegations that Washington denies—and against Pakistan's interests. Military leaders have now been trying to sway an entire nation away from Khan for nearly two years with little success.

The generals and their new civilian allies may have assumed that jailing Khan, bringing back Sharif from exile, and implementing repressive measures—such as barring PTI-affiliated candidates' access to the media—would ensure the election result that they wanted. Instead, young PTI activists used social media to mobilize voters and upended the establishment's plans.

Still, the reaction of voters to the Pakistani military's highhandedness is unlikely to unleash a revolution. In the short term, the country will continue to have a weak civilian government willing to work closely with the military while Khan remains in prison and his party out of power. Any widespread political violence will only result in a clamor for the military to take over and restore order.

For years, Pakistan's military has repeated the cycle of “elect, dismiss, disqualify, and arrest” for civilian politicians. But in the long term, the country's leaders must collectively address the widespread frustration and polarization that have contributed to the success of Khan's populism. Although unlikely, Khan changing tack and accepting political compromise could help ease Pakistan's pain. In any case, the



hostility toward the military's political role among its former supporters makes it difficult for the generals to act as if nothing has changed. ■

**HUSAIN HAQQANI** is a senior fellow and the director for South and Central Asia at the Hudson Institute and a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States.

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MIDDLE EAST



# Men Alone Cannot Build a Durable Peace in the Middle East

By Xanthe Scharff

**A**s war rages between Israel and Hamas, it is hard to imagine an enduring end to the conflict. For decades, though, a

growing movement of Palestinian and Israeli women has both envisioned and demanded peace.

Three days before Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, attack, thousands of women from two peacebuilding groups gathered at Jerusalem's Tolerance Monument and began a march to the Dead Sea. Israelis from Women Wage Peace carried blue flags, and Palestinians from Women of the Sun flew yellow ones. Women from both sides pulled up chairs as a symbol of a good-faith resumption of negotiations to reach a political solution.

Women Wage Peace formed in response to Operation Protective Edge, as Israel called its 2014 invasion of Gaza in the wake of then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's failed effort to restart final status negotiations.

"We, Palestinian and Israeli mothers, are determined to stop the vicious cycle of bloodshed," reads the preamble to the women's joint campaign, titled the Mother's Call, which demands a political solution within a limited time frame.

They set the table to show the importance of dialogue and women's involvement in decision-making. But in the war between Israel and Hamas, women's voices are largely missing from negotiations.

Ensuring women's participation isn't about equity or fairness. It's about winning the peace.

In 2014, Laurel Stone, then a researcher at Seton Hall University, conducted a quantitative analysis of 156 peace agreements. She found that when women are decision-makers—serving as negotiators and mediators—the probability of an agreement lasting at least two years increased by 20 percent. The probability of the agreement holding for 15 years increased by 35 percent.

Many studies show that women tend to be more collaborative, more focused on social issues over military issues, and less likely to attack those who hold differing views. With women at the table, the potential for risk-taking behavior and attacks on perceived enemies may

be lower. In diverse teams, decisions are more likely to be based on facts than assumptions.

While men are more likely to be fighters in war, the work of holding families and communities together more often falls to women, and according to some studies, it's women who more frequently stand up for a return to negotiations, civilian protection, and an end to violence.

"We learned from the cases of Northern Ireland and Liberia," said Yael Braudo-Bahat, the co-director of Women Wage Peace. Women's active participation greatly strengthened these peace and recovery processes.

Ahead of the formal talks that led to the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant women's groups formed the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and gained two seats at a table of 20 in formal negotiations. As one of the few groups that moved beyond the sectarian divide, its members were seen as honest brokers. They represented civil society concerns and helped ensure that the agreement included commitments for social healing and integration.

During the Second Liberian Civil War, women successfully pressured then-President Charles Taylor and other male decision-makers to negotiate and sign a peace agreement in 2003.

"We were the ones watching our children die of hunger. ... We were the easiest targets of rape and sexual abuse," said Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, the founder of the Women for Liberia Mass Action for Peace grassroots movement. This common suffering among women formed the basis for unity across political and religious divides.

In Israel and Gaza, women need to play an important role in the implementation of any new accord between Israelis and Palestinians, Braudo-Bahat said. Her organization's partnership with Women of the Sun has remained steadfast, even after learning that her





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co-founder, Vivian Silver, 74, was killed by Hamas on Oct. 7.

“We continue our plans—we work together, and we don’t hide it,” she said. “It might be dangerous to the Women of the Sun, but they are so courageous.”

Although many Palestinians want peace, for others “peace is normalization,” a member of Women of the Sun wrote to *FOREIGN POLICY* via WhatsApp, choosing to go by the initials M.H. to preserve her anonymity and safety. Some Palestinians think that “it’s something shameful to be dealing with Israel,” she added, because it could imply that Israel’s treatment of, and policies toward, Palestinians is tolerable. Still, she believes that “we should actively engage and collaborate, even if some label it as normalization.”

International law is on the side of these women. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted unanimously more than 23 years ago, urges all member states to increase the participation of women in peace and security efforts.

Despite Israel’s deteriorating track record with regard to women’s rights and roles as decision-makers, women are involved in the war as politicians, members of the military, and civilians. Women in politics have made important advances for gender equity, although among the 32 cabinet ministers sworn in a year ago, only five were women.

The reality for women in Gaza is far more challenging when it comes to holding leadership positions. Women generally do not participate in public political activities or hold public office.

At the start of the conflict, Hamas had just one woman, Jamila al-Shanti, 68, serving as part of the organization’s 15-member political bureau. Shanti, who was also a founder of Hamas’s women’s movement, was killed in an Israeli airstrike on Oct. 19.

“You can hear amazing rhetoric and lip service, even from the Palestinian leadership,” said Dalal Iriqat, an assistant professor at the Arab American

University in the West Bank. “But when it comes to practice, I always find a scarcity of women in decision-making.”

Women’s organizations in the Palestinian territories and in Israel have a rich history of political engagement, however. Palestinian women created social structures such as health clinics and orphanages following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the mass displacement of Palestinian people. Following the Six-Day War in 1967, with traditional political structures in tatters and both Gaza and the West Bank under Israeli occupation, women of every social class stepped up.

A cadre of female activists emerged as a force in December 1987, when Palestinian frustration with Israeli rule broke out in a popular uprising known as the First Intifada, or “shaking off.” Underlying this largely nonviolent Palestinian struggle was a collective social, economic, and political mobilization led by women.

Palestinian political leadership acknowledged women’s centrality in the Intifada, which paved the way for negotiations with Israel, when it included three women—Suad Amiry, Zahiria Kamal, and Hanan Ashrawi—as part of the delegation that participated in the Middle East peace talks that culminated with the Madrid Conference in October 1991.

Ultimately, though, exiled PLO leaders shunted the Madrid framework to begin secret negotiations with Israel that resulted in the security-focused Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Under their leadership, Israeli occupation, and the failures of the Oslo Accords, democratic ideals and women’s rights eroded.

Israel and the United States have discussed a potential postwar role for the PA in Gaza. The PA has three female ministers, including its minister for women’s affairs, though women still struggle for equal opportunities and freedom from violence.

“Women usually refrain from being





Members of Women Wage Peace gather at a promenade overlooking Jerusalem's Old City on July 27, 2017.

activist in politics,” said an activist in the West Bank who withheld her name for security reasons. “Women are frightened to be involved in political activities because they will be put in jail or be subjected to any kind of violence.”

Serena Awad, a nonprofit worker from Gaza who is now living in Rafah, told *FOREIGN POLICY* that women in Gaza are directing and managing many aspects of the humanitarian response. These women work for the U.N. as well as in health, cultural, child protection, human rights, sports, and legal organizations.

“I have lived through six aggressions, and every time, I wait for my turn to die,” said Awad, 24. “What I want the world to know is that women in Gaza are like any other women—we study, go to work, have our own family, but we suffer.”

Israeli and Palestinian women working as peacebuilders say they need more international support. Women’s organizations are notoriously underfunded, with only 0.4 percent of global gender-related funding going directly to women’s rights organizations.

During crises, women’s rights often take a back seat. As of January, Women of the Sun’s 2024 budget was approximately \$100,000, and Women Wage Peace’s budget was approximately

\$1 million, according to the organizations’ representatives.

Women’s groups often need external funding to sustain their efforts. During the peace process between Sudan and South Sudan, for example, South Sudanese women were highly mobilized, but some volunteer delegates had to pause their involvement so they could go back to earning money.

Democratic countries have a role to play by insisting on women’s participation in negotiations, said M.H. of Women of the Sun. She and other peacebuilders say the United States and the U.N. should be more active.

“By will, things can happen,” M.H. said. “And if the U.S. says it [that women should be involved in negotiations], it can happen.”

Talks convened by Qatar, the United States, Egypt, and France to end the conflict between Hamas and Israel are underway. These countries and other regional players—including Jordan, Israel, and the PA—have previously created national action plans that recognize women’s crucial role in promoting peace, culminating in 107 countries worldwide forming national action plans to empower women.

Still, news coverage reveals little evidence of efforts by these countries to promote women’s participation in the

Israel-Hamas conflict. Braudo-Bahat urges policymakers to involve women in discussions now—not after violence ends. “The day after the war is yesterday. ... We need to start now,” she said.

The U.S. State Department is “working to ensure the expertise of women from civil society and in government is incorporated in any process related to the current conflict in Gaza,” a spokesperson for the department wrote in an email.

A diverse list of 12 Israeli and Palestinian women who are qualified to participate in negotiations was provided by the 1325 Project, run by members of Women Lawyers for Social Justice—known in Israel as Itach Ma’aki—to the U.S. Embassy and other embassies and international bodies.

Thanks to this and other efforts to promote women’s participation, international organizations have approached some Israeli and Palestinian women to represent civil society in unofficial convenings known as Track 2 and Track 3 negotiations.

“Women are very dominant in Track 3 but don’t climb the ladder to Track 1 [official negotiations],” said 1325 Project co-director Netta Loevy.

Back in Gaza, the water tastes like poison; it’s freezing, and Awad, the nonprofit worker, keeps losing weight.



She asked almost a dozen female leaders in Gaza what they think should happen to resolve the war.

No one could give her an answer. They were busy responding to humanitarian needs, and telecommunication and internet services were out.

Iriqat, the Arab American University professor, has one wish—“that someone considers that if women are in charge, and involved, a more strategic agreement could hold.” ■

**XANTHE SCHARFF** is a writer focused on women and foreign affairs.

## The End of Prosperity in Israel

By David E. Rosenberg

**N**o one can say with complete confidence what the long-term effects of the Gaza war and its auxiliary conflicts in the West Bank and on the border with Lebanon will be for Israel. But even today, it is safe to assume that the war marks the end of a 20-year era of peace (by Israeli standards) and prosperity (by anyone's standards) and the return to the more militarized state and society Israel was for the first half-century of its existence.

For outsiders, whose image of Israel is largely formed when its periodic conflicts with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran reach the headlines, the idea that the country may become *more* militarized seems improbable. Over the past two decades, it has fought no less than five wars and has been engaged in an extended shadow war with Iran. Its defense budget as a percentage of GDP is among the highest in the world. Some 69 percent of young men and 56 per-

cent of young women (not counting the ultra-Orthodox and Israeli Arabs, who are exempt) are drafted into the military every year. The streets and shopping malls are filled with uniformed soldiers, and large numbers of civilians carry automatic weapons.

But before Oct. 7, 2023, Israelis had basically put behind them the idea that they were in a state of perpetual war, one that their parents and grandparents had taken for granted. The wars that Israel did fight were short. They did little or no damage to the economy or infrastructure, and casualties were small, thanks in large part to the country's Iron Dome anti-missile system. The Palestinian issue remained unresolved, but it was becoming increasingly irrelevant. There were no major pushes to restart negotiations; instead, there was talk of “shrinking the conflict” by improving the lives of Palestinians under Israeli rule without giving them a state.

None of this was entirely illusory. The 2020 Abraham Accords normalized Israel's ties with the United Arab Emirates and other Arab countries. Before Oct. 7, Saudi Arabia seemed to be edging toward a similar deal. Israel was welcomed into regional economic initiatives such as the I2U2 Group of India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States; the East Mediterranean Gas Forum comprising Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine; and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, unveiled just weeks before Oct. 7. Talk in Israel and the Gulf about a new Middle East—less focused on conflict and more on economic development—did not seem implausible.

This all had a direct impact on the Israeli military. Defense spending fell steadily from 15.6 percent of GDP in 1991, on the eve of the Oslo Accords, to 4.5 percent in 2022—still high by global standards. Defense became less of a burden not only on the wallets of Israelis but also on their time: The aggregate number of days reservists spent in the military fell from 10 million in 1985 to

4 million by 2000 and just 2 million in 2018, according to the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. The percentage of non-ultra-Orthodox young people who got an exemption from conscription was edging higher. Support for a mandatory draft—a core article of Israel's social contract—fell below 50 percent in 2021, according to polling by the Israel Democracy Institute, a significant change in Israeli attitudes. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) increasingly relied on technology and the air force rather than tanks and infantry for deterrence.

The reduced military burden and the growing sense that Israel was safe and secure and would easily bounce back from periodic wars gave an enormous boost to the economy. Indeed, one reason the defense burden fell so much was because the economy was growing much faster than the increase in military spending. The 30 years before Oct. 7 were the years of “Start-Up Nation.” Israel adopted the Silicon Valley start-up model with remarkable gusto, creating a global high-tech juggernaut. The sector created huge numbers of well-paid jobs, drew in billions of dollars of foreign investment, and created an unprecedented trade surplus. The wealth percolated across Israeli society and enabled the government to cut taxes to a level slightly below the average for OECD countries.

The Israel of the coming years, if not longer, will look very different. To cover the cost of the war with Hamas, defense spending is due to climb by close to 80 percent this year (when you include U.S. aid), or about 70 billion shekels (\$19.6 billion). That number remains subject to debate, but even the usually parsimonious Finance Ministry accepts it will have to grow by at least 20 billion shekels (\$5.6 billion) a year. To pay for this, the government has chosen to cut other spending and increase this year's budget deficit to 6.6 percent of GDP. That level is unsustainable, so if military spending remains at an



elevated level over the next few years, Israel will eventually have to reverse a long-term trend of reducing taxes.

The sharp rise in military spending seems inevitable, even if the conflict with Hamas winds down or moves to lower-intensity warfare. Hamas's Oct. 7 attack taught the IDF that technology has its limits (Hamas easily overcame the defenses along the Gaza border) and that nothing can replace boots on the ground. Conscription is due to be extended to a full three years from the current two years and eight months, and reservists will be called up much more often.

The war itself has taught Israeli decision-makers another important lesson, namely that future conflicts threaten to be lengthy and eat up ammunition at a prodigious rate. Without the U.S. airlift, Israel would not have had the ordnance to sustain the Gaza offensive because it lacks the domestic manufacturing capacity. Israel will now have to forswear to some degree its focus on defense electronics and cyberwarfare to produce more bombs and other low-tech ammunition and spend more money on bigger inventories of weaponry. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the cabinet will be asked to approve a decision to greatly expand Israel's military industries.

These changes will inevitably reverberate through the economy. Higher taxes will naturally deter business development and growth and, ultimately, economic growth. Israel has for many years enjoyed an unusually strong credit rating thanks to its sound government finances, but a less safe and secure national security environment will raise the bar for global investors to put money into Israel. Early in the Israel-Hamas war, S&P, Moody's, and Fitch downgraded Israel's outlook to negative. Moody's later lowered Israel's credit rating.

A tenser security environment has profound implications for Israel's start-up sector, which raises half or more of its capital from overseas and relies heavily on an overwhelmingly young and male workforce that will now be doing more military service. Engineers and entrepreneurs can easily decamp abroad if they find conditions in Israel increasingly unfavorable. Security concerns may even take a toll on Israeli businesses' famous resiliency—the ability to cope with terror and missile attacks and fulfill customer orders. That resiliency was based at least in part on the prevailing confidence that Israel was well defended and moving slowly but surely to a more peaceful era and regional acceptance. Now, more and more Israelis see

their country moving in the opposite direction.

The last time Israel suffered such a cataclysmic shock to its military self-confidence was in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. That spurred a sharp rise in defense spending and a decade or more that historians often refer to as Israel's "lost years" economically. The 2023 shock has not been anywhere near as great, and the impact will be smaller. The economy is many times larger; unlike in 1973, the world economy does not appear to be heading into a recession that would make Israel's recovery efforts harder; and Israel has its energy and defense industries to fall back on. The defense industry is set for growth due to rising domestic and global demand (the latter in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war), while Israel's natural gas industry is expecting buoyant demand from Egypt and Europe. A new round of exploration licenses awarded shortly after the war with Hamas started could lead to expanded production.

Still, a return to the older, more militarized Israel will not be easy. The war has spurred a surge of patriotism and a greater willingness on the part of the young not only to serve in the military but volunteer for combat duty. But this new zeitgeist might not last. Netanyahu remains a deeply polarizing figure, and the country is still sharply divided over issues that were contentious well before Oct. 7, including the government's controversial judicial reform program. Some members of the younger generation who grew up in an era of increasing material comfort will surely chafe at the prospect of higher taxes and more obligations to the state. The smartest and most successful among them will have the option to emigrate, which means that a brain drain could be one more setback Israel endures as a result of the war. ■



Armed soldiers walk among shoppers at the Machane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem on Jan. 5.

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CHINA



## Decoupling Is Made in China

By Agathe Demarais

**T**here is a story told among Kremlin watchers: Shortly after Western countries first imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin summoned his economic advisors. His question was simple: How was Russia doing in terms of food self-sufficiency? Not very well, came the reply. The country was dependent on imports to feed its citizens. Putin went pale and ordered that something be done, fearing that sanctions could curb Moscow's access to food staples. Fast-forward to Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Putin no longer had to worry about food. In only eight years, Russia had become almost self-sufficient, producing meat, fish, and even decent-quality cheese.

Fast-forward to Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Putin no longer had to worry about food. In only eight years, Russia had become almost self-sufficient, producing meat and even decent-quality cheese.

Russia's bid for food self-sufficiency long predates the currently fashionable

debate over economic decoupling—recently rebranded as de-risking—which entails curbing economic reliance on unfriendly states. Contrary to what the political discourse might suggest, Western countries did not invent these policies. As the Russian example demonstrates, countries at odds with Western democracies have long been pursuing a de-risking policy to shield themselves from their potential foes.

Compared with Russia, China has an even longer track record of reducing economic reliance on the West in technology, trade, and finance. If there is an inventor and world leader of decoupling and de-risking, it is by all accounts Beijing.

Long before the United States imposed a flurry of controls on high-tech exports to China in recent years, Chinese leaders made technology the first pillar of their de-risking push. Beijing's first investment plans in the semiconductor sector, for example, date back to the 1980s—with arguably mixed results. China's calculus is simple: Technology forms the backbone of economic and military superiority. Technological self-sufficiency, to Beijing, is therefore an existential imperative to survive and thrive.

China's efforts to reduce its technological dependence deepened over the past decade. In 2015, two years before U.S. President Donald Trump started bragging about cutting ties with China, Beijing released its “Made in China 2025” blueprint for self-sufficiency in key sectors—including semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and clean tech.

China's view of technological self-sufficiency as an existential imperative has led to impressive progress in only a few years. In many high-tech fields, Chinese firms and researchers are either the unchallenged world leaders (notably in clean tech, where Chinese firms dominate the market for solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles) or roughly on a par with their Western competitors (including in AI, quantum

computing, and biotech).

Semiconductors are an exception: When it comes to microchips, Western policymakers like to reassure themselves by noting that China still lags far behind the United States, Taiwan, and South Korea in the production of cutting-edge chips. While this is certainly true, Beijing may actually welcome the additional sense of urgency that U.S. export controls have fueled.

Chinese leaders also know that export controls can easily backfire. History shows that in the long run, unilateral U.S. export controls have almost always damaged U.S. firms by restricting their export revenues—which, in turn, curbs the amounts that they can spend on research and development to remain at the cutting edge. In other words, Beijing is playing the long game, hoping that Washington's aggressive strategy will eventually backfire—and further help China's bid to reduce its reliance on Western technology.

Finance is the second, long-established pillar of Beijing's de-risking strategy. Here, too, China's efforts to cut ties with Western economies preceded U.S. and European plans to de-risk from Beijing. The most obvious example is that Beijing has never allowed significant foreign involvement in its domestic financial sector. The country's financial markets are closed, with foreign investors owning only 4 percent of Chinese stocks and 9 percent of government debt. China has its own banking system that is almost entirely walled off from international finance, with non-Chinese investors controlling less than 2 percent of Chinese bank assets. And the capital controls that severely restrict the movement of funds in and out of the country are nowhere near being lifted.

Yet Beijing's de-risking in the financial sphere goes much further than just keeping foreigners away. China's leaders face an inconvenient truth: Reliance on Western financial channels may well be Beijing's Achilles's heel. Europe and



the United States own the world's dominant currencies and control access to global financial infrastructure, such as SWIFT, the global payment system connecting all banks, and Euroclear, one of the most important global depositories for securities.

Western financial dominance is what makes sanctions so powerful. Losing access to the U.S. dollar or to SWIFT is a virtual death sentence for most banks and companies, as Beijing saw after the Western decision to cut off Iran's access to SWIFT in 2012.

In a preemptive bid to vaccinate itself against financial sanctions, China is pushing to develop cross-border payments in renminbi. The path will be steep, given the dominance of the dollar and euro for global trade. Yet China's plans are making progress: The share of global payments settled in renminbi almost doubled in 2023, to nearly 4 percent—still a small number but the direction of travel appears clear. Crucially, one-third of China's foreign trade is now denominated in renminbi, offering Chinese firms some protection against Western sanctions. Despite all the chatter about a possible currency for the BRICS bloc—which comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and five recently added nations—Beijing hopes that the renminbi will become the bloc's currency of choice for trade. It has already become the most used currency for Russia-China trade.

China's alternative to SWIFT, CIPS (the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System), was launched in 2015 and is much smaller than SWIFT. But it already connects most banks across the world and would provide a backup if SWIFT were to disconnect Chinese banks. Finally, China is also piloting cross-border transactions using digital currency. The road will be long for a Chinese digital currency to become global. But dominance may not be the point: China's goal is to have alternative financial channels as a means of

protection, which only requires them to be operational.

The third and final pillar of China's de-risking strategy entails reducing reliance on unfriendly states for trade and as destinations for Chinese investment. Beijing sees overreliance on any country for trade as a weakness, since conflicts, pandemics, or geopolitical tensions can curb economic ties or disrupt supply chains. For an export-oriented economy such as China's, excessive dependence on any given country for the imports of critical inputs or as a key export destination could be fatal.

China's de-risking efforts in trade are more recent than those in tech and finance, roughly dating back to the first U.S.-China trade war in 2018. Yet a look at the latest statistics from Chinese customs shows that China has lately sped up trade de-risking, with a clear effort to diversify ties away from seemingly unfriendly Western states.

In the first 11 months of 2023, Chinese exports to the United States decreased by 8.5 percent compared with the same period in 2022, while those to the European Union dropped by 5.8 percent. Meanwhile, China's exports to most emerging markets—including India, Russia, Thailand, Latin America, and Africa—rose. China's efforts to decrease trade reliance on Western economies are paying off: In 2023, Southeast Asia collectively became China's biggest export destination, ahead of both the United States and EU.

China's de-risking also extends to investment. Data from the American Enterprise Institute shows that in the decade preceding 2014, the G-7 economies plus Australia and New Zealand absorbed nearly half of China's outbound investment flows, excluding Belt and Road Initiative funds. By 2022, this share dropped to just 15 percent, with emerging economies such as Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil attracting the biggest inflows of Chinese direct investment.

Similarly to China's other efforts,

the push to invest in emerging markets also predates the invention of Western de-risking. The shift became noticeable in the data in 2017, but the start was likely much earlier, since investment projects typically take several years to come to fruition.

All of this underlines that China's de-risking push is far older and more extensive than similar Western efforts. Yet discussions of China's own de-risking strategy are conspicuously absent from the Western debate.

This is a serious flaw: Seen from Beijing, the West's recent embrace of de-risking is another reason to accelerate China's long-established plans to prioritize technological self-sufficiency, homegrown financial infrastructure, and trade with non-Western economies. Beijing's long, systematic shift away from the United States and Europe is a prominent feature of Chinese economic policy, and it comes with huge consequences.

De-risking is a two-way street. Economic ties give significant leverage to the West over Beijing, even if some will argue that the idea of economic interdependence fostering cooperation and peace crashed and burned with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The ongoing process of severing economic and financial links will inevitably diminish the deterrence effect of Western sanctions threats, making the world—and the Taiwan Strait in particular—a less safe place.

This is exactly China's strategy, with Chinese ambitions to annex Taiwan among the key reasons behind Beijing's plans for self-sufficiency in the first place. The United States and Europe did not invent de-risking. That credit goes to China, which very much looks like the most skilled practitioner in the field. ■

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# The Pentagon's Big China Bubble

By William D. Hartung

In January, U.S. congressional leaders reached a tentative agreement to appropriate \$886 billion for the Defense Department and related work on nuclear weapons at the Energy Department. The central justification for this spending—among the country's highest since World War II—is China, which the Pentagon routinely refers to as the “pacing threat” driving U.S. strategy.

Assessing the potential military threat from China is an art, not a science. Information regarding the details—how much the Chinese are spending, how the funds are being spent, whether the technologies they are investing in will work as advertised, how long it will take to get from the research stage to workable systems, and how military spending will trend over the next 10 to 15 years—is hard to come by due to both a lack of transparency and the inherent difficulties involved in predicting the pace of technological development.

But there is ample evidence to suggest that China hawks in the Pentagon and Congress are overstating China's military capabilities while underplaying the value of dialogue and diplomacy in addressing the challenges that Beijing poses to the United States and its allies.

One key front in the debate on Pentagon spending is the controversy over how much China actually spends on its own military. There's no debate that Chinese spending has substantially increased over the past two decades as its economy has skyrocketed. Yet the most recent analysis by the Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute—the standard source for global comparisons of military outlays—suggests that the United States still outspends China by a healthy 3-to-1 margin.

But critics at the Heritage Foundation and elsewhere argue that the standard approach understates China's military investments by a substantial margin, for two reasons. Firstly, official Chinese reporting omits key military-related activities, including a full accounting of research and development on new weapons systems and the cost of defense capabilities in space. Secondly, Chinese currency goes further than that of the United States due to cheaper costs for key inputs, including but not limited to personnel in the armed forces and the weapons industry.

Taking these factors into account, officials such as Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan have suggested that Chinese spending is roughly comparable to the United States and rising at a higher rate.

But proponents of the view that China spends much more on its military than is commonly understood are overstating the case. Even analyses that dramatically boost Chinese figures to account for a larger range of items and the differential purchasing power put Beijing's spending at a little more than half of Washington's—around 59 percent, according to a study conducted by Peter Robertson, a professor of economics at the University of Western Australia. Robertson has attempted to adjust purchasing power as it relates to specific military items, a concept he calls military purchasing power parity, but he acknowledges that doing so can provide only a rough estimate at best.

But that's not the end of the story. Spending alone is not a good measure of relative military capabilities, intentions, or likely outcomes in specific scenarios. The United States substantially outpaces China in the numbers and sophistication of traditional military platforms such as major aircraft carriers (11 in the U.S. fleet compared with three

in China), nuclear weapons (by a ratio of 10-to-1), and advanced combat aircraft (nearly 3-to-1). Concerns about China's larger number of ships are counterbalanced by the fact that the U.S. Navy has more than twice as much tonnage, which reflects the possession of larger ships with greater range and more firepower.

But uncertainty about the U.S. Navy's shipbuilding plans, the vulnerability of large carriers to modern missiles, and the funds wasted on vessels such as the dysfunctional Littoral Combat Ship could combine to erode U.S. advantages in naval firepower over time. In addition, Chinese progress in anti-access/area denial systems could complicate the U.S. ability to effectively employ offensive systems in a conflict.

But the greatest area of concern is the ability of either side to rapidly develop and deploy next-generation systems, such as hypersonic weapons, unpiloted vehicles, and advanced communications and targeting systems that incorporate artificial intelligence. Both the United States and China are investing in these technologies, but it is too early to tell if either side is likely to gain a decisive advantage.

The differences in the relative size of the U.S. and Chinese holdings of key weapons systems are just one variable in comparing their military capabilities. Importantly, they do not capture the question of relative military power in the Western Pacific, where China holds a geographical advantage and has increased its capabilities considerably compared with a few decades ago.

But a report by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, where I work, that proposed a new U.S. defense strategy for Asia points out that the answer is not to simply race to reestablish U.S. military superiority in the region: “Efforts by the United States to restore military dominance in the region through offensive strategies of control ... would ... prove financially unsustainable; they could also



backfire by exacerbating the risk of crises, conflict, and rapid escalation in a war.”

In the place where the risk of a U.S.-China conflict is most likely—Taiwan—a robust diplomatic strategy needs to be developed to accompany and supplant the emphasis on how to win a war with China.

A war between the United States and China over Taiwan would be a disaster for all parties concerned. According to a series of war games conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, while the United States could “win” a war to defend Taiwan from a Chinese amphibious assault, it would be a Pyrrhic victory. A recent analysis by Bloomberg Economics estimated that a war over Taiwan could cost the global economy \$10 trillion.

As for the question of the likely balance in emerging technologies, it is imperative that these systems be carefully tested and that their usefulness be assessed realistically. A rush to deploy AI-driven weapons would increase the risk of malfunctions that could cause unintended episodes of mass slaughter or even trigger an accidental nuclear war.

Next-generation technology will not

be a panacea. The notion of trusting in technology as the decisive factor in warfare is a common refrain from the U.S. national security state, as evidenced by the enthusiasm for the “electronic battlefield” in Vietnam or the so-called revolution in military affairs that reached peak hype during Donald Rumsfeld’s second tenure as U.S. defense secretary during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But even when the systems enabling networked warfighting and more accurate munitions were made to work, in a number of key conflicts they were not able to help Washington meet its stated objectives because they were ill-suited to the nature of the wars being fought. This was true in Vietnam as well as in the decades-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Motivation, local knowledge, nationalist backlash against a foreign military presence, and the creation of cheap counterweapons such as improvised explosive devices undermined the value of sophisticated U.S. technology.

Despite the lessons learned from the wars of this century regarding the limits of advanced technology, the Pentagon seems to be in thrall to a new wave of techno-enthusiasm, convinced that it can come up with miracle weapons

that would help win a war with China or even deter Chinese aggression by their very existence.

This attitude was displayed most clearly in an August 2023 speech by Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks to members of the arms industry’s largest trade group, the National Defense Industrial Association. She used the occasion to announce the launching of the Replicator Initiative, a crash program to produce items such as “swarms of drones” that can hit up to a thousand targets in 24 hours.

Hicks made it clear that the new initiative was aimed at China:

To stay ahead, we’re going to create a new state of the art ... leveraging attritable, autonomous systems in all domains—which are less expensive, put fewer people in the line of fire, and can be changed, updated, or improved with substantially shorter lead times. We’ll counter the PLA’s [China’s People’s Liberation Army] mass with mass of our own, but ours will be harder to plan for, harder to hit, harder to beat.

Later in her remarks, Hicks suggested that the approach embodied in the Replicator Initiative would have a profound effect on the calculations of Chinese leaders: “We must ensure the PRC leadership wakes up every day, considers the risks of aggression, and concludes, ‘Today is not the day’—and not just today but every day between now and 2027, now and 2035, now and 2049, and beyond.”

A more likely outcome of a U.S. rush to deploy AI-driven weapons would be an accelerated, high-tech arms race with Beijing, accompanied by an increased risk of nuclear escalation due to a blurring of the lines between nuclear and conventional weapons.

Thankfully, there are signs that the Biden administration may be open to rebalancing the U.S.-China relationship to increase the emphasis on



A guard gestures not to be photographed at a gate to the Forbidden City in Beijing on March 1, 2017.



cooperation and dialogue as a way to create guardrails against the outbreak of war. Military-to-military communications between the United States and China were revived in early January, and after the summit meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping last November, commitments were made to commence discussions on nuclear weapons and the military uses of AI. Now it's crucial that there be substantive follow-up on these pledges by both sides.

Whether the question is protecting Taiwan without resorting to war or heading off the possibility that China might outpace the United States in military power over the long term, leaning too heavily on military scenarios and arms buildups at the expense of intensive communication and diplomacy is more likely to undermine U.S. security than enhance it.

It's time to put debates about spending levels and military holdings in perspective and instead engage in a comprehensive assessment of the best way to build a relationship with China that is less likely to provoke a conflict and more likely to curb Beijing's more aggressive instincts.

Ultimately, the size and shape of the Pentagon budget should be influenced by a rebalancing of U.S. security policies toward China. Whether a fresh look at that strategy is possible in Washington's current political environment remains to be seen. But given what's at stake, advocates of a new course need to make themselves heard, loud and clear. ■

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**CHINA BRIEF:** *FP's James Palmer explains the political drivers behind the headlines in Beijing and shows you the stories the West has missed. Sign up for email newsletters at [ForeignPolicy.com/briefings](https://ForeignPolicy.com/briefings).*



## What a Russian Victory Would Mean for Ukraine

By Adrian Karatnycky

**W**ith Ukraine's counteroffensive stalled and the U.S. Congress deadlocked over crucial military aid, some analysts have begun raising the specter of a turning point in the war that could lead to a Ukrainian defeat. While the situation on the ground is still far from dire, it could rapidly deteriorate in the absence of a significant infusion of U.S. military support for Ukraine.

The consequences of a Ukrainian defeat need to be fully understood. The likely geopolitical consequences are easy to anticipate. The defeat of a Western-backed country would embolden Russia and other revisionist states to change other borders by force. A Russian victory would frighten Russia's European neighbors, possibly leading to a collapse of European collective security as some countries choose appeasement and others massively rearm. China, too, would conclude

that Taiwan cannot rely on sustained U.S. support. Indeed, the ripple effects of U.S. indecision are already apparent: In a move that recalls Russia's illegal annexation of several regions of Ukraine, Venezuela late last year voted to claim sovereignty over more than half of neighboring Guyana. While there are no signs of an impending invasion, it would be naive to think that other countries aren't watching closely to see whether Russia's land grab succeeds.

Many analysts have already described these far-reaching security risks. But they pale in comparison to the dire consequences for Ukraine and its inhabitants if Russia wins. It is important for both supporters and opponents of Ukraine aid to know what these consequences would be.

To understand Ukraine's likely fate if Russia turns the tide, the best place to start is with what the Russians actually say. Last year, on Dec. 8, Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that in his view, there is no future for the Ukrainian state. On Dec. 5, he spelled out his intention to "reeducate" the Ukrainian people, curing them of "Russophobia" and "historical falsifications." On Nov. 12, former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made Russia's appetites clear: "Odessa, Nikolaev [Mykolaiv], Kiev, and practically everything else is not Ukraine at all." It is "obvious," he posted on Telegram, that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a "usurper," that the Ukrainian language is only a "mongrel dialect" of Russian, and that Ukraine is "NOT a country, but artificially collected territories." Other regime propagandists assert that the Ukrainian state is a disease that must be treated and Ukraine a society that must be "de-wormed."

More explicitly, Russia's highly censored state television has, over the past two years, consistently promoted the rape of Ukrainians, the drowning of children, the leveling of cities, the eradication of the Ukrainian elite, and the physical extermination of millions of



Ukrainians. A barrage of incitement to war crimes, genocide, and other deeds has been documented by Russian Media Monitor, which regularly publishes Russian television clips with English subtitles. This coordinated campaign is not bluster but a harbinger of what awaits the Ukrainian people. In these remarks, we can see the contours of the atrocities awaiting Ukrainians under a total or nearly total Russian occupation.

We can also project the effect of a Russian victory from the atrocities that are already widespread in the Russian-occupied territories. According to official Ukrainian sources, nearly 2 million Ukrainians have already been removed from their homes and communities in the occupied areas and resettled in Russia, either temporarily or permanently. Other estimates range from 1.6 million to 4.7 million. Russian children's commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova said last July that more than 700,000 Ukrainian children had been taken from Ukraine to Russia since February 2022; nearly 20,000 of these children are known to Ukrainian authorities by name. Transferring children from their home country and denying them access to their language and culture is not only an internationally recognized war crime. Such forced assimilation is also defined

by the U.N. Convention on Genocide as a genocidal act. It is why the International Criminal Court has issued a warrant for Lvova-Belova's arrest.

Russia is not only ridding its occupied regions of Ukrainians but also replacing them with Russian settlers—a tragic continuity with Soviet and Russian imperial practices of systemic deportation, colonization, and Russification. In the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, where the Russian advance killed tens of thousands of civilians and destroyed 50 percent of the city's housing stock, a handful of new apartment buildings were recently constructed. Some of that housing is being offered for sale, with Russians carpetbaggers snatching up real estate at bargain prices.

Ukraine's partially occupied south offers a clear picture of the techniques used by the occupying forces to establish authority. A Human Rights Watch report from July 2022 documented a pattern of torture, disappearances, and arbitrary detention in the region. Citizens endured torture during interrogation, including beatings, electroshocks, and sensory deprivation. Several prisoners died from the torture, and large numbers have simply disappeared. Among the victims were local officials, teachers, representatives of the

Orthodox Church of Ukraine, NGO activists, and members of Ukraine's territorial defense. A massive amount of information has also been collected by human rights monitors and journalists about the operation of filtration and detention camps.

Political indoctrination and the militarization of youth are already key characteristics of life under Russian occupation. Political banners and posters promoting Russian patriotism are omnipresent in the occupied regions. New children's textbooks expunge Ukrainian history and preach hatred for Ukraine's leadership. The Ukrainian language is being removed from much of the education system and relegated to its colonial status as a quaint dialect representing nothing but a gradually disappearing regional culture soon to be subsumed in the Russified mainstream.

Already, millions of Ukrainians have had their lives destroyed in one way or another by Russia's monstrous occupation. Were Russia to complete its conquest, it would be a multiple of that number. After almost a decade of war against Russia, Ukrainians are united and highly mobilized in the defense of their country's borders, democracy, culture, and language, to which many Ukrainian Russian-speakers



A man waves a Russian flag during a fireworks display in the center of the Crimean city of Sevastopol on March 21, 2014.

have switched out of disgust with Moscow's invasion. Millions of Ukrainians have been enraged and radicalized by Russia's war crimes and destruction of their towns and homes. Millions of Ukrainians have volunteered to assist the war effort, millions have contributed funds to support the military, and even more have turned to social media to vent and publicly register their rage at Putin and the Russian state.

That would not only make any conquest brutal and bloody. Should Ukraine lose, almost all of Ukrainian society would need to be punished, repressed, silenced, or reeducated if the occupation is to quell resistance and absorb the country into Russia. For this reason, a Russian takeover would be accompanied by mass arrests, long-term detentions, mass deportations into the Russian heartland, filtration camps on a vast scale, and political terror. If a serious insurgency emerges, the level of repression will only widen and deepen.

A major effort will also be required to rid the country of seditious materials, which is to say all films, novels, poetry, essays, art, scholarly works, and music that may contain positive references to Ukraine's period of independence. Libraries and schools will be purged of all such subversive content—in essence, the majority of all writing and cultural output that Ukraine has produced during the last three decades. Writers and scholars will face the choice of repudiating their identity and past work or becoming nonpersons in the new order. Many will face arrest or worse, simply because they transport Ukrainian culture and stand in the way of Russification. Again, this is not speculation but widespread practice in other territories that Russia has occupied.

Russian territorial advances would be accompanied by a second wave of Ukrainian refugees far more massive than that of early 2022, when some 7 million Ukrainians crossed into the European Union. For the remaining Ukrainians, the future would be one

of oppressive controls on culture, education, and speech, accompanied by a mass terror on a scale not seen in Europe since the 20th-century era of totalitarian rule.

There you have in distilled form what a Russian victory would mean. Members of the U.S. Congress are free to vote against assistance to Ukraine if they think—wrongly—that the war's outcome does not affect the U.S. national interest. But they should not be allowed to oppose assistance to Ukraine without being fully aware of the tyranny they will be helping to empower—and their responsibility for the massive and entirely predictable crimes that will ensue. ■

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## Europe Can't Get Its Military Act Together

By Stephen M. Walt

**F**ormer U.S. President Donald Trump set off alarm bells in Europe when he told a campaign rally in February that he would encourage Russia to do “whatever the hell” it wants to any countries he judged to be delinquent on their defense obligations. European countries were already fretting about the possibility of a second Trump term, and these latest remarks sent these concerns into high orbit. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told the *Financial Times*

a few days later that Europe was facing a world that has gotten “rougher” and that “we have to spend more, we have to spend better, [and] we have to spend European.”

But the question remains: Will Europe do enough to be able to defend itself? Complaints that European states are overly dependent on U.S. protection and unwilling to maintain adequate defense capabilities have a long history, and the wake-up call provided by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has yet to produce a dramatic increase in Europe's usable military power. Yes, NATO members are now spending more money, and the European Union recently authorized an additional 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) in support to Ukraine. But Europe's ability to maintain substantial forces in the field for more than a few weeks remains paltry: It still relies on the United States for some critical capabilities, and some NATO members have reason to wonder if their partners could do much to help if they were attacked, even if those partners tried.

To be sure, rhetoric from European officials is becoming more strident. Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen recently warned that Russia might test the NATO mutual defense clause within three to five years, and a senior NATO diplomat told the *Times* that Europe no longer has “the luxury to think that Russia would stop in Ukraine.” According to another senior diplomat, Russia's “intent and capability” to attack a NATO country by 2030 was “pretty much consensus” within the alliance at this point. Because it might take Europe 10 years or more to develop sufficient capabilities of its own, die-hard Atlanticists want to keep Uncle Sam firmly committed to Europe despite all the competing demands on U.S. time, attention, and resources.

Can Europe get its act together? Two well-established bodies of theory are relevant here. The first, to which I have tried to contribute, is balance of power



(or if you prefer, balance of threat) theory. It predicts that a serious external threat to European security—such as a nearby great power with a strong military and highly revisionist ambitions—would cause most of these states to join forces to deter the threat (or if necessary, to defeat it). That impulse would grow stronger if these states understood that they could not rely on anyone else for protection. Recent increases in European defense spending and Sweden’s and Finland’s decisions to join NATO illustrate the tendency for threatened states to balance perfectly, and this well-established tendency should make us more optimistic about Europe’s ability and willingness to take greater responsibility for its own defense.

Unfortunately, a second body of theory makes that upbeat outcome less certain. Because security is a “collective good,” states in an alliance will be tempted to “buck-pass” or free-ride on the efforts of others, in the hope that their partners will do enough to keep them safe and secure, even if they do less. This tendency helps explain why the strongest members of an alliance tend to contribute a disproportionate amount to the collective effort. If an alliance’s leading members do enough to deter or defeat an attack, the contributions of the smallest members may be superfluous. After all, the alliance wouldn’t be that much stronger even if they doubled their efforts. Hence the temptation to do less, confident that the larger actors will do enough out of their own self-interest. If enough members succumb to the temptation to let others bear the greater burden, however, or if other selfish interests overcome the need to work together, then the alliance may not produce the combined capabilities and coordinated strategy it needs to be secure.

Taken together, these two well-known theories underscore the dilemma NATO faces today. The good news is that NATO’s European members have vastly more latent power potential than



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (left) and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz speak at a press conference in Granssee, Germany, on March 5, 2023.

Russia does. They have three to four times more people, and their combined economies are a whopping 10 times larger than Russia’s. Several European states still have sophisticated arms industries capable of producing excellent weapons, and some of them (e.g., Germany) possessed formidable ground and air forces during the latter stages of the Cold War. Even more remarkably, NATO’s European members alone spend at least three times more on defense than Russia does every single year. Even if we allow for higher personnel costs, duplication of effort, and other inefficiencies, Europe has more than enough power potential to deter or defeat a Russian attack, assuming that latent capacity is properly mobilized and led.

The bad news is that a sustained effort to mount a capable European defense force faces significant obstacles. For starters, NATO’s European members do not agree on the level or even the identity of their main security problems. For the Baltic states and Poland, it is obvious that Russia poses the greatest danger. For Spain and Italy, however, Russia is a distant problem at best, and illegal migration is a bigger challenge. Getting Portugal to do

much to help Estonia will take a bit of persuasion.

Second, those who want Europe to do more face a delicate dilemma: They must convince people there’s a serious problem, but they also have to convince them that solving the problem won’t be too costly or difficult. If they try to mobilize support for a big defense buildup by exaggerating Russia’s military capabilities and portraying Russian President Vladimir Putin as a madman with unlimited ambitions, the challenge Europe appears to face might seem insurmountable, and the temptation to fall back on Uncle Sam will grow. But if Russia’s power and ambitions are believed to be more modest and therefore manageable, it will be harder to convince European publics to make big sacrifices now and to sustain a serious effort over time. To make greater autonomy work, Europeans must believe that Russia is dangerous, but they must also believe that they can handle the problem even if the United States does significantly less.

A third obstacle is the ambiguous role of nuclear weapons. If you really believe that nuclear weapons deter large-scale acts of aggression, then you’re likely to

think that the British and French nuclear forces and the U.S. nuclear umbrella will protect NATO from a Russian attack under almost any circumstances. (Ukraine, it is worth remembering, is not a NATO member.) And if so, then there's less need to build a big and expensive array of conventional forces. If you're not that confident about the reliability of extended nuclear deterrence, however, or you don't want to have to threaten nuclear use in response to some low-level challenge, then you'll want the kind of flexibility that capable conventional forces provide.

Fourth, European states still prefer to invest in their own defense industries and armed forces, instead of cooperating to standardize weaponry and develop a common strategy and defense plans. According to a 2023 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, although overall European defense spending has risen sharply since Russia seized Crimea in 2014, the percentage devoted to cooperative procurement efforts fell steadily until 2021 and never came close to the 35 percent target previously set by the EU. EU countries reportedly field some 178 different weapons systems—148 more than the United States—despite spending less. The stubborn tendency to go it alone squanders the enormous latent resource advantage that Europe enjoys over possible challengers and may be a luxury it can no longer afford.

A final obstacle—at least for the moment—is Washington's long-standing ambivalence about encouraging Europe to stand on its own. The United States has generally wanted its European partners to be militarily strong—but not too strong—and politically united—but not too united. Why? Because this arrangement maximized U.S. influence over a coalition of capable but subordinate partners. Washington wanted the rest of NATO to be strong enough to be useful but also fully compliant with U.S. wishes, and compliance would be harder to maintain if these states became

stronger and started to speak with one voice. The desire to keep Europe dependent and docile led successive U.S. administrations to oppose any steps that might have led to genuine European strategic autonomy.

Those days may be coming to an end, however. One need not be Trumpian to recognize that the United States cannot have it all and that it needs to shift more of the burden of collective defense onto its European partners. But if the past is any guide, Europe will not pick up the slack if its leaders are still convinced that Uncle Sam will be all-in under any circumstances. It is worth recalling that the initial push for European economic integration in the early 1950s was driven in part by European fears that the United States was eventually going to withdraw its forces from the continent and that their ability to counter the Warsaw Pact would be enhanced by the creation of a large and unified European economic order. The security impulse behind European integration receded once it became clear that Uncle Sam was staying, but growing doubts about the U.S. commitment would give Europeans ample incentive to mobilize their superior economic capacity and latent military potential more effectively, purely out of self-interest.

U.S. officials should encourage this development, regardless of who ends up in the White House next year. Reduced reliance on the United States will lead Europe to balance more vigorously, and moving slowly but steadily in this direction will give U.S. allies time to overcome the dilemmas of collective action that will inevitably arise. Because the nations of Europe have considerably more military potential than Russia does, they need not do this perfectly in order to be pretty darn safe. ■

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## Put Aid Before Talks in Sudan

By Suha Musa

Ongoing warfare in Sudan, with more than 14,600 people killed and 10.7 million displaced, has steadily broken down the country's political, social, and medical services. Reports suggest that more than 25 million of the country's 46 million people need assistance; cholera cases had risen to over 10,700 by late February; and between 70 and 80 percent of hospitals in affected states have been left nonfunctional.

As violence and displacement counts rise, humanitarian aid efforts haven't kept up. Instead, initiatives to negotiate between the warring powers—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan "Hemeti" Dagalo—have been the priority for the international community, neglecting the suffering that ordinary Sudanese citizens have endured for close to a year. While talks have been on and off for months, vital humanitarian initiatives remain underfunded.

It is easy to assume that with negotia-



tions would come a harmonious ceasefire and peaceful postwar society, but global history and Sudan's own history indicate a very different outcome if international actors rely primarily on good-faith negotiations to end the conflict and launch Sudan into a successful postwar society.

To rely on negotiations is to assume that one of the warring factions will win and the other will concede, leaving either Burhan or Hemeti in charge of Sudan's reconstruction. Given U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's determination that both the RSF and SAF have committed war crimes—with the RSF also committing crimes against humanity and acts of ethnic cleansing—inviting these parties to a negotiation table projects a bleak future for Sudan.

The international community has its priorities backward. Instead of prioritizing negotiations between two factions that actively reject any notion of their own wrongdoing and that citizens overwhelmingly reject as unrepresentative, foreign actors must redirect their attention to limiting foreign funding of the conflict, advocating for the inclusion of Sudanese citizen groups, and financing proposed humanitarian plans. Indeed, the central focus of international organizations and outside powers seeking peace in Sudan should

be the restoration of civilian life, rather than impractical negotiations that have often failed in the past.

After Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019, international powers and nongovernmental organizations eagerly supported a citizen-led democratic transition, vowing to assist in the process. But, as the U.N. Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) was shuttered last December by the U.N. Security Council, such promises appear empty. Government officials in Khartoum deemed the mission "disappointing" as they demanded its end and blamed the violence on former UNITAMS chief Volker Perthes, forcing the United Nations' hand to withdraw.

In managing negotiations between the factions that are barring the progress of a civilian government, international mediators continue to walk back these promises. To reassert their commitment to civilian-led initiatives in Sudan, a healthy and safe citizenry is necessary.

The continued failure of Sudan's health system represents just one of the many failures the country's public systems have suffered amid the ongoing violence. As fighting has made Sudan dangerous to move within, humanitarian access has been greatly limited. This has

since resulted in cholera spreading to at least 11 of Sudan's states—threatening communities plagued by inadequate water treatment and food insecurity at a higher rate. As measles, cholera, and dengue fever spread, it is becoming increasingly obvious that if guns and bombs don't kill Sudanese, the failure of the health system and lack of medical supplies will.

The ongoing conflict's impact on access to food and resources has also contributed to massive degradation in the nation's economy. With an inflation rate of 256 percent relative to average consumer prices, people across Sudan, whether in conflict-ridden areas or not, are suffering.

Most efforts aimed at assisting vulnerable citizens have been undertaken by Sudanese people themselves. With unreliable access to the internet, Sudanese globally have used social media to advertise the best routes to escape Sudan and share which shops have food and medicine in stock as well as how to send and receive money amid shuttered banks. Sudanese citizens have taken it upon themselves to do the work they've expected of international organizations and powers.

Stories that have emerged out of Sudan since the fighting began last April detail harrowing civilian experiences



A health worker measures the circumference of a Sudanese child's arm at a clinic for refugees in Renk, South Sudan, on Feb. 13.

with ethnic and sexual violence, largely perpetrated by the RSF, invoking memories of the war in Darfur, where widespread violence occurred at the hands of the *janjaweed*, the militia from which the RSF emerged. While that war was declared over in August 2020 as Sudan's newly formed transitional government promised Darfur rebel groups a role in Sudan's democratic transition, those oaths have disappeared amid the current conflict.

The western area of Darfur remains the epicenter of violence toward civilians, as risks of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and sexual abuse mount against primarily non-Arab communities. A lack of organization within RSF ranks and the group's history have all but authorized heinous attacks against Sudan's most vulnerable populations, with a limited humanitarian response from parties outside the country.

When humanitarian aid does manage to reach displaced people, it typically happens in refugee camps in neighboring countries, such as Doctors Without Borders' work in the Ourang camp in Chad, despite the organization's ongoing efforts to maintain a presence in Sudan. Fears of looting and violence, a lack of institutional protection, and the continued degradation of networks have made it increasingly difficult to reach afflicted communities in Sudan.

As violence rains down on West Darfur, communities are becoming more vulnerable. While around 42 percent of Sudan's population suffers from high levels of acute food insecurity, these figures increase dramatically to 62 percent in West Darfur. As the humanitarian crisis deepens in areas most affected by ethnic and sexual violence over the last 20 years, a lack of urgency in the international response ensures that the situation will get worse.

The most urgent initiative to protect Sudanese is readily waiting, but with only 43.1 percent of the necessary 2023 funding acquired, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs (OCHA) response plan has not been as effective as it could be. The plan aims to provide lifesaving assistance to limit immediate morbidity and mortality rates and keep pending risks at bay through preemptive action.

The limited funding has allowed OCHA to reach only 33 percent of people in need, so increasing pressure on state actors is key to ensure humanitarian aid. Of the \$2.57 billion needed to fully enact the plan in 2023, the United States provided \$540.1 million of the current secured funding, but Saudi Arabia—the other key broker in ongoing negotiations—contributed only \$38 million, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, a regional bloc in East Africa, gave less than \$100,000. As negotiating powers aim to bring the United Arab Emirates into talks regarding its role in Sudan's war, the Emirati government provided less than \$5 million to the effort. Encouraging allies in the West to assist in the existing plan is similarly crucial, as it offers a more immediate response.

Using existing Sudanese citizen networks of grassroots trauma response and financial and educational empowerment of mental health services across Sudan—specifically in areas such as Darfur, Kordofan, and Khartoum—is key to development. Frameworks to assist displaced people are necessary as well, as hundreds of thousands flee to neighboring countries where more danger often awaits them.

Building networks for refugees and asylum-seekers to safely leave the country and resettle with the assistance of foreign governments ensures vulnerable populations gain access to robust medical and social services that are not currently available domestically. All these efforts have begun thanks to Sudanese people themselves, but without foreign intervention and commitment, these initiatives will not have a wide impact.

As peace talks continue, the Sudanese public must be represented by the

citizen groups that led protests against Bashir and his government—as the loudest voice.

Even as Sudanese internally and globally call for both Hemeti and Burhan to be held accountable by the international community, the former allies who served in the Bashir regime may very well end up sharing power in defiance of the public's will. Bringing Sudanese citizen groups into the discussion could avoid such an outcome while prioritizing the health and human rights of the population. Until humanitarian efforts take center stage in discussions surrounding Sudan, there will be no winners. ■

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## What South Africa Really Won at the ICJ

By *Sasha Polakow-Suransky*

For those with long memories, the seed of South Africa's case against Israel—accusing it of genocidal acts in the Gaza Strip—might be traced to a spring day nearly 50 years ago. On April 9, 1976, South Africa's white supremacist prime minister, Balthazar Johannes Vorster, was welcomed with full red-carpet treatment to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

The moment, for those who knew the prime minister's past, was incongruous. A former Nazi sympathizer who had proudly declared in 1942 that “we stand for Christian Nationalism, which is an





People raise Palestinian flags around a statue of late South African President Nelson Mandela in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Jan. 10, after South Africa filed a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

ally of National Socialism,” bowed his head, knelt, and laid a wreath in memory of Adolf Hitler’s victims before his diplomatic entourage whisked him away to more important meetings.

Vorster was not in town to make amends for his Nazi past. He was there to cement arms deals with the Israeli government, which had, since 1974, become one of the apartheid regime’s most significant suppliers of military technology. In the years that followed, as many other nations imposed sanctions and distanced themselves from Pretoria, Israel drew closer—supplying the regime with bombs and artillery shells, aircraft components, military training, and more while cooperating on the construction and testing of missile delivery systems and even exchanging materials that were vital to the nuclear weapons programs of both countries.

Former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Rafal Eitan told a university audience in Tel Aviv in the late 1980s that “[Black South Africans] want to gain control over the white minority just as the Arabs here want to gain control over us. And we, too, like the white minority in South Africa, must act to prevent them from taking us over.” Two months after returning from his trip to Israel, Vorster presided over apartheid South Africa’s most infamous

massacre, when police opened fire on protesting schoolchildren in Soweto—killing at least 176—many of them shot in the back. None of this was forgotten, especially not in January as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a near-unanimous interim order instructing Israel to take provisional measures to prevent genocidal acts in Gaza.

Relations between Israel and South Africa are now frosty. For South Africa’s current African National Congress (ANC) government, there is no doubt that historical resentment over Israel’s role in prolonging white minority rule and propping up a government that the ANC was fighting to overthrow plays a role. South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement and its various liberation movements also have a long history of supporting the Palestinian cause.

At a time when Israel was backing Black South Africans’ oppressors, the ANC received support from the PLO. It came as no surprise that just two weeks after his release from prison in 1990, Nelson Mandela met with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, declaring, “There are many similarities between our struggle and that of the PLO. We live under a unique form of colonialism in South Africa, as well as in Israel.” In later speeches, he stated that “our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.”

But there is another reason that South Africa brought the ICJ case when it did: It is desperate to rehabilitate its international image as a moral superpower, a reputation it cultivated during the heady post-apartheid days of the 1990s. But that reputation has been eroded by years of cozying up to authoritarian regimes, failing to condemn human rights violators, and shirking its responsibilities under international law.

By daring to take on a radioactive global issue, Pretoria is once again perceived as heroic.

Indeed, when wealthy Persian Gulf states were happy to sign (or begin negotiating) agreements with Israel that essentially threw Palestinians under the bus, and larger and more powerful nations that purport to support the Palestinian cause, such as Pakistan and Indonesia, made disapproving noises from the sidelines, South Africa chose to act, challenging Israel—and by extension, its uncritical backers in Washington—in a venue invested with great symbolism and gravitas. Even if the ICJ at this stage has not ruled that Israel engaged in any of the genocidal behaviors alleged by South Africa, its narrow interim finding that “at least some of the acts and omissions alleged by South Africa to have been committed by Israel in Gaza appear to be capable of falling within the provisions” of the Genocide Convention has been celebrated as a victory.

In some ways, the outcome never really mattered. South Africa’s diplomatic masterstroke was to bring the case at all.

For many years after its transition to democracy, South Africa was the recipient of global goodwill—seen as a poster child for peaceful reconciliation and the triumph of good over evil. Many observers assumed that a country that could emerge from such division and brutality intact without widespread bloodshed, ethnic cleansing, or partition surely had something to teach the world. Its Truth and Reconciliation Commission was lauded as a blueprint for other

societies healing from the wounds of war. Pretoria offered itself, or was called on, as a peacemaker.

The “Rainbow Nation” image brought tourism, international investment, and major global events such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup. That year, South Africa projected an image of itself as a multi-racial melting pot, its citizens blowing joyfully on vuvuzelas in packed stadiums, even if the success of the tournament obscured the reality of growing poverty, state corruption, and a violent undercurrent of xenophobia against the many migrants to the country fleeing wars elsewhere in Africa.

On the foreign-policy front, South Africa’s moral compass had already started to falter. The ANC government had little to say when its former ally, Robert Mugabe, plunged neighboring Zimbabwe into crisis by stealing elections in 2002 and subsequent years, attacking his political opposition, and fomenting a refugee crisis that sent more than 1 million Zimbabweans across the border to South Africa.

Faced with the Syrian government’s brutal crackdown on demonstrators in 2011 that exploded into a subsequent civil war, South Africa abstained in a key U.N. Security Council vote. When the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for former Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir in 2015, South Africa refused to seize him when he arrived on South African soil, despite the clamoring of local human rights lawyers.

Pretoria arguably had such an opportunity when Ukraine brought a case against Russia two days after Moscow invaded in February 2022; more than 30 other nations intervened to support the case.

Instead, South Africa’s first public statement from President Cyril Ramaphosa was to thank “His Excellency President Vladimir Putin” for taking his call and noting South Africa’s “balanced approach” calling for “mediation and negotiation between the parties.”

Ramaphosa’s government is filled with officials nostalgic for the Cold War days when Moscow aided the anti-apartheid movement and many ANC operatives trained in the Soviet Union. The sense of historical debt runs so deep that when Putin—also facing an ICC arrest warrant—planned to visit South Africa for the BRICS summit last August, Pretoria formally requested that the ICC exempt it from its legal obligation to arrest him. (Putin later decided not to attend.)

Then, last November, just after its foreign minister made an official visit to Iran and met with regime officials not exactly known for their commitment to human rights, South Africa welcomed a delegation of Hamas leaders to the country. They met with leading ANC figures and members of the Mandela family while praising the Oct. 7 operation. All of this served to bolster the view that South Africa was not just standing up for Palestinian rights but that it was explicitly embracing a group that celebrated anti-Jewish violence—which undermined Pretoria’s effort to cast itself as a potential peacemaker.

And just one week before South African lawyers put forth genocide charges against Israel in The Hague, Ramaphosa welcomed a well-known genocidaire: Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, who has been leading his Rapid Support Forces in a civil war against the Sudanese Armed Forces for nearly a year. He is better known for commanding the *janjaweed* militias in a well-documented genocidal rampage in Darfur between 2003 and 2005 on behalf of Bashir’s government.

Yet at a time when Western double standards have been so spectacularly on display, most of the world seems more than happy to let Pretoria’s past and present moral shortcomings slide. Perhaps that’s because, listening to the formal legal proceedings, punctuated by a robed American judge reading out the court’s interim decision in The Hague’s imposing Peace Palace, many Palestinians

and their supporters felt genuinely heard for the first time.

The United States has, predictably, shrugged off the South African case. Before the proceedings even began, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken argued that the case “distracts the world” and called it “meritless.” But irrespective of the case’s legal merits, Blinken’s casual dismissal will have diplomatic consequences—both for the Biden administration’s credibility in promoting its so-called democracy agenda and when it comes to bolstering support for Ukraine across the global south.

The Israeli-Palestinian issue remains a third rail in British and U.S. politics. But for most of the world, it is fair game. The perception that Washington and its allies care about Ukrainian suffering at the hands of an adversary but not Palestinian suffering at the hands of an ally has been a driver of the nonaligned stance adopted by many countries—including Brazil and South Africa. But Israel’s bombardment of Gaza, which has displaced 1.9 million Palestinians and killed more than 31,000, has turbocharged this sentiment and made the leaders of many countries far more skeptical of any appeals from Washington or European capitals on humanitarian grounds.

An interim ruling supported by 15 of 17 judges was a damning outcome for Israel. Then, mere days after the court’s interim ruling, close to one-third of the current Israeli cabinet attended a conference hatching plans to reoccupy an ethnically cleansed Gaza—trampling on their government’s legal defense and gifting South Africa’s lawyers another potential line on their ICJ charge sheet.

Because the ICJ lacks enforcement power, U.S. pressure for Israel to act on the ruling’s interim measures is likely the only way they will take effect. The appearance that Washington is doing little will only reinforce the widely held perception that President Joe Biden’s democracy agenda and all U.S. talk about the sanctity of human rights—



from Sudan to Xinjiang—is empty rhetoric.

Most foreign leaders and citizens outside Europe and North America now simply don't take U.S. or European appeals on humanitarian grounds seriously given the double standard they perceive and their resentment of the West's hierarchy of solidarity, which so clearly privileges the victims of its adversaries over those of its allies.

They are likely to dismiss future moral appeals emanating from Western capitals on similar grounds—no matter how valid or urgent the cause may be. That's bad news for Darfuris, Rohingyas, Uyghurs, and other victimized minorities; it could also be calamitous in places such as Taiwan or Guyana, should larger saber-rattling neighbors like China and Venezuela choose to make good on threats of war.

South Africa, meanwhile, has its eyes on a bigger geopolitical prize. The ICJ case has won it accolades across the global south, and the ANC government is no longer afraid to publicly contradict and challenge Washington. After hosting the BRICS summit in August, Pretoria made clear that it's not content to merely follow the anti-Western line set out by Moscow and Beijing. It is seeking to lead in its own right.

After a year in which its credentials as a serious global player were legitimately questioned, South Africa has capitalized on the silence and hypocrisy of larger powers in an effort to reclaim its reputation as a moral beacon to the world. Whether deserving of that label or not, it is succeeding. ■

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## U.S. Pressure Helped Save Brazil's Democracy

By *Oliver Stuenkel*

**O**n Feb. 8, Brazil's federal police launched a high-profile raid against former President Jair Bolsonaro and more than 10 of his allies, including Brazil's former navy chief, national security advisor, and ministers of defense and justice. Authorities accused the group of plotting a potential coup after Bolsonaro's failed 2022 reelection bid.

Court documents suggest that Bolsonaro personally edited a decree that would have overturned election results and imprisoned a Supreme Court justice; a general loyal to the president confirmed that he would provide troops to carry out the coup. Bolsonaro also allegedly pressured his cabinet to forcefully share disinformation about supposed weaknesses in Brazil's electoral system. The former president was asked to hand over his passport to authorities and may face decades in jail.

The recent revelations suggest that Brazilian coup-mongers' plans were more advanced than initially believed. In the end, they did not get their way—

in part due to divisions within Brazil's armed forces that were the target of concerted pro-democracy efforts by U.S. President Joe Biden.

Biden's stated commitment to defending democracy worldwide is often brushed off as mere rhetoric. During his tenure, the United States has made uneasy compromises with autocrats to achieve its geopolitical objectives. U.S. support for Israel has led Washington to be branded a hypocrite in much of the global south.

This tide of criticism may explain why one of Biden's most significant foreign-policy achievements to date remains overlooked. Brazil's democracy was closer to the brink than initially understood—and targeted U.S. pressure on key Brazilian officials was likely decisive in guaranteeing a largely peaceful transition of power in the country after its October 2022 presidential election.

The account presented in this article comes from interviews with Brazilian policymakers and issue-area experts as well as Brazilian and international media reports. In conversations with FOREIGN POLICY, several individuals, including a high-ranking Brazilian diplomat and a military expert, confirmed that, in their views, external pressure was critical to preventing members of Brazil's military from executing Bolsonaro's plans for a coup.

Brazil returned relatively quickly to political normalcy after the deeply polarizing 2022 presidential contest. That has led some observers to forget how serious of a threat Bolsonaro posed to the country's democracy.

During his final months in office, the former army captain so openly flirted with subverting democracy that a Brazilian "Jan. 6 scenario" was seen by analysts, myself included, as a comparatively benign prospect. We feared much worse than what the United States experienced in 2021.

In the end, Bolsonaro supporters did launch an attack on Brasília on Jan. 8, 2023, about a week after new



President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's inauguration. But Brazil's judiciary has swiftly prosecuted cases related to the riots; last September, the first defendants to stand trial were convicted and sentenced to at least 14 years in prison. As of late February, 73 people remained in jail, and more than 1,350 had been released from prison as they awaited their trials.

In addition to the Jan. 6 and Jan. 8 parallels, Bolsonaro's pre-electoral strategy was also similar to that of his ally former U.S. President Donald Trump. Without evidence, Bolsonaro sowed doubts about the reliability of Brazil's electronic voting machines and spoke about voter fraud, seemingly preparing to reject the presidential election result if he lost. Of the approximately 50 million Brazilians who said they would vote for Bolsonaro, about 25 percent told pollsters that the president should not recognize the outcome if he came up short. Last June, Brazil's electoral court banned Bolsonaro from holding office for eight years for spreading false claims about Brazil's voting system.

Yet comparisons between the chaotic presidential transitions in the United States in early 2021 and in Brazil in early 2023 may end there. That's because Latin America's largest nation was facing a far bigger threat to its democracy.

Unlike their U.S. counterparts, several of Brazil's leading generals not only refused to publicly commit to respecting the election results but actively embraced Bolsonaro's conspiracy theories. Some even accepted his argument that the armed forces should play a role in certifying the contest's result, rather than Brazil's electoral court.

The generals were aware that a Lula win would lead thousands of army officers to lose positions of power—and associated economic perks. During his presidency, Bolsonaro appointed more than 6,000 military officers to roles in his administration and in state-owned companies, blurring the lines between the armed forces and civilian government to a degree unprecedented since the end of Brazil's dictatorship in 1985.

Adm. Almir Garnier Santos, then the head of the Brazilian Navy, and Gen. Paulo Sérgio Nogueira, then the minister of defense, did little to hide their willingness to question the reliability of Brazil's voting system. In leaked recordings of meetings of Bolsonaro's cabinet members, Nogueira described Brazil's electoral court as the "enemy."

Yet support for subverting Brazil's democracy among generals was not unanimous; it was a high-ranking former general—Bolsonaro's vice

president, Hamilton Mourão—who helped alert the United States to the prospect of a coup. According to a 2023 investigation by the *Financial Times*, Mourão privately expressed concern about anti-democratic currents within the armed forces to former U.S. Ambassador to Brazil Tom Shannon during a private lunch in New York in 2022. Shannon served in Brasília from 2010 to 2013 and has remained a key interlocuter in U.S.-Brazil affairs ever since.

In response, the Biden administration mounted a sustained pressure campaign aimed at Brazil's military, which began as early as 2021. The effort, as first reported in *Folha de São Paulo* and also covered by FOREIGN POLICY, involved explicit public warnings by U.S. senators about not respecting election results as well as continuous back-channel conversations to make clear that a democratic rupture would leave Brazil isolated on the international stage—and lead to a downgrade of U.S.-Brazil security cooperation.

The campaign involved the White House, State Department, CIA, Senate, and—notably—the Pentagon. Including that last agency may have been the Biden administration's most decisive move. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was employed as Biden's chief



Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro arrives at a rally in São Paulo on Feb. 25.

MIGUEL SCHINCARIOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



public emissary to Brazil's generals. It was a natural choice given the tense relationship between Biden and Bolsonaro, who followed Trump's lead in parroting falsehoods about supposed fraud during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Austin was also a more credible interlocutor, since Brazil's military was the intended target of the U.S. campaign.

The sheer number of U.S. actors involved in the campaign meant that, for much of 2022, many Brazilian government officials visiting Washington received an unambiguous message from the U.S. government about the need for the military to respect the electoral process. Shortly before Brazil's election, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution calling on Brazil to ensure the vote was "conducted in a free, fair, credible, transparent, and peaceful manner." In order to minimize the risk of a coup, Biden and numerous Western allies publicly congratulated Lula for his victory within hours of the official results being announced.

Mourão's reaction to Lula's win suggests that the threat of a negative international response was among the factors that convinced the Brazilian military's coup-mongers to stand down. In a post on X (then still known as Twitter) three days after the Oct. 30, 2022, runoff, Mourão acknowledged Bolsonaro supporters' "frustration" and questioned the legitimacy of the election but argued that "a military coup would put the country in a difficult situation internationally."

As an investigation by the *Brazilian Report* revealed, the United States also played a crucial role in helping Brazil's electoral authorities to overcome a global chip shortage to outfit electronic voting machines and ensure a smooth contest. Bolsonaro would have latched on to any technical difficulties as supposed evidence of machines' unreliability.

This largely behind-the-scenes operation involved Shannon, fellow former U.S. Ambassador to Brazil Anthony

Harrington, and Rubens Barbosa, Brazil's former ambassador to the United States. Barbosa was tapped by Brazil's electoral court to lead the effort, which involved negotiations with the Taiwanese government to ensure that chip manufacturer Nuvoton prioritized Brazil's demands. Crucially, Bolsonaro's foreign minister, Carlos França, did not inform the then-president of the effort.

The Biden administration's strategy was more daring than it appears in retrospect. Memories of U.S. meddling in Brazil's internal affairs—whether in 1964 to support a military coup or, more recently, in the National Security Agency's spying on national oil company Petrobras and former President Dilma Rousseff—remain vivid in Brazil.

For this reason, Washington's efforts to coup-proof the country's democracy risked backfiring. Across Latin America, U.S. claims to imperatives such as "democracy promotion" and "democracy defense" are tarnished due to the traumatic history of U.S. intervention in the region.

None of this is to suggest that international pressure alone could have prevented a coup in Brazil. The country saw an unprecedented mobilization of pro-democracy forces ahead of the election. Lula reached out to moderates by selecting a center-right former rival as his running mate. Brazil's electoral authorities took historic steps to combat fake news. Many of Lula's former opponents came out in support of the leftist candidate.

Yet the U.S. government's efforts to protect Brazil's democracy are especially remarkable because it was clear from the start that they would benefit Lula, a candidate with a long history of antagonizing the United States. Bolsonaro ran as a pro-American candidate in 2018 and frequently spoke out against China.

Predictably, the U.S.-Brazil relationship did not improve significantly after Lula came into office. During a visit to the White House in February 2023, Lula

thanked Biden for his defense of democracy, yet the meeting was marked by mutual disappointment. The U.S. Congress was unwilling to provide Biden with more funds to support Brazil's fight against deforestation in the Amazon, and Lula's nonaligned stance toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine frustrated Washington. Lula's meeting with Biden paled in comparison to the Brazilian president's high-level visit to Beijing soon after.

Irrespective of how U.S.-Brazil ties have evolved since 2022, the United States' election-year strategy toward Brazil remains a remarkable U.S. foreign-policy success. A military coup in Brazil would have sent shock waves around the world and increased the risk of a broader democratic recession in the Western Hemisphere.

While one may speculate about how Brazil's coup-mongering generals would have behaved in 2022 if Trump had still been in the White House, it seems obvious that the United States would not have played the same constructive role in helping Brazil to fend off the most serious threat to its democracy in decades.

This makes the upcoming U.S. presidential election—expected to be a rematch between Biden and Trump—even more relevant for Brazil and other sometimes-shaky democracies around the world. The next time that anti-democratic forces emerge from the shadows, the international environment—and the White House—may be less hostile to them. ■

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# The Biden Doctrine Will Make Things Worse

By Steven A. Cook

Does the United States need a “Biden Doctrine for the Middle East”? I ask because Thomas Friedman laid it out in the *New York Times* in late January. Apparently, the Biden administration is prepared to take a “strong and resolute stand on Iran,” advance Palestinian statehood, and offer Saudi Arabia a defense pact that would hinge on normalization of Riyadh’s relations with Israel.

Put me down for a “No.” U.S. President Joe Biden and his advisors, who have previously eschewed big projects aimed at transforming the Middle East, are about to bite off a lot more than they can chew, especially when it comes to building a Palestinian state, setting Washington up for yet another failure in the region.

Looking back across the post-World War II era, an interesting pattern emerges in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: When policymakers used U.S. power to prevent bad things from happening, they were successful, but when they sought to leverage Washington’s military, economic, and diplomatic resources to make good things happen, they failed.

The impulse to openly engage in international social engineering in the region dates back to 1991. That January and February, the United States defeated Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s army of occupation in Kuwait. And 10 months later, the leaders of the Soviet Union decided to bring that union to an end. The United States stood alone as

the sole remaining superpower. Having prevailed in the Cold War, Washington was determined to win the peace, which meant redeeming the world. The principal way that U.S. officials sought to do this in the Middle East was through “the peace process.”

The U.S. impulse to forge peace in the Middle East had less to do with international law than the belief that U.S. power could be the catalyst for a new, more pacific, and prosperous global order. This was hardly outside mainstream thinking, of course. After all, the United States had saved the world from fascism, and at the time that President George H.W. Bush convened a peace conference in Madrid, Soviet communism was near death.

For all his efforts, Bush’s goals in the Middle East remained primarily limited to solving the problem of Arab-Israeli peace. It was not until the Clinton administration that the peace process took on a decidedly transformative cast. The same week in 1993 that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat signed the first agreement of the Oslo Accords under the auspices and imprimatur of U.S. President Bill Clinton, his national security advisor, Anthony Lake, appeared before students and faculty at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies to set out the Clinton administration’s goals for U.S. foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War world. Central to the president’s approach was what Lake called “democratic enlargement.”

The way the Clinton team would promote change in the Middle East was through Palestine. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians, Clinton reasoned, would produce a more peaceful, prosperous, and integrated region, thereby undermining the rationale for the Middle East’s national security states. After peace, authoritarianism would give way to democratic political systems in the Arab world.

The idea that peace would catalyze political change was alluring, but Clinton

misconstrued the reasons for the authoritarian politics of the region. In any event, his almost decade-long effort to clinch a conflict-ending agreement between Israelis and Palestinians came to naught. And as he left office, violence engulfed both communities in what became the Second Intifada.

The next U.S. president, George W. Bush, was initially skeptical of the time and energy that Clinton devoted to Middle East peace, but Bush was actually the first president to declare that a Palestinian state was a goal of U.S. foreign policy. To get there, he flipped his predecessor’s logic. For the Bush White House, only after the democratic reform of Palestinian political institutions and the ouster of Arafat could there be peace.

Like Clinton before him, Bush failed. As he handed off the Oval Office to President Barack Obama, there was no Palestinian democracy, no peace, and no Palestinian state. Despite leading two very different administrations with two different approaches to the Middle East, Clinton and Bush shared a common, ambitious objective: the political and social transformation of the region.

Cognizant of the United States’ failures in the Middle East—whether the transformation of Iraq, the promotion of democracy through the so-called Freedom Agenda, or the effort to build a Palestinian state—neither Obama nor President Donald Trump nor Biden harbored the desire to socially engineer a new Middle East. In Biden’s case, as vice president he oversaw then-Secretary of State John Kerry’s struggle to get Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate, much less sign a peace agreement, and came away pessimistic about a two-state solution. Almost immediately after coming into office in 2021, Biden’s advisors made clear that the regional ambitions of administrations past would not be repeated.

Then came Hamas’s brutal killings of almost 1,200 Israelis on Oct. 7, 2023, and



Israel's withering military response in the Gaza Strip. According to Friedman, as the war between Israel and Hamas continues and the bodies of mostly Palestinian civilians pile up, Biden has concluded that what he wants to accomplish in the Middle East—ensuring the free flow of oil, helping to prevent threats to Israel's security, and outmaneuvering the Chinese—is unlikely to happen without a new, ambitious U.S. doctrine that once again drives change in the Middle East from the outside.

To be fair, it is a positive development that the White House understands that Iran does not want a new relationship with Washington. And a defense pact with Saudi Arabia makes sense in terms of global competition with China. But a significant U.S. investment in building a Palestinian state is likely to end in failure, like the previous efforts to do the same.

Biden and his team may feel that they have no choice but to pursue a two-state solution, but they should be aware of what they are taking on. The conflict is bound up in thorny—but often not well-understood—concepts, such as identity, historical memory, and nationalism.

There is also a religious dimension to the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, especially since Hamas and messianic Jewish groups have sacralized the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Add to this the fact that Palestinian political leaders—both those in Hamas and the Palestinian Authority—routinely deny the historical connections between Judaism and historic Palestine. The opposing narratives that emerge from these issues do not lend themselves to the kind of coexistence the Biden administration now apparently envisions.

Then there are the brutal politics within Israeli and Palestinian societies that have contributed to stalemates between the parties over the years. The Israel-Hamas war centered in Gaza is only likely to make it more difficult for the Israelis to accede to the Palestinians' minimum demands for peace—a fully sovereign independent state, a capital in Jerusalem, and a return of refugees. Likewise, the Palestinians could not agree to Israel's minimum demands for peace, which are a mirror image of their own: Jerusalem as the undivided, eternal capital of Israel; a state whose territory extends beyond the lines drawn

on June 4, 1967; and no return of Palestinian refugees.

Bereft of new ideas, concerned about ceding ground to global competitors over the war in Gaza, and worried about young voters, Biden and his team have latched on to the peace process—a failed enterprise that has no better chance of succeeding now than any other time in the past three decades.

In a way, it is hard to blame the president. Peace processing is safe. There is political support within the Democratic Party for it. He can say he tried. When this latest push to transform the Middle East fails to produce a Palestinian state after perhaps years of inconclusive negotiations about negotiations, Biden will be well into his post-presidency.

What should the United States do instead? That is a difficult question, especially since it is asking U.S. policymakers, members of Congress, and the Beltway policy community to recognize the limits of U.S. power to resolve an unresolvable conflict.

Still, there are important things that the United States can do. It must prevent Iran from sowing more regional chaos. Washington must work hard to head off any backsliding on the regional integration that has already taken place. And U.S. leaders can explain to Israelis why the politics of support for their country are changing. In some ways, this will help create an environment that is more conducive to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but there are no guarantees.

Way back in 2001, during a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked, "The United States cannot want peace more than the parties themselves." That is the trap that Biden is walking into. ■



From left, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and President Joe Biden meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Oct. 18, 2023.

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# THE NEW IDEA OF INDIA

NARENDRA MODI'S REIGN  
IS PRODUCING A LESS  
LIBERAL BUT MORE  
ASSURED NATION.

BY RAVI AGRAWAL





**F**rom the middle of April until early June, staggered over the course of several weeks, the world's biggest election will take place. More than 960 million Indians—out of a population of 1.4 billion—are eligible to vote in parliamentary elections that polls strongly suggest will return Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power for a third consecutive term.

Modi is probably the world's most popular leader. According to a recent Morning Consult poll, 78 percent of Indians approve of his leadership. (The next three highest-ranked leaders, from Mexico, Argentina, and Switzerland, generate approval ratings of 63, 62, and 56 percent, respectively.) It is not hard to see why Modi is admired. He is a charismatic leader, a masterful orator in Hindi, and widely perceived as hard-working and committed to the country's success. He is regarded as unlikely to turn to nepotism or corruption, often attributed to the fact that he is a 73-year-old man without a partner or children. Modi has few genuine competitors. His power within his party is absolute, and his opponents are fractured, weak, and dynastic—a quality usually equated with graft. Whether it is through maximizing his opportunity to host the G-20 or through his high-profile visits abroad, Modi has expanded India's presence on the world stage and, with it, his own popularity. New Delhi is also becoming more assertive in its foreign policy, prioritizing self-interest over ideology and morality—another choice that is not without considerable domestic appeal.

Modi's success can confuse his detractors. After all, he has increasingly authoritarian tendencies: Modi only rarely attends press conferences, has stopped sitting down for interviews with the few remaining journalists who would ask him difficult questions, and has largely sidestepped parliamentary debate. He has centralized power and built a cult of personality while weakening India's system of federalism. Under his leadership, the country's Hindu majority has become dominant. This salience of one religion can have ugly impacts, harming minority groups and calling into question the country's commitment to secularism. Key pillars of democracy, such as a free press and an independent judiciary, have been eroded.

Yet Modi wins—democratically. The political scientist Sunil Khilnani argued in his 1997 book, *The Idea of India*, that it was democracy, rather than culture or religion, that shaped what was then a 50-year-old country. The primary embodiment of this idea, according to Khilnani, was India's first prime minister, the anglicized, University of Cambridge-educated Jawaharlal Nehru, who went by the nickname “Joe” into his 20s.

Nehru believed in a vision of a liberal, secular country that would serve as a contrast to Pakistan, which was formed explicitly as a Muslim homeland. Modi is, in many ways, Nehru's opposite. Born into a lower-caste, lower-middle-class family, the current prime minister's formative education came from years of traveling around the country as a Hindu community organizer, sleeping in ordinary people's homes and building an understanding of their collective frustrations and aspirations. Modi's idea of India, while premised on electoral democracy and welfarism, is substantially different from Nehru's. It centers culture and religion in the state's affairs; it defines nationhood through Hinduism; and it believes a powerful chief executive is preferable to a liberal one, even if that means the curtailment of individual rights and civil liberties. This alternative vision—a form of illiberal democracy—is an increasingly winning proposition for Modi and his BJP.

Hindus represent 80 percent of India's population. The BJP courts this mega-majority by making them feel proud of their religion and culture. Sometimes, it aids this project by stirring up resentment of the country's 200 million Muslims, who form 14 percent of the population. The BJP also attempts to further a version of history that interprets Hindus as victimized by successive hordes of invaders. Hindus hardly comprise a monolith, divided as they are by caste and language, but the BJP requires only half their support to win national elections. In 2014, it secured 31 percent of the national vote to gain a majority of seats in Parliament—the first time in three decades a single party had done so. It did even better in 2019, with 37 percent of the vote.

At least some part of the BJP's success can be attributed to Modi's name recognition and tireless performances on the campaign trail. But focusing too much on one man can be a distraction from understanding India's trajectory. Even though Modi has acquired a greater concentration of power than any Indian leader in a generation, his core religious agenda has long been telegraphed by his party, as well as by its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu social society and paramilitary group that counts more than 5 million members. While Modi has been the primary face of the BJP since 2014, the party itself has existed in its current form since 1980. (The RSS, to which Modi traces his true ideological roots, is even older. It will mark its 100th anniversary next year.) The BJP's vision—its idea of India—is hardly new or hidden. It is clearly described in its election manifestos and, combined with Modi's salesmanship, is increasingly successful at the ballot box.

Put another way, while India's current political moment has much to do with supply—in the form of a once-in-a-generation



leader and few convincing alternatives—it may also have something to do with shifting demand. The success of the BJP’s political project reveals a clearer picture of what India is becoming. Nearly half the country’s population is under the age of 25. Many of these young Indians are looking to assert a new cultural and social vision of nationhood. An illiberal, Hindi-dominated, and Hindu-first nation is emerging, and it is challenging—even eclipsing—other ideas of India, including Nehru’s. This has profound impacts for both domestic and foreign policy. The sooner India’s would-be partners and rivals realize this, the better they will be able to manage New Delhi’s growing global clout. “The Nehruvian idea of India is dead,” said Vinay Sitapati, the author of *India Before Modi*. “Something is definitely lost. But the question is whether that idea was alien to India in the first place.”

**INDIANS BRISTLE AT REPORTS** of how their country has fallen in recent years on key markers of the health of its civil society. It is nonetheless worth contending with those assessments. According to Reporters Without Borders, India ranked 161st out of 180 countries for press freedom in 2023, down from 80th out of 139 countries in 2002. Freedom House, which measures democracy around the world, marked India as only “partly free” in its 2024 report, with Indian-administered Kashmir receiving a “not free” designation. Only a handful of countries and territories, such as Russia and Hong Kong, experienced a greater decline in freedom over the last decade than India. The World Economic Forum’s 2023 Global Gender Gap Index ranks India 127th out of 146 countries. The World Justice Project ranks India 79th out of 142 countries for adherence to the rule of law, down from 59th in 2015. As one legal scholar wrote in *Scroll.in*, the judiciary has “placed its enormous arsenal at the government’s disposal in pursuit of its radical majoritarian agenda.” Consider, as well, access to the web: India has administered more internet shutdowns than any country in the last decade, even more than Iran and Myanmar.

The social indicator that worries observers of India the most is religious freedom. Troubles between Hindus and Muslims are not new. But in its decade in power, Modi’s BJP has been remarkably successful in furthering its Hindu-first

**While India’s current political moment has much to do with supply, it may also have something to do with shifting demand.**

agenda through legislation. It has done so by revoking the semi-autonomous status of majority-Muslim Kashmir in 2019 and later that year—an election year—passing an immigration law that fast-tracked citizenship for non-Muslims from three neighboring countries, each of which has a large Muslim majority. (The law, which makes it more difficult for Indian Muslims to prove their citizenship, was implemented in March. The timing of this announcement seemed to highlight its electoral benefits.)

Perhaps more damaging than these legislative maneuvers has been the Modi administration’s silence, and often its dog whistles of encouragement, amid an increasingly menacing climate for Indian Muslims. While Nehru’s emphasis on secularism once imposed implicit rules in the public sphere, Hindus can now question Muslims’ loyalty to India with relative impunity. Hindu supremacy has become the norm; critics are branded “anti-national.” This dominance culminated on Jan. 22, when Modi consecrated a giant temple to the Hindu god Ram in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya. The temple, which cost \$250 million to build, was constructed on the site of a mosque that was demolished by a Hindu mob in 1992. When that happened three decades ago, top BJP leaders recoiled from the violence they had unleashed. Today, that embarrassment has morphed into an expression of national pride. “It is the beginning of a new era,” said Modi, adorned in a Hindu priest’s garb at the temple’s opening, in front of an audience of top Bollywood stars and the country’s business elite.

Modi’s vision of what it means to be Indian is at least partly borne out in public opinion. When the Pew Research Center conducted a major survey of religion in India between late 2019 and early 2020, it found that 64 percent of Hindus believed being Hindu was very important to being “truly Indian,” while 59 percent said speaking Hindi was similarly foundational in defining Indianness; 84 percent considered religion to be “very important” in their lives; and 59 percent prayed daily. “The BJP’s dominance is primarily demand-driven,” said Sitapati, who also teaches law and politics at Shiv Nadar University Chennai. “Progressives are in denial about this.”

Sitapati has critics on the left who claim his scholarship underplays the militant roots of the BJP and RSS, helping to rehabilitate their image. But on the question of demand and supply: The BJP’s dominance is limited to the country’s north, where most people speak Hindi. In the wealthier south, where tech firms are flourishing, literacy rates are higher, and most people speak languages such as Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, the BJP is decidedly less popular. Southern leaders harbor a growing resentment that their taxes are

subsidizing the Hindi Belt in the north. This geographic cleavage could come to a head in 2026, when a national process of redistricting is expected to take place. Opposition leaders fear the BJP could redraw parliamentary constituencies to its advantage. If the BJP succeeds, it could continue winning at the polls long beyond Modi's time.

Despite all this, Sitapati contends that the country remains democratic: "Political participation is higher than ever. Elections are free and fair. The BJP regularly loses state elections. If your definition of democracy is focused on the sanctity of elections and the substance of policies, then democracy is thriving." In Indian society, he said, culture is not centered on liberalism and individual rights; Modi's rise must be viewed within that context.

Liberal Indians who might disagree are vanishing from the public eye. One clear exception is the Booker Prize-winning novelist Arundhati Roy. Speaking in Lausanne, Switzerland, last September, she described an India descending into fascism. The ruling BJP's "message of Hindu supremacism has relentlessly been disseminated to a population of 1.4 billion people," Roy said. "Consequently, elections are a season of murder, lynching, and dog-whistling. ... It is no longer just our leaders we must fear but a whole section of the population."

Is the mobilization of more than a billion Hindus a form of tyranny of the majority? Not quite, says Pratap Bhanu Mehta, an Indian political scientist who teaches at Princeton University. "Hindu nationalists will say that theirs is a classic nation-building project," he said, underscoring how independent India is still a young country. Populism, too, is an unsatisfying term for describing Modi's politics. Even though he plays up his modest background, he is hardly anti-elitist and in fact frequently courts top Indian and global business leaders to invest in the country. Sometimes, they directly finance Modi's success: A 2017 provision for electoral bonds brought in more than \$600 million in anonymous donations to the BJP. The Supreme Court scrapped the scheme in March, calling it "unconstitutional," but the ruling is likely too late to have prevented the influence of big donors in this year's election.

Mukul Kesavan, a historian based in New Delhi, argues that it would be more accurate to describe the BJP's agenda as majoritarianism. "Majoritarianism just needs a minority to mobilize against—a hatred of the internal other," he said. "India is at the vanguard of this. There is no one else doing what we are doing. I am continually astonished that the West doesn't see this."

What the West also doesn't always see is that Modi is substantially different from strongmen such as Donald Trump in the United States. While Trump propagated an ideology that eclipsed that of the Republican Party, Modi is fulfilling the RSS's century-old movement to equate Indianness more

closely with Hinduism. Surveys and elections both reveal this movement's time has come.

"People aren't blinkered. They're willing to accept trade-offs," said Mehta, explaining how growing numbers of Indians have accepted the BJP's premise of a Hindu state, even if there are elements of that project that make them uncomfortable. "They don't think the majoritarian agenda presents a deal-breaker." For now, at least. A key question is what happens when majoritarianism provokes something that challenges public acceptance of this trade-off. The greatest risk here lies in a potential surge of communal violence, the likes of which have pockmarked Indian history. In 2002, for example, 58 Hindu pilgrims were killed in Godhra, in the western state of Gujarat, after a train that was returning from Ayodhya caught fire. Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, declared the incident an act of terrorism. After rumors circulated that Muslims were responsible for the fire, a mob embarked on three days of violence in the state, killing more than a thousand people. An overwhelming majority of the dead were Muslim. Modi has never been convicted of any involvement, but the tragedy has followed him in ways both damaging and to his advantage. Liberal Indians were horrified that he didn't do more to stop the violence, but the message for a substantial number of Hindus was that he would stop at nothing to protect them.

Twenty-two years later, Modi is a mainstream leader catering to a national constituency that is much more diverse than that of Gujarat. While the riots once loomed large in his biography, Indians now see them as just one part of a complicated career in the public eye. What is unknown is how they might react to another mass outbreak of communal violence and whether civil society retains the muscle to rein in the worst excesses of its people. Optimists will point out that India has been through tough moments and emerged stronger. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in 1975, giving her the license to rule by decree, voters kicked her out of power the first chance they got. Modi, however, has a stronger grip on the country—and he continues to expand his powers while winning at the ballot box.

**JUST AS CITIZENS CAN'T SUBSIST** purely on the ideals of secularism and liberalism, it's the same with nationalism and majoritarianism. In the end, the state must deliver. Here, Modi's record is mixed. "Modi sees Japan as a model—modern in an industrial sense without being Western in a cultural sense," Sitapati said. "He has delivered on an ideological project that is Hindu revivalism mixed with industrialization."

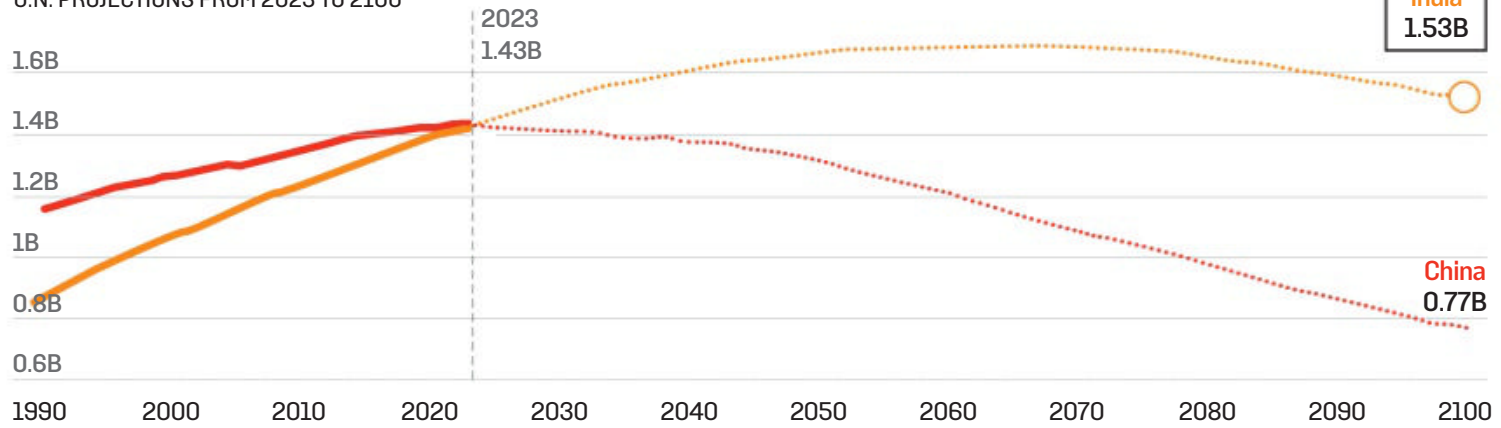
India is undertaking a vast national project of state-building under Modi. Since 2014, spending on transport has more than tripled as a share of GDP. India is currently building more than 6,000 miles of highways a year and has doubled the length of its rural road network since 2014. In 2022,



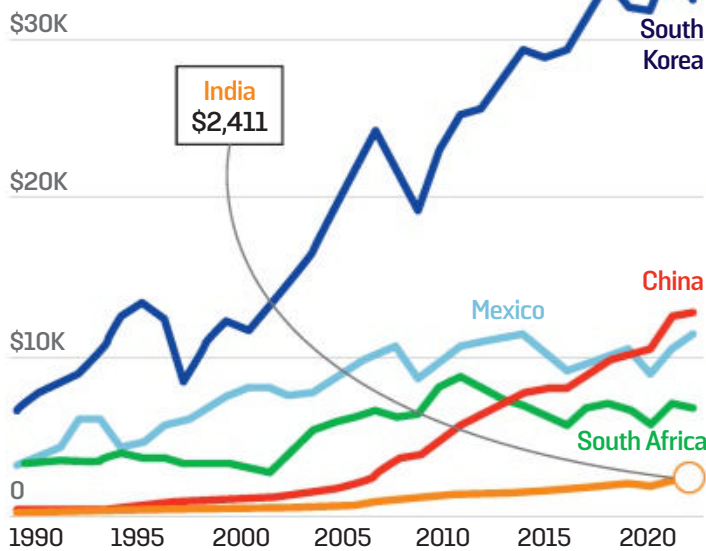
# India Explained in 5 Charts

## 1. The World's Most Populous Country—and Growing

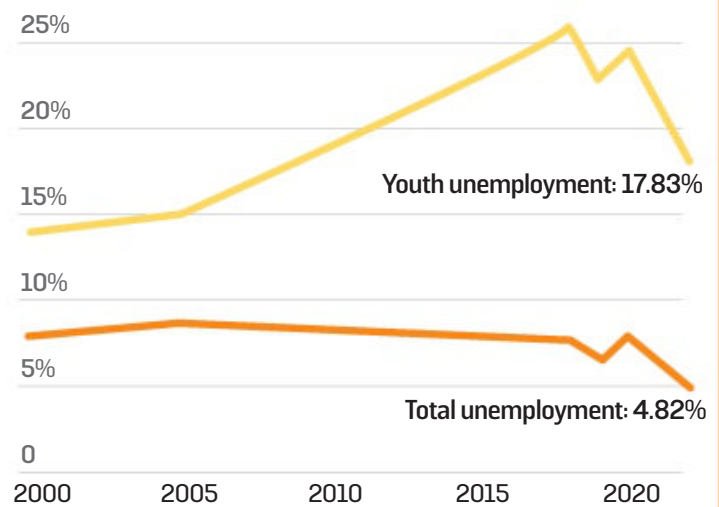
U.N. PROJECTIONS FROM 2023 TO 2100



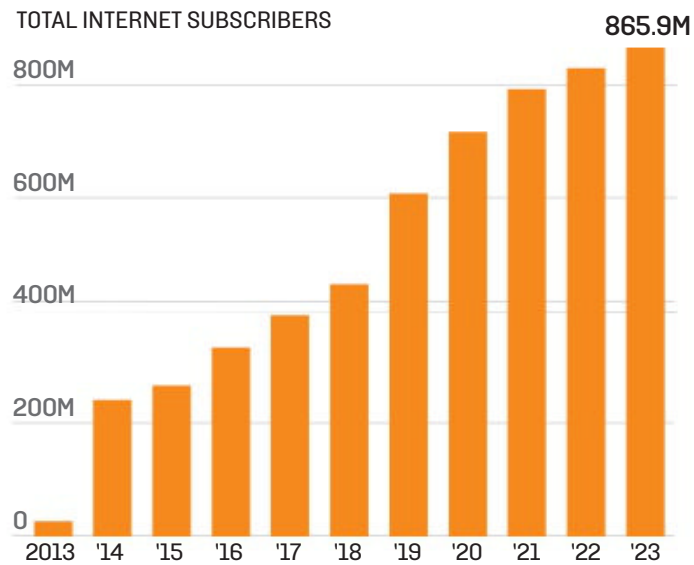
## 2. GDP Per Capita Remains Low



## 3. Young Indians Need Jobs

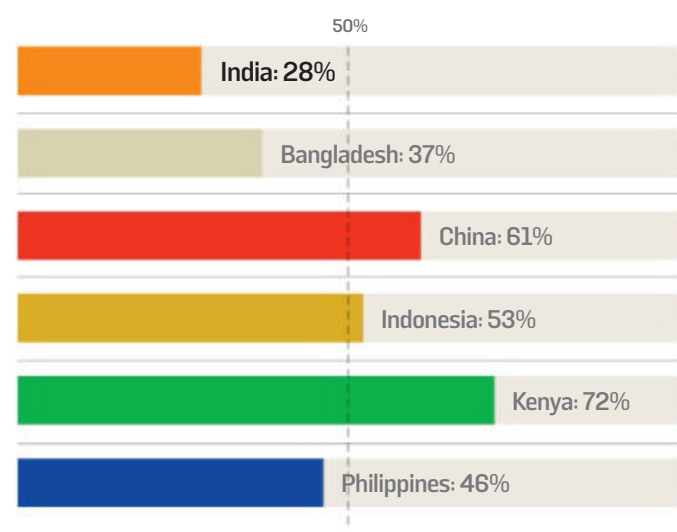


## 4. Internet Usage Is Exploding



## 5. Women Are Underemployed

FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE, 2022



NOTES: GDP IN CURRENT U.S. DOLLARS THROUGH 2022; YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT REFERS TO THE SHARE OF THE LABOR FORCE AGES 15-24 WITHOUT WORK BUT SEEKING EMPLOYMENT (MODELED ILO ESTIMATE THROUGH 2022); INTERNET SUBSCRIBERS AS OF DEC. 31 OF PREVIOUS YEAR; SOURCES: UNITED NATIONS, WORLD BANK, FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF ST. LOUIS, TELECOM REGULATORY AUTHORITY OF INDIA.

capitalizing on a red-hot aviation market, New Delhi privatized its creaky national carrier, Air India. India has twice as many airports today than it did a decade ago, with domestic passengers more than doubling in quantity to top 200 million. Its middle classes are spending more money: Average monthly per capita consumption expenditure in urban areas rose by 146 percent in the last decade. Meanwhile, India is whittling down its infamous bureaucratic hurdles to become an easier place for industry. According to the World Bank's annual Doing Business report, India rose from a rank of 134th in 2014 to 63rd in 2020. Investors seem bullish. The country's main stock index, the BSE Sensex, has increased in value by 250 percent in the last decade.

Strongmen are usually more popular among men than women. It is a strange paradox, then, that the BJP won a record number of votes by women in the 2019 national election and is projected to do so again in 2024, as voter participation, and voting by women, continues to climb. Modi has targeted female voters through the canny deployment of services that make domestic life easier. Rural access to piped water, for example, has climbed to more than 75 percent from just 16.8 percent in 2019. Modi declared India free of open defecation in 2019 after a campaign to build more than 110 million toilets. And according to the International Energy Agency, 45 percent of India's electricity transmission lines have been installed in the last decade.

The most transformative force in the country is the ongoing proliferation of the internet, as I wrote in my 2018 book, *India Connected*. Just as the invention of the car more than a century ago shaped modern America, with the corresponding building out of the interstate system and suburbia, cheap smartphones have enabled Indians to partake in a burgeoning digital ecosystem. Though it didn't have much to do with the smartphone and internet boom, the government has capitalized on it. India's Unified Payments Interface, a government-run instant payment system, now accounts for three-fourths of all non-cash retail transactions in the country. With the help of digital banking and a new national biometric identification system, New Delhi has been able to sidestep corruption by directly transferring subsidies to citizens, saving billions of dollars in wastage.

The private sector has been a willing participant in India's new digital and physical economy. But it has also been strangely leery of investing more, as two leading economists describe in this issue (Page 42). Businesses remain concerned that Modi has a cabal of preferred partners in his plans for industrialization—for example, he is seen as too cozy with the country's two richest men, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, both of whom hail from his native state of Gujarat. Fears abound that New Delhi's history of retroactive taxation and protectionism could blow up the best laid corporate plans.

Because he has corralled great power, when Modi missteps, the consequences tend to be enormous. In 2016, he suddenly announced a process of demonetization, recalling high-value notes of currency as legal tender. While the move attempted to reduce corruption by outing people with large amounts of untaxed income, it was in fact a stunt that reduced India's growth by nearly 2 percentage points. Similarly, panicked by the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, Modi announced a sudden national lockdown, leading to millions of migrant workers racing home—and likely spreading the virus. A year later, New Delhi largely stood by when the delta variant of COVID-19 surged through the country, killing untold thousands of Indians. No amount of nationalism or pride could cover up for the fact that, on that occasion, the state had let its people down.

Now, with a population hungry for good news, India is looking to take advantage of the best foreign-policy deals. There are plenty to be struck in a shifting global order. The United States' power is in relative decline, China's has risen, and a range of so-called middle powers are looking to benchmark their status. Modi is projecting an image of a more powerful, muscular, prideful nation—and Indians are in thrall to the self-portrait.

**ONE WINDOW INTO INDIA'S NEWFOUND STATUS** on the world stage came last September, after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made the stunning announcement that Ottawa was investigating "credible allegations" that Indian government agents had orchestrated the murder of a Sikh community leader in British Columbia. New Delhi flatly denied his accusations, calling them "absurd." The person who was killed, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, had sought to establish a nation called Khalistan, carved out of territory in his native Punjab, a state in northwestern India. In 2020, New Delhi declared Nijjar a terrorist.

A Canadian leader publicly accusing India of a murder on Canadian soil could have been a major embarrassment for Modi. Instead, the incident galvanized his supporters. The national mood seemed to agree with the government line that New Delhi didn't do it but with an important subtext: If it did, it did the right thing.

"It's this idea that 'We have arrived. Now we can talk on equal terms to the white man,'" Sitapati said. It's not just

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## Further Reading

For a reading list to help make sense of modern India, check out New Delhi-based writer Mukul Kesavan's recommendations on [ForeignPolicy.com](https://ForeignPolicy.com).





Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets a crowd in Varanasi, India, on March 4, 2022.

## Modi is projecting an image of a more powerful, muscular, prideful nation—and Indians are in thrall to the self-portrait.

revisionism to examine how colonial powers masterminded the plunder of India's land and resources; even the word "loot" is stolen from Hindi, as the writer and parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor has pointed out. The BJP's project of nation-building attempts to reinsert a sense of self-pride, often by painting Hindus as the victims of centuries of wrongs but who have now awoken to claim their true status. This is why the Jan. 22 opening of the Ram temple took on epic significance, reviving among Hindus a sense that they were rightfully claiming the primacy they once enjoyed.

The flashier the stage, the better. For much of 2023, India flaunted its hosting of the G-20, a rotating presidency that most other countries see as perfunctory. For Modi, it became a marketing machine, with giant billboards advertising New Delhi's pride in playing host (always alongside a portrait of the prime minister). When the summit began in September, TV channels dutifully carried key parts live, showing Modi welcoming a series of top world leaders.

Weeks earlier, Indians united around another celebratory moment. The country landed two robots on the moon, making it only the fourth country to do so and the first to reach the moon's southern polar region. As TV channels ran a live broadcast of the landing, Modi beamed into mission control at the key moment of touchdown, his face on a split screen with the landing. The self-promotion can seem garish, but it feeds into a sense of collective accomplishment and national identity.

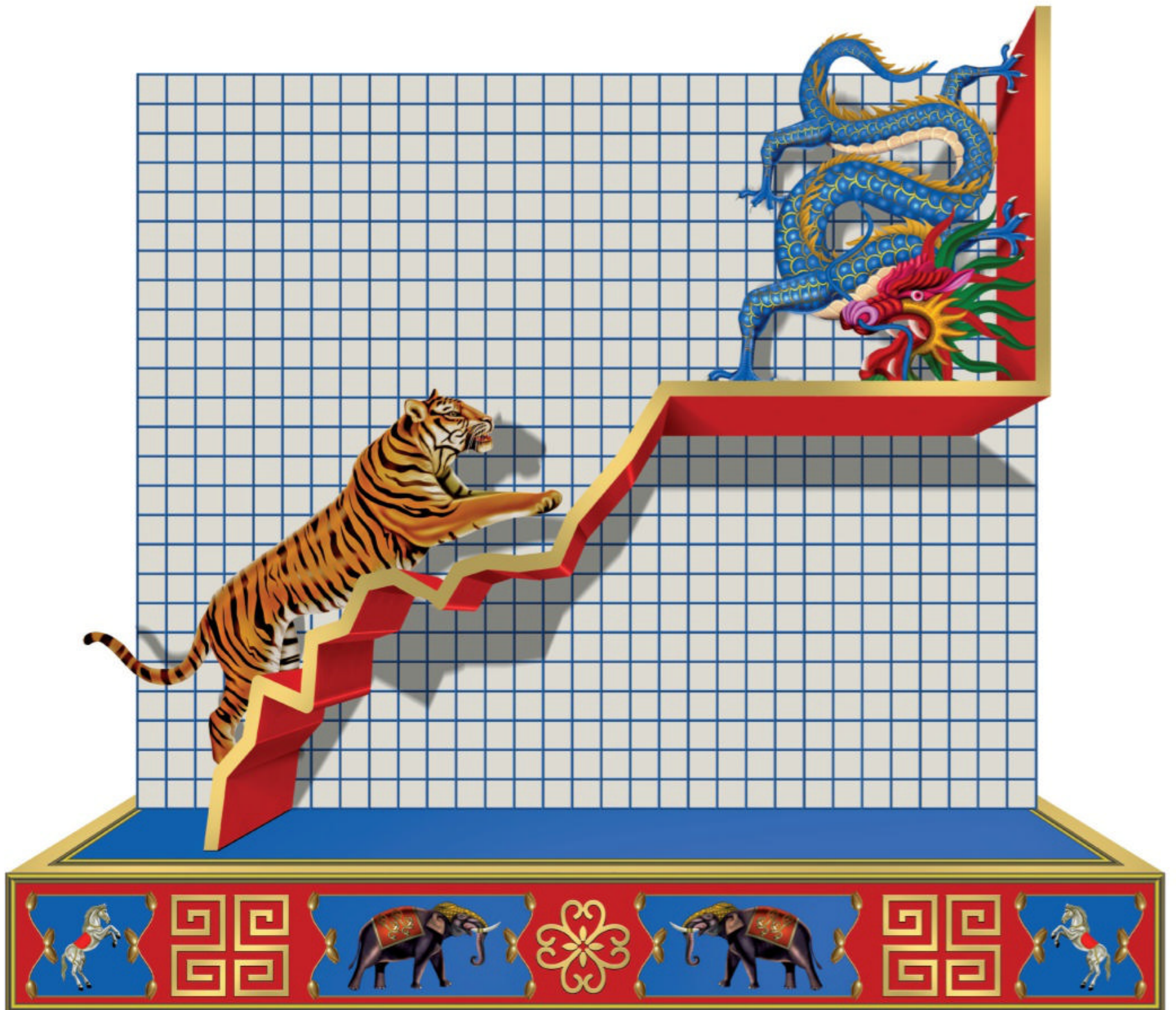
Also popular is New Delhi's stance on Moscow, thumbing its nose at Western countries seeking to sanction Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. While Russia exported less than 1 percent of its crude to India before 2022, it now sends more

than half of its supplies there. China and India are together purchasing 80 percent of Russia's seaborne oil exports—and they do so at below-market rates because of a price cap imposed by the West. There is little consideration for morality, in part because Indians, like many in the global south, now widely perceive the West as applying double standards to world affairs. As a result, there's no moral benchmark. For India, an advantageous oil deal is just that: good economics and smart politics. (India and Russia also share a historic friendship, which both sides are keen to continue.)

New Delhi's growing foreign-policy assertiveness stems from a knowledge that it is increasingly needed by other countries. Allies seem aware of this new dynamic. For the United States, even if India doesn't come to its aid in a potential tussle with China in the Taiwan Strait, merely preventing New Delhi from growing closer to Beijing represents a geopolitical win that papers over other disagreements. For other countries, access to India's growing market is paramount. Despite the BJP's hostility to Muslims, Modi receives a red-carpet welcome when he visits countries in the Persian Gulf.

India's embrace of its strategic interests—and its confidence in articulating that choice—is of a piece with broader changes in how the country views itself. Modi and his BJP have succeeded in furthering an idea of India that makes a virtue of sacrificing Western liberalism for a homegrown sense of self-interest. By appealing to young people's economic aspirations and their desire for identity in an increasingly interconnected world, the BJP has found room to advance a religious and cultural agenda that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. This vision cannot be purely top-down; the will of a nation evolves over time. In the future, there will likely be further contests among other ideas of India. But if Modi's BJP continues to win at the ballot box, history may show that the country's liberal experiment wasn't just interrupted—it may have been an aberration. ■

RAVI AGRAWAL is the editor in chief of FOREIGN POLICY.



# IS INDIA REALLY THE NEXT CHINA?

*The case for its economic ascent  
is strong, but government policies  
still stand in the way.*

BY  
JOSH FELMAN  
AND  
ARVIND  
SUBRAMANIAN





Will India be the next China? As China's economy spirals downward and optimism about India's growth reverberates around the world, that question can no longer be dismissed as the fevered fantasy of nationalists. It needs to be taken seriously—not least because the world is already behaving as if India is a major power.

Consider this: In 2023, suspicion swirled that the Indian government was connected to the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil and a plot to kill a U.S. citizen on U.S. soil—a remarkable set of allegations. Yet even more remarkable than the allegations were the reactions. The U.S. government opted to douse the potentially incendiary fallout, saying little, merely allowing the case to wend its way through the courts. In other words, Indian hubris was accommodated, not chastised. It was a testament to India's newfound political standing.

As for the economy, it is true that the Chinese experience of the last 40 years was a very specific type of miracle that is unlikely to be replicated. Even so, there is a case for India because it is no longer the economically constrained giant that it once was.

For the past quarter century, India's development was hobbled by its infrastructure, inadequate to the nation's own manufacturing needs and patently insufficient for foreign firms considering India as an export base. Over the last decade, however, its infrastructure has been transformed. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has built roads, ports, airports, railways, power, and telecommunications, in such quantities that it has rendered the country almost unrecognizable from what it was just a few years ago. To give just one example, around 34,000 miles of national highways have been built since the current government came to power in 2014.

The nation's digital infrastructure has also been transformed. Once creaky and technologically backward, it is now cutting-edge, with ordinary Indians using smartphones to pay for even the most routine shopping transactions. Even more crucially, the digital network now serves all Indians, allowing the government to introduce programs such as direct cash transfers to those in need, while the private sector has used it as a platform for entrepreneurship and innovation.

At the same time, the Modi government's "New Welfarism" has enhanced Indians' quality of life. This distinctive approach prioritizes the public delivery of essentially private goods and services, providing voters with clean fuel, sanitation, power, housing, water, and bank accounts while making clear to

them that the benefactor is the prime minister. As a result of these programs, the state is now able to cushion the vulnerable with employment and free food during times of hardship like the COVID-19 pandemic. The capacity of the Indian state to build and deliver better—and at scale—has been remarkable.

These are major policy achievements, the fruit of cumulative and national efforts. Many of these initiatives were, in fact, started by previous central and state governments, though the Modi government deserves important credit for their accelerating progress. And there are signs that they are producing results.

To begin with, India has received a major new impetus to its skill-based service exports. India's services first boomed in the early 2000s but plateaued after the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Now, they have seen a rebirth. In 2022, India's global market share increased by 1.1 percentage point (about \$40 billion), reflecting an important jump up the skills ladder. (In 2023, India likely gained further global market share but at a less torrid pace.)

Indians who used to write cheap code and man call centers are now running global capability centers, with high-skilled personnel performing analytical tasks for top global companies. JPMorgan Chase alone has more than 50,000 workers in India; Goldman Sachs's largest office outside New York is in Bengaluru. Accenture and Amazon, among many others, also have large presences. This boom, in turn, has ignited the construction of high-rise apartments, which along with cranes are now dotting the skylines of the tech cities of Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Pune. Sales of SUVs are soaring, and luxury malls and high-end restaurants are sprouting—all helped along by a boom in personal credit.

Next, there are signs that Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and one of its least developed, is witnessing a revival. The state is refurbishing its decrepit infrastructure (not to mention its many temples), getting its finances under control, and reducing corruption and violence under its charismatic, sectarian leader, a vigilante Hindu monk-turned-politician. If the state can finally become an attractive investment destination, it has the potential to change the trajectory of the entire nation by dint of its sheer demographic heft. Its transformation would send the signal that India's Hindi heartland—until recently pejoratively referred to as a *bimaru*, or diseased region—is not condemned to perpetual underdevelopment.

Finally, the downward spiral of the Chinese economy under President Xi Jinping has accelerated. As a result,

capital is exiting that country at an alarming pace, with a net \$69 billion in corporate and household funds leaving in 2023, according to official figures.

There are indications that a small share of this capital is finding its way to India. Most prominently, Apple has set up plants in a number of Indian states so that it can more readily supply the domestic market and diversify its export base, especially now that economic tensions between the United States and China are rising. And this, in turn, is helping to build a chain of domestic electronics suppliers, some of which are planning to set up large factories, especially in India's south, employing more than 20,000 workers. This is an astonishing phenomenon in a country that has always been characterized by subscale, inefficient manufacturing firms.

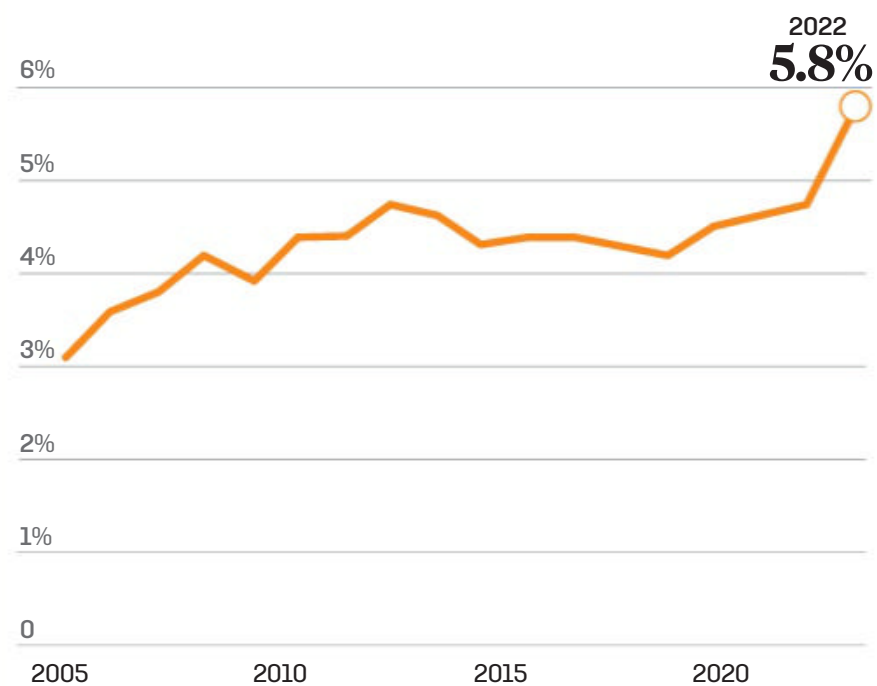
If these large-scale plants prove viable, then they could spark a surge in goods exports, which would truly change prospects—not just for India's long-beleaguered manufacturing sector but also for low-skilled workers who have not been able to enjoy the high-skill export service boom. The math is worth reflecting on. India's low-skill exports will never reach Chinese levels of competitiveness, reflected in global market shares in excess of 40 percent. That's because the unique set of political and economic circumstances that encouraged the advanced world to shift much of its industrial base to just one country no longer exists. But over the coming decade, it is perfectly feasible for India to increase its current share of around 3 percent by 5-10 percentage points, which would represent hundreds of billions of dollars of additional exports.

Despite the favorable portents, any declaration of India displacing China is premature. That's because the encouraging signs are not yet convincingly reflected in the economic data, while government policies remain inadequate to realizing the new opportunities.

Consider the economic data. For some time, we have been skeptical of claims that India has really been able to put aside the lost decade of the 2010s, a period that saw modest growth, little structural transformation, and weak job creation. True, the economy has recovered post-COVID but in an unequal manner, favoring capital over labor, big firms over small, and the salaried middle class and the rich over the millions of people employed in the informal economy.

Part of the problem has been that India has so far managed to capitalize on only a small portion of the new opportunities created by the relative economic decline of China. Despite the government's determined campaign to "Make in India," it has not so far succeeded in convincing many firms to expand their Indian operations. In fact, inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) have actually been declining.

### Global Market Share of High-Skill Services



India also accounts for a smaller share of FDI flows to emerging markets excluding China.

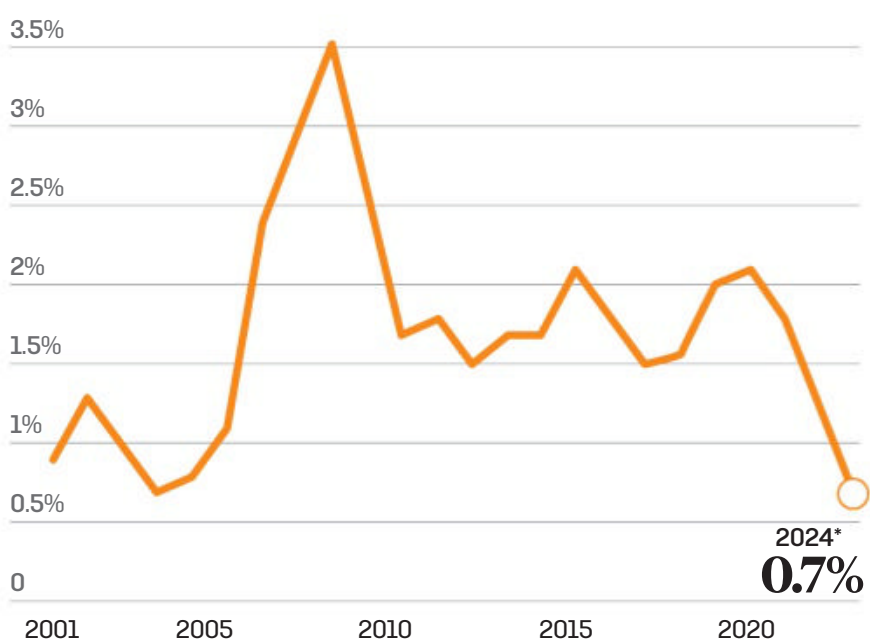
This is not just a case of skittish foreigners. Even domestic firms have been reluctant to invest, notwithstanding the improved infrastructure that the government has created, the subsidies that it has offered, and, in some cases, the protectionism that it has lavished on the manufacturing sector. Private investment in plants and machinery has still not rebounded from the depressed levels of the last decade. And there are no convincing signs that this situation is about to turn around. In fact, new project announcements actually fell in nominal terms in 2023 compared with the previous year's level.

Consequently, India's manufacturing exports—the source of job creation for its vast pools of unskilled labor—remain weak. In fact, India's global market share in key sectors such as apparel has declined since the global financial crisis. All this has been a major concern for Modi's government and even the central bank, which recently issued a report

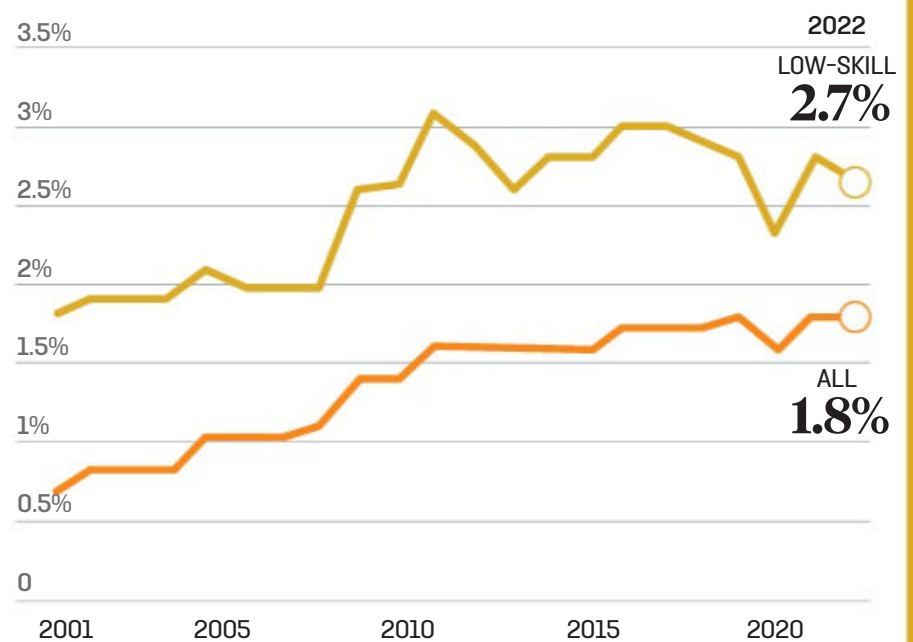
**India has so far managed to capitalize on only a small portion of the new opportunities created by the relative economic decline of China.**



## Foreign Direct Investment as a Percentage of GDP



## Global Market Share of Manufacturing



NOTES: HIGH-SKILL INCLUDES FINANCE, INSURANCE, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND IT SERVICES, OTHER BUSINESS, AND PERSONAL. DATA FOR 2024 IS FOR THREE FISCAL QUARTERS. LOW-SKILL EXCLUDES IRON AND STEEL, HEAVY MACHINERY, AND PHARMACEUTICALS AND CHEMICALS. SOURCES: WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION, RESERVE BANK OF INDIA.

urging the private sector to “get its act together” and relieve the government of the burden of investment.

Why have firms been so reluctant to seize the opportunities that lie so manifestly in front of them? Essentially, because they perceive that the risks of doing so are too high.

Firms’ concerns lie in three main areas. First, they are worried that the “software” of policymaking remains weak. The playing field is not level, as a few large domestic conglomerates and some large foreign companies are seen as favored firms, to the detriment of the broader investment climate. After all, for every favored firm that undertakes investments because its risks have been reduced, there are many competitors that have reduced their spending because their risks have increased. For them, the risks of being victims of arbitrary state action remain substantial.

Second, even as the government recognizes the need to boost exports, it remains viscerally attached to inwardness—that is to say, import barriers. This protectionism has a new allure because many people believe that India’s domestic market is now so large and its domestic firms so advanced that they can easily replace foreign firms, as long as they are given a boost from the government. Unsurprisingly so—economic nationalism inevitably accompanies political nationalism.

But the reality is that India’s domestic market is not particularly large, at least for the middle-class goods that global firms are trying to sell. And frequent announcements of

protectionist measures actually undercut domestic investment, as firms become risk-averse, anticipating that they might sooner or later be cut off from critical foreign supplies. For example, the announcement last August that imports of laptops would be restricted sparked panic among firms in the important IT sector. In the end, the restrictions were watered down, but the fears still linger, especially as similar measures have been implemented in other sectors.

Above all looms the question of the wedge between politics and economics. Investment and growth can survive, even thrive, in the face of institutional decay as long as the political regime remains stable. And Modi’s popularity seems to portend stability. But rising disaffection and restiveness among minority communities, the southern states, the political opposition, and the farmers of northern India increase the likelihood of accidents. As the economist John Maynard Keynes famously remarked, the inevitable never happens. It is the unexpected, always.

We can glimpse hope in India’s present yet remain anxious about the future. ■

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# THE TRUE BELIEVER

*S. Jaishankar has become  
the chief executor of India's  
strong-willed foreign policy.*

BY RISHI IYENGAR

**IT ALL BEGAN IN BEIJING.** Narendra Modi was the chief minister of Gujarat when he visited in 2011 to pitch his state as a destination for Chinese investment. As India's ambassador to China at the time, S. Jaishankar was tasked with helping to facilitate meetings with Chinese Communist Party leaders and officials, companies, and even Indian students there.

The Beijing meeting was the starting point of a close and mutually respectful partnership between Modi and Jaishankar—one that is reshaping not only India's geopolitics but increasingly the world's. Jaishankar himself has recounted that first meeting on multiple occasions, including in the preface of his new book, *Why Bharat Matters*.

Of that defining moment with Modi in the Chinese capital, Jaishankar writes, "My cumulative impression was one of strong nationalism, great purposefulness and deep attention to detail."

The two men's stars would rise in tandem.

Jaishankar's Beijing tenure was followed by a move to Washington in late 2013 as India's ambassador to the United States. Modi was still persona non grata there; his visa had been revoked in 2005 for his perceived role



भारत





in enabling communal riots in Gujarat three years earlier. (The U.S. State Department termed Modi's failure to curb the riots as bearing responsibility for "particularly severe violations of religious freedom.") An investigative team appointed by India's Supreme Court subsequently cleared Modi of any culpability in 2012, and soon after becoming prime minister in 2014, he was welcomed back to the United States. During his visit that September, he even addressed a packed house of Indian diaspora attendees at New York's Madison Square Garden, an appearance Jaishankar helped facilitate that has since been replicated in arenas around the world and has become a hallmark of Modi's foreign policy.

Four months later, days before he was due to retire from the foreign service, Jaishankar was elevated by Modi to foreign secretary—India's top diplomat, who reports to the external affairs minister—somewhat abruptly and controversially, replacing Sujatha Singh several months before her tenure officially ended. It was only the second time a foreign secretary had been removed from the post.

Jaishankar would be at the center of another prominent "second" in India's foreign-policy history in 2019. Soon after Modi won reelection in a landslide, he appointed Jaishankar to his cabinet as external affairs minister. It was only the second time a foreign service officer had become external affairs minister, crossing the Rubicon from diplomat to politician. Jaishankar became the first foreign secretary to do so, with a brief private-sector sojourn in between as president of global corporate affairs at the conglomerate Tata Sons.

"To me, personally, it was a surprise. I had not even thought about it," Jaishankar said during a meeting with members of the Indian community in Seoul in early March, sitting between an Indian flag and a larger-than-life portrait of himself.

Once he did become a politician, however, Jaishankar went all in, spearheading an Indian foreign policy that has been a marked departure from that of previous governments at least in style, if not necessarily always substance.

That style is confident, assertive, proudly Hindu, and unabashedly nationalist, intended to convey that India is taking its rightful place among the major powers. Jaishankar has become known for publicly sparring with Western counterparts, think tankers, and journalists when India's positions don't align with theirs. He advocates principles of "multialignment" and "strategic autonomy," in which India will be driven by its own national interest.

He has slammed a BBC documentary on Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots that India banned in early 2023 ("I don't know if election season has started in India and Delhi or not, but for sure it has started in London and New York"); dismissed global democracy rankings that show India backsliding ("There's an ideological agenda out there"); and defended

India's neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and its purchases of Russian oil ("Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems").

All the while, Jaishankar has served as the tip of the spear for an unapologetic India, led by Modi.

Modi and Jaishankar do come from completely different worlds. Jaishankar grew up in New Delhi and studied at two of the Indian capital's most elite educational institutions, St. Stephen's College and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The latter, where Jaishankar did a Ph.D. in international relations with a focus on nuclear diplomacy, is named after India's first prime minister, whom Modi has consistently criticized. Modi's humble beginnings, by contrast, are a key part of his political persona. He has frequently spoken about his small-town upbringing in Vadnagar, Gujarat, where his family ran a tea shop, before joining the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu-nationalist organization and the ideological parent of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And while Modi predominantly speaks in Hindi both at home and abroad, Jaishankar mostly opts for English.

Jaishankar's worldliness has served Modi's priorities well. "If you take a look back, Mr. Modi was planning bold things on foreign policy in the second term, so he wanted someone he trusted who could actually do the big moves. I think you could say that has largely paid off," said C. Raja Mohan, a senior fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi and columnist at FOREIGN POLICY.

**ON PAPER, JAISHANKAR IS A NATURAL CHOICE** to spearhead a rising India's foreign policy. His ambassadorships in Beijing and Washington gave him a keen understanding of the two major powers defining global geopolitics today, and they came as part of a four-decade diplomatic career that began in the Indian Embassy in Moscow in the late 1970s and included stints in Japan, Singapore, and the Czech Republic. As joint secretary for the Americas in India's Ministry of External Affairs, he was also a key negotiator for the country's landmark civilian nuclear agreement with the United States in 2005.

"He already had the reputation of being a whiz kid because he of course had a legendary pedigree," said Ashley J. Tellis, the Tata chair for strategic affairs and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Tellis, a former U.S. government advisor and expert on India-U.S. relations, not only sat across from Jaishankar during the nuclear deal negotiations and has known him for decades but also knew his father, K. Subrahmanyam, a former bureaucrat and government advisor who played a key role in establishing India's nuclear doctrine and is considered one of the country's foremost strategic thinkers.

Yet Jaishankar's transition to politics stood out because that's not how it usually happens in India. External affairs



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**Jaishankar's style is confident, assertive, proudly Hindu, and unabashedly nationalist, intended to convey that India is taking its rightful place among the major powers.**

ministers are career politicians and usually have very little actual foreign-policy experience when they take on the role. The call-up from Modi caught many off guard, according to multiple former Indian diplomats who asked to remain anonymous to speak candidly, though most described it as an inspired choice.

It is a testament to India's increased global standing and importance, as well as Jaishankar's easy rapport with his global counterparts, that his blunt talk hasn't really cost the Modi government important friends. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said at last year's Munich Security Conference that Jaishankar had a "point" with his comments on Europe. In Munich this year, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock smiled as Jaishankar, next to them on stage, parried another question about India's purchases of Russian oil and its selective alignment with Western partners. "Why should it be a problem? If I'm smart enough to have multiple options, you should be admiring me—you shouldn't be criticizing me," he said before clarifying that India isn't "purely unsentimentally transactional."

At a high level, many of the dynamics currently governing India's foreign policy pre-date the Modi government. The country's close diplomatic and military partnership with Russia dates back to the Cold War, while the India-U.S. relationship has been on an upward trajectory across multiple governments since President Bill Clinton's visit to New Delhi in 2000 ended more than two decades of tenuous relations. Meanwhile, India's decades-long enmity with China has ebbed since military clashes on their shared border in 2020 unraveled the bonhomie that Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had established during the former's first term in office.

For all Jaishankar's proclamations, "I actually see more continuity than I do change," said Shivshankar Menon, who served as India's foreign secretary and national security advisor under Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh. "Whether you call it nonalignment or strategic autonomy or multidirectional policy, on the big things ... I don't see much difference."

India's policy toward the Middle East has been one notable departure, with Modi establishing far closer ties with Israel as well as Arab nations in the Gulf—particularly Saudi

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—than any of his predecessors, even amid concerns about rising Islamophobia within India. Modi even inaugurated a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi to great fanfare in February, embracing the Emirati president as his "brother" during his visit.

The bigger shifts have been on tenor and tone, with the message that India has changed internally, and those internal changes are what need explaining to the world. "There is certainly a difference in the way this government projects foreign policy compared to previous governments—it's much more activist," Menon said. "I think there's a conscious effort to try and show that India counts in the world, that the world now looks up to it."

In conveying this message, Jaishankar has thrived.

Lisa Curtis, a former U.S. government official who dealt with Jaishankar during the 2005 nuclear deal negotiations as well as in his time at the Indian Embassy in Washington, said he has acquired a "sharper edge" in recent years but has always been effective at communicating India's position. "Since he's so steeped in the issues and so articulate on global matters, that helps India to put forward a good face on the international scene," said Curtis, now a senior fellow at the Washington-based Center for a New American Security. "I think he's helped India immensely in being accepted as a global power."

Jaishankar's pugilistic zeal has also extended to defending Modi's Hindu-nationalist ideology, including against criticism about its more illiberal elements and the treatment of minorities in India over the past decade, with increased instances of violence against Muslims in particular. "Are there people in any country, including India, who others would regard as extremist? I think it depends on your point of view," Jaishankar said during the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi in February when asked by an FP reporter how those concerns might impact India's global standing. "Some of it may be true. Some of it may be politics."

Jaishankar laid out the Modi government's position more clearly when asked a somewhat similar question during a discussion at the Royal Over-Seas League in London last November. "People today are less hypocritical about their beliefs, about their traditions, about their culture," he said. "I would say we are more Indian. We are more authentic."

As someone whose entire diplomatic career, by definition, was spent being apolitical, Jaishankar's politics before he joined Modi's government remain opaque. Until Modi made him foreign secretary, Jaishankar mostly served under governments led by the main opposition Indian National Congress party.

"The ruling political philosophy among India's academics and among India's bureaucracy is a socialist, left-leaning worldview. Jaishankar didn't ever subscribe to that," said

Indrani Bagchi, the CEO of the Ananta Aspen Centre in New Delhi who previously spent nearly two decades as the diplomatic editor for the *Times of India* newspaper.

While Modi has established himself as a geopolitical glad-hander in his own right over the past decade—with his zealous, highly symbolic hugs of world leaders often making headlines—Jaishankar’s global experience and his ability to articulate Modi’s vision on the world stage have made him the perfect interlocutor and representative.

As Bagchi put it: “He’s able to explain Modi to the world.”

**JAISHANKAR DID NOT RESPOND** to multiple interview requests for this story, but the two books he has published since becoming external affairs minister provide a window into his worldview as well as the evolution of India’s foreign policy in the five years he has been in the role.

The works are bookended by two of the world’s largest elections: The first was published in 2020, just over a year after Modi was reelected to a second term and inducted Jaishankar into his cabinet. The second came out early this year, ahead of India’s upcoming national election, in which Modi is expected to cruise to a third term. The titles of Jaishankar’s books themselves are instructive, illustrating a shift in the projection of India to the world: *The India Way* and *Why Bharat Matters*. “Bharat” is the traditional Sanskrit name for India, and its use by the Modi government as the country’s official name on some invites to the G-20 summit it hosted last September caused diplomatic ripples, with some critics and political opponents suggesting it was another example of the Modi government’s effort to reshape India in its Hindu-nationalist image. Jaishankar’s riposte was that he would “invite everybody to read” the Indian Constitution, which begins with the words “India, that is Bharat,” and treats both names as official.

Speculation of an “official” name change has not come to pass, though Modi continues to use both interchangeably. India is already referred to as Bharat within the country by its native language speakers, but the two names present another internal contrast that the Modi government has been happy to exploit—in its view, “India” represents a colonial, English-speaking, out-of-touch elite, while “Bharat” represents the real, grassroots, predominantly rural majority of the nation.

Jaishankar, too, leans into that dichotomy in his second book, referring to “India” almost exclusively through most chapters but pointedly ending each chapter with an invocation of “Bharat”—often only in the last sentence. “That is why India can only rise when it is truly Bharat,” the first chapter concludes. In the chapter on India-China relations, he writes: “It is only when our approach to China is steeped in realism that we will strengthen our image before the world as Bharat.”

Stylistic choices aside, the central argument of *Why Bharat*

*Matters* is that India must authentically embrace its cultural traditions and reclaim its status as a “civilizational” power—in much the way that China has—rather than remain beholden to a Western-led world order. “India matters because it is Bharat,” Jaishankar writes. He uses one of India’s most famous epics, the Ramayana, as a framework for thinking about that civilizational resurgence. The Hindu epic depicts the victory of the god Ram over the demon king Ravana after he abducted Ram’s wife, Sita, a story that in Hinduism symbolizes the triumph of good over evil.

Jaishankar posits that the Ramayana, in which Ram “sets the norms for personal conduct and promotes good governance,” offers lessons for geopolitics, too. Modi and members of his BJP often invoke Ram in heralding the government’s achievements, and many supporters declare their loyalty to the deity in troubling manifestations of the party’s political project, including during attacks on the country’s Muslims and Christians. Modi’s inauguration of a Ram temple in January in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya, considered Ram’s birthplace—on the site of a 16th-century Mughal mosque that was destroyed in 1992 by Hindu nationalists—represented the fulfillment of a key campaign promise.

Jaishankar presents the Ramayana as a lens for Indians to view their global rise and for the world to view India’s rise. Ram’s story is an “account of a rising power that is able to harmonize its particular interests with a commitment to doing global good,” he writes.

In both books, Jaishankar offers a detailed explanation of India’s realpolitik approach, with the most succinct encapsulation coming near the beginning of his first book, *The India Way*, a compilation of several of his speeches and analyses. India’s priorities in this era of great-power competition and growing multipolarity, he writes, should be to “engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support.”

Jaishankar dedicates a chapter in that first book to another Indian epic, the Mahabharata, which centers on a giant battle between five brothers, the Pandavas, and their cousins, the Kauravas. Jaishankar hails this as “the greatest story ever told” and “the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts on statecraft.” Today’s India can learn from the Mahabharata’s central lesson of being able to implement difficult policies without being held back by a fear of collateral consequences, Jaishankar writes, albeit doing so responsibly and while retaining the moral high ground.

“Serial violators are given little credit even when they comply, while an occasional disrupter can always justify a deviation,” he writes of the global rules-based order. “Nevertheless, the advantage of being perceived as a rule-abiding and responsible player cannot be underestimated.”



Another lesson from the Mahabharata that Jaishankar draws attention to, which he and Modi have both used to great effect, is the mastery of messaging both at home and abroad. “Where the Pandavas consistently scored over their cousins was the ability to shape and control the narrative,” he writes. “Their ethical positioning was at the heart of a superior branding.”

It is this brand that Jaishankar is attempting to establish for Modi’s new India, or Bharat—a participant on the world stage, rather than just a bystander, that will look out foremost for its own interests but is willing to engage with multiple partners.

“India is better off being liked than just being respected,” he writes.

**THE TAKE-NO-PRISONERS APPROACH** adopted by Jaishankar on the global stage has been immensely popular back home, with hyperbolic compilations of instances when he “shut down” or “destroyed” Western reporters frequently doing the rounds on social media. This reception indicates his statements may be playing to two galleries at once.

“The constituencies on the inside are now completely convinced that India’s moment has come, that India can pursue its interests without apology and without diffidence,” said Tellis of Carnegie. “I see that external-facing behavior as being shaped very much by the compulsions of internal politics.”

It’s hard to argue that the Modi government’s nationalist persona isn’t popular among the electorate. The BJP won 282 out of 543 seats in the Indian Parliament during the 2014 election, the most by a single party in three decades, bettering that performance with 303 seats in 2019. Opinion polls for the 2024 contest so far indicate the party will match, if not surpass, that performance.

While Jaishankar is now front and center on the global stage and his trajectory is unique in many ways, he’s also part of a wider pattern of Modi bringing more technocrats into his government. The current minister of railways, technology, and communications is a former bureaucrat, while the petroleum and urban affairs minister spent nearly four decades in the diplomatic corps. Modi’s priority, particularly in his second term, has been on finding executors of his policies rather than mere political apparatchiks.

“Modi was looking for wider talent to run the government, to implement his policies,” Mohan said. “Jaishankar is just one part of it. Because he’s the foreign minister, he’s the one exposed to the world, he’s the one who’s speaking

**The central argument of *Why Bharat Matters* is that India must authentically embrace its cultural traditions.**

up for India at most international forums, so he gets a lot of that visibility both at home and abroad.”

It’s also more than just visibility. As the world’s most populous country with the fifth-largest economy, India’s decisions are naturally consequential, and Jaishankar has shepherded the Modi government’s efforts to be at the center of global conversations on issues such as technology, climate change, and collective security. Along with stepping up engagements with the West, the Gulf, and the global south, India has prioritized multilateral forums and partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (with Australia, Japan, and the United States), I2U2 (with Israel, the UAE, and the United States), and the G-20. And Jaishankar has balanced both sides in each of the two major conflicts roiling the world today—maintaining India’s ties with both Russia and the West amid the war in Ukraine and continuing to call for respect of humanitarian law in Gaza and a two-state solution while condemning terrorism and even reportedly sending Indian-made drones to Israel.

Jaishankar outlined his view of India’s rise in a speech at his alma mater JNU in late February. “Bharat also means being a civilizational state rather than just a national polity. It suggests a larger responsibility and contribution, one that is expressed as a first responder, development partner, peacekeeper, bridge builder, global goods contributor, and upholder of rules, norms, and law,” he said. “It mandates the influencing of the international agenda and shaping of global narratives.”

As India gears up for its next landmark national election, scheduled to take place from April to June, questions have begun to swirl around whether Jaishankar will take the final step in his political evolution and run for election to India’s lower house of Parliament, or Lok Sabha. He entered Modi’s cabinet through the Rajya Sabha, or upper house, where lawmakers are elected by state legislators, but the Lok Sabha is where the people of India decide. His plans to run have not yet been confirmed, but his near-universal popularity will likely hold him in good stead. When asked about it, he has repeatedly deflected.

Should he be preparing for a grueling campaign, however, his growing embrace of symbolism steeped in India’s dominant religion is perhaps a natural choice. For a large swath of Indian voters, wearing one’s Hindu identity on one’s sleeve is increasingly welcome. And Modi’s potential political base is enormous, given that 80 percent of India’s population is Hindu.

“Being overtly Hindu is now OK,” Bagchi said. Whether it’s building a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi or the recent groundbreaking on the Ram temple in Ayodhya, “all of that adds to what they see Modi bringing to the table, and Jaishankar is a part of that universe.” ■

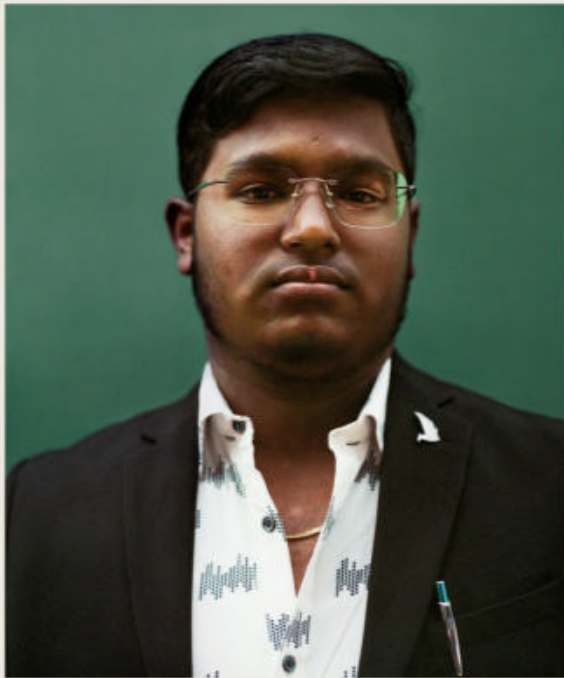
—Robbie Gramer contributed reporting for this story.

RISHI IYENGAR is a staff writer at FOREIGN POLICY.



**MEET INDIA'S  
GENERATION Z**

*The people who will shape the  
country's next decades came of age  
during the Modi era.*







BY  
 SNIGDHA  
 POONAM

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PHOTOS  
 BY  
 PRARTHNA  
 SINGH

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**I**ndia changes more in five years than many countries would in a quarter century. This is partly because it is still relatively young: The country gained independence just 76 years ago, and nearly half of its population is under the age of 25. As one would expect, then, much has happened in the five years since 2019, when Indian voters issued an overwhelming mandate to keep the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in power.

Shortly after reelection, the Modi government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir its special autonomous status, fulfilling a long-held promise to its Hindu base. The next year, COVID-19 arrived, and the country became one of the most tragic sites of the pandemic. In 2021, the government barely intervened as thousands of people died waiting for hospital beds and oxygen tanks.

Last year, India hosted the annual G-20 summit with the pomp of a country that had much to teach the righteous leaders of the Western democratic world. With the next general election approaching, the BJP has doubled down on its key priorities. In January, Modi appeared in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya to inaugurate a grand temple to the Hindu warrior-god Ram at the same site where Hindu nationalists demolished a 16th-century mosque in 1992. He called the current era a “new dawn.”

Something else took place in the last five years: India overtook China to become the world’s most populous country, with 1.4 billion people. A key driver of this population boom is the country’s youth. They face the hopes as well as the harsh realities of India as it stands today—and they will determine which way it goes from here. How have they viewed the events shaping India and the world since 2019, and who will have their vote?

**BETWEEN 2019 AND TODAY**, I have interviewed more than 100 young adults across India through my reporting and research. My first book, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World*, was published in 2018, and I wondered how much had changed. I began reporting *Dreamers* one month after Modi first became prime minister in 2014—a time of hope for India’s youth, many of whom believed that the new leader would break down barriers between them and their dreams.

Just before COVID-19 hit in 2020, I embarked on a collaboration with the photographer Prarthna Singh to depict India’s young generation through portraits and conversations with people ages 18 to 25. In the years between the 2019 and 2024 national elections, the project, titled “2024: Notes From a Generation,” took us to the small towns where we grew up and the big cities we now call home. No two conversations were alike: The people we met represented diverse backgrounds, cultural values, and political leanings.

Themes began to emerge. Most of the individuals we interviewed were dealing with challenges rooted in the political, social, and economic contexts of today’s India. These conversations comprised a historical record of a particularly fraught moment in the country’s journey. How young Indians confront the hurdles they are up against—whether finding jobs, forming identities, or exercising freedoms—will shape their own lives and India’s trajectory.

The “2024: Notes from a Generation” project began in Jaipur, Singh’s hometown, in a tent we set up on the roof of her parents’ house. Two conversations there came to represent opposite viewpoints on today’s India and young people’s place in it. Saba Naz, who was 21 years old in 2020, arrived on a cold morning wearing a denim jacket and a hijab. She was enrolled in a medical college to pursue dentistry and focused keenly on her studies.

However, things were heating up at Naz’s college in Jaipur. One day, a teacher asked the students about their views on the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which grants a pathway to citizenship for religious minorities from neighboring

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## About the Project

Previous spread: Photos from “2024: Notes From a Generation” show young people in the cities of Jaipur, Mumbai, New Delhi, and Ranchi and were taken between January 2020 and December 2023. A selection of portraits and a soundscape from the project will be on display at Mumbai’s TARQ gallery from March 9 to May 11.





Saba Naz | Jaipur | 2020

countries but excludes Muslims. (The CAA was implemented this March.) When a classmate said the law was necessary, Naz, who is Muslim, couldn't keep quiet. "I got up and confronted him," she said. "I asked, 'What is the need for this when the Indian Constitution already has a dedicated law dealing with asylum-seekers?'" The teacher shut her down.

In 2019, India's Supreme Court also issued a judgment allowing for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya—a decision that was controversial because the temple was to be built on the site of a mosque torn down by a Hindu mob. Naz was increasingly disillusioned with the situation in India. She started to closely follow the women-led protests against the CAA in Shaheen Bagh, Delhi. When a demonstration was organized in Jaipur, Naz went along with her sister to see what it was about. She returned the next day and the day after.

When I met her in January 2020, Naz had just entered the world of political protest, but she knew she was in it for the long haul. I have since met many young Muslim women who were inspired by the Shaheen Bagh protests. In an increasingly polarized country, Naz felt that she couldn't afford to be indifferent. She now had responsibilities beyond her plan to graduate college and open her own clinic. "As young people, we have to ask questions and demand change," she said.

A few hours after meeting Naz, I interviewed Lokendra Singh Raythaliya, then 23, who was on a mission to mobilize local youth to back the government on the CAA. Raythaliya

had just filed his nomination for student union president in an upcoming election at the University of Rajasthan. The students would vote for him, he said, because they knew he stood up for causes related to the BJP's nation-building.

Raythaliya joined the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, a student party affiliated with the BJP. He was inspired by Modi's own journey into politics—like himself, the prime minister came from nowhere, he said: "I grew up in a village near Jaipur. My father drives a truck, earning 10,000 rupees [around \$125] a month. I am the first person in my family to go to college." Raythaliya argued that Modi's success challenged the system in which only people with wealth or connections could advance in politics.

Raythaliya also admired the prime minister for keeping his word, whether on removing Article 370 or building the Ram temple in Ayodhya: "Whatever he says he will do, he does." The student leader believed that India's biggest problems were poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality, but the fact that Modi hadn't tackled them yet didn't make him think any less of the prime minister's capability. He gave me several reasons why he continues to have faith. I would hear them again and again: "He is working day and night," "He is changing India's image in the world," "He is taking India into the 21st century."

Naz and Raythaliya were alike in many ways: ambitious and opinionated, each driven by their responsibility as young people to change things for the better. Naz would like to see her country adhere to the secular ideals enshrined in its constitution, while Raythaliya envisions an India where individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal opportunities as those born into privilege.

However, Raythaliya was working toward the BJP's vision of India, which seems to be no place for a young Muslim woman with big dreams. He was focused on his own prospects, blending business and politics. "We have to do something by ourselves," Raythaliya said. "I have to support my family. It can't run on my father's salary as a driver."

**INDIA'S YOUTH FACE SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLES** to social and economic mobility. The country's job market is shrinking, and education and skills hardly help people gain entry. As of 2021, 1 in 5 college graduates in India was unemployed, according to the Mumbai-based Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). In rural areas, working-age individuals are increasingly lining up for manual labor provided by the government's wage-guarantee scheme. Based on the latest government data, those with full-time employment are not seeing their salaries increase.

Despite India's economy growing by about 7 percent annually, many young people feel it has nothing to offer them. The CMIE notes a troubling trend of people withdrawing from the

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job market, with the labor participation rate falling from 46 percent in 2017 to 40 percent in 2022. The frustration among job seekers is palpable, and discontent has led to riots, such as those in 2022 in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Most job seekers resign themselves to low-paid casual work or self-employment. Across India, I have run into young people who keep two jobs at a time: a chef who sells insurance policies, a carpenter who makes deliveries for a food start-up, a call center employee who draws additional income as a web designer. Some were also preparing for examinations for government jobs, but few genuinely entertained the chance of landing one.

Last year in New Delhi, I met Mithun Kumar, a 19-year-old who had recently migrated from provincial Bihar, near the border with Nepal, to join a fast-growing workforce of underpaid gig workers. Between 10 million and 15 million people work as freelancers for Indian start-ups serving the needs of the country's urban elite: commuting, delivering food, and online shopping. Kumar delivered packages for an e-commerce company that assigned him work through a mobile app. Some months, he made as much as 15,000 rupees (around \$187) and could send some home to his family.

Kumar liked the freedom to work when he wanted to, but three months into the gig, he was feeling restless about his work status. He could earn money, but he didn't have a job.



**Mithun Kumar** | New Delhi | 2023

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## Many female voters interviewed ahead of the 2019 election said they would opt for the BJP in gratitude. Yet Modi and his party might have to try harder in 2024.

His employers owed him nothing, and each day was unpredictable. He heard the company was going to change the app so that the delivery workers could no longer refuse a job during their designated hours. Kumar loved exploring the big city, but he wouldn't stay long. An uncle running a motor repair shop in Nepal had asked him to join him, working without pay for a few years but learning a real skill. He thought it was time to move on.

Few of the young men I interviewed connected their poor job prospects to the BJP's performance, instead viewing their bleak futures as a personal failure. Ramesh Kumar, who toiled in factories and construction sites, reasoned that a society can only function if the rich remained rich and the poor remained poor. The ire of those who did blame the country's leaders fizzled when confronted with their electoral choices. India, many of them told me, needed a strong leader, after all.

**BY COMPARISON, THE YOUNG WOMEN** I spoke with were angrier: at their families, for not allowing them even small freedoms; at society, for judging them; and at the political system, for keeping India from becoming a place that values women's ambitions. In Jaipur, 23-year-old Chanchal Rajawat told me that her biggest wish was that the men in her family would respect the views of their female relatives. As a child, she believed that if women earned an independent income, men would listen to what they had to say.

Gradually, Rajawat realized that wouldn't be enough. Neither her sister-in-law, who has a postgraduate degree, nor her sister, who draws a higher salary than her husband, can make their own decisions or spend their own money, she said. "It was clear to me that I would have to become an IAS officer," she added, referring to the Indian Administrative Service, the government's premier civil service. Her father said only then would she be allowed to choose where she lives and works. Since then, Rajawat's single mission has been to ace the IAS entrance exam, a test so difficult that less than 1 percent of candidates succeed.

She is confident she will pass, and after she does, she intends to give herself the liberty to have fun for the first time in her life. "I will go out at night, go to a pub, have a few drinks, roam the streets," Rajawat said.





**Supriya Kumari** | Ranchi | 2021

Across different cities, I met young women who were using education and employment to forge new paths for themselves. In New Delhi, I spoke to a woman who had run away from her home in Bihar to enroll at a university, demanding that her father pay her college fees or else she would file a domestic abuse complaint. Last year, in Mumbai's Bandra suburb, 18-year-old Saniya MQ told me that she taught herself to rap so she could "become someone" instead of dropping out of school to get married, like most other girls she knew. She already had a busy performance schedule and an album to her name.

Having only one job is not enough to support one's family. In 2021 in Ranchi, Jharkhand, I met Supriya Kumari, who started her day at a soccer field coaching young players and finished in a car showroom handling phone calls from customers. In the same city, Arti Kumari worked full time as a gym trainer while also giving private karate classes. For the young women I met, a job was much more than a source of income. It gave them agency and confidence to engage with the outside world.

In 2019, 3 out of 5 respondents in a survey of first-time female voters said they would vote without the interference of their families. Traditionally, their votes favored the opposition Indian National Congress party, but that changed with Modi's rising popularity. By 2018, according to pre-election polls, the BJP seemed to have plugged the women's vote gap. From his early days as prime minister, Modi addressed

women directly, envisioned welfare schemes targeted at their specific needs, and projected masculine authority. Many female voters I spoke to ahead of the 2019 election said they would opt for the BJP in gratitude. Post-2019 poll surveys showed the party's vote share was only marginally higher among men than women.

This year, women are expected to turn out in equal numbers to men. Yet Modi and his party might have to try harder in 2024. With every major political party seeking to court female voters, their electoral choices could carry more weight. In polling areas where welfare schemes are not the key factor influencing voters' behavior, a new generation of women may prioritize different issues.

**NO CLEAR ALTERNATIVE HAS PRESENTED ITSELF** for young people who have made up their minds against Modi. In some regions, voters make different party choices for state and national polls. In the eastern state of Jharkhand, those I interviewed from Indigenous backgrounds stressed the need to protect their ways of life and uphold their land and property rights. In the western state of Maharashtra, Yogesh Padmukh, a 19-year-old building supervisor, was leaning toward a political alliance centered on the interests of Muslims and Dalits.

But at the national level, few people expressed a strong preference when it came to non-BJP contenders. Even former Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi, who journeyed across the country on a march to "unite India" in 2022 and 2023, seemed to have limited appeal to those who oppose India's current trajectory. The only place I saw palpable support for Gandhi was Kerala, where he won a parliamentary seat in 2019. In Kozhikode, Kerala, last December, student protesters blocked the entry of the state governor, whose appointment they saw as the BJP's effort to gain a foothold in a state where calls for Hindu supremacy have little electoral currency.

That holds for a large part of southern India, a divergence that the BJP is trying to undo. It is succeeding in small pockets. In Tamil Nadu, Balaji Selavan, a 24-year-old who works in cybersecurity, admitted that many among his influential community of Tamil Brahmins were increasingly drawn to Modi's leadership style. They applauded the stock market's performance under what appears to be a stable government and celebrated India's successful mission to land a spacecraft on the moon. But Selavan said he still did not quite grasp what was so great about Modi. "He is all show and no substance," he said. ■

**SNIGDHA POONAM** is an independent journalist based in India and the United Kingdom and the author of *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World*.





## BECOMING INDIAN

*A novelist considers how  
his sense of national identity  
has changed.*

BY  
AMITAVA  
KUMAR



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**I** was born and grew up in India, and I'm trying to remember when I became Indian.

In the summer of 1986, a police constable on a bicycle came to my home in the city of Patna to conduct an inquiry. This visit was in response to my application for a passport. Two weeks later, my passport was ready. I was 23 years old, preparing to come to the United States to attend a graduate program in literature. Did I first become Indian when I acquired my passport?

If so, it would be paradoxical that I became Indian at the very moment I was most eager to get away from India.

But there must have been earlier occasions.

I was 8 when Bangladesh was liberated with the help of the Indian Army in December 1971. I had a vague sense that the Indian armed forces, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had beaten the Pakistanis and that they had also outfoxed the rotund man with thick glasses in newspaper photographs, Henry Kissinger. Maybe it was then that I adopted my nascent national identity?

When I was a little older, my father's job took us to Bokaro, a city in eastern India where the Russians had helped build a steel factory. One day, I met the Russian engineers and their families at an event where they were giving out gifts, including pins with Vladimir Lenin's head on them. This first real encounter with foreigners, maybe this was the day when I thought of myself as Indian?

I'm forgetting something.

From my early childhood, my family would travel from our ancestral village in Champaran to a nearby town across the border in Nepal. This was in pre-liberalization India, when markets were closed to foreign products. In Nepal, we could buy Chinese and Japanese products. For our trip back, women hid new chiffon sarees under their garments. In my pockets, I would have anything from a new transistor radio to a sleek camera or just a pack of peppermint-flavored Wrigley's gum. My first typewriter, a red portable Brother, was bought during one of these trips not long after I had entered college.

Passports were not required during these visits to Nepal. The cycle rickshaws we hired trundled past the customs crossing without rigorous checks. But what I want to say is that the knowledge that I was breaking the law (smuggling!) weighed on me more than the issue of national difference.

Now that I think about it, a sense of a self and the idea of this self also inhabiting a particular place, a place as large as a country, only came to me when I saw the outlines of a national literature, that is, when I had grasped the notion of a body of literature that told our stories. In other words, sometime during my late teens I became Indian because I had acquired a complex language—a gift given by writers who had come before me—that described the people and places around me.

I admired the grasp that Khushwant Singh, Dom Moraes, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ved Mehta, and a young Salman Rushdie had on a broad but also intimate language that established them as Indian, one that embraced history, landscape, people, and their mixed identities. Singh's 1956 novel, *Train to Pakistan*, in particular was instructive about the history of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs having lived together peaceably and then, caught in the cataclysm of history, transforming into each other's murderers. Even V.S. Naipaul, born in distant Trinidad, was Indian because he had so accurately, if dyspeptically, depicted the spaces in which was staged the drama of our large and untidy collective identity.

I should clarify that I wasn't at all fluent in that language myself. In fact, I felt quite inadequate. In the 1980s, when I entered my 20s, India saw riots, a huge industrial disaster in Bhopal, and the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the killings of Sikhs that followed it. But it was as if I was looking at these events standing mutely behind thick glass. More years would pass before I could employ a vocabulary to communicate in that language of national belonging and translate that trauma onto the page in hopes of a reckoning.

By the time a Hindu mob destroyed the old mosque in the city of Ayodhya on Dec. 6, 1992, I was ready to speak out. I recognized that a planned effort by an organized, ultranationalist party had unleashed the demon of hatred in Indian society. I was finishing my doctoral studies at the time and saw zealots from my own Hindu community in the United States donating gold bricks for the construction of a temple on the disputed site. In the books I wrote over the ensuing decade, *Passport Photos* and then *Bombay-London-New York*, I argued that in the Indian diaspora, the soft emotion of nostalgia had been turned into the hard emotion of fundamentalism.

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In the early 1990s, I was also training to be a scholar of post-colonial literature—a term describing, for the most part, the literature of countries in Africa and Asia that had achieved freedom from colonialism. My peers included people from Ethiopia, Ireland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. When we read, say, Rushdie or Jamaica Kincaid, Nadine Gordimer or Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Edward Said or Nawal El Saadawi, we were focusing on critiques of colonialism and its lingering history.

The freedom struggles of our own countries had been carried out under the flag of nationalism. But decades after independence, it was difficult to ignore the actions of our own governments run by the privileged and the powerful. We faulted our own postcolonial states for having produced parodies of nationalism.

But this produced a peculiar problem. If one said anything negative about India, for instance, one invited the charge of representing the “colonial mindset.” There was the criticism of writing in English, also that of living abroad. All variety of narrow nationalists accused my field of postcolonial studies of being inauthentic, a prisoner of the Western mentality that had traditionally looked down on the countries of the East. This situation was rich with irony.

In 2002, riots in the state of Gujarat killed, by official count, 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus, though other estimates place the total number killed as high as 2,000. The chief minister of Gujarat at that time was Narendra Modi, and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was also in power in New Delhi. In the aftermath of the riots, I reported from Ahmedabad’s relief camps for Muslim refugees and carried on my investigations into religious violence elsewhere, including in various parts of Kashmir. My writings earned me a place on a “hit list” run by Hindu ultranationalists in the United States, and BJP supporters accused me of being anti-Hindu and anti-India. India’s right wing saw me as a foreigner.

The Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore, a part of whose song “Bharoto Bhagyo Bidhata” was adopted as India’s national anthem, wrote in a 1917 essay that “nationalism is a great menace.” The sense of a national identity always relies on the idea of an “other” who is the enemy; in the case of India, it is not only a traditional rival such as Pakistan but also the enemy within, the non-Hindu, most commonly the Muslim. Since the BJP’s rise to power under Modi in 2014, Muslims have been fixed as that dirty, undesirable “other.” In the nationalist consciousness, they are the true non-Indians.

Tagore was warning us against what he called “social slavery” that “impels us to make the life of our fellow-beings a burden to them where they differ from us even in such a thing as their choice of food.” More than a century after Tagore wrote his essay, his words appear like grim prophecy when mobs have lynched Muslims in different parts of India on the

## We faulted our own postcolonial states for having produced parodies of nationalism.

suspicion of eating beef. In 2014, Modi supporters attempted to send prominent writer U.R. Ananthamurthy a ticket for a flight to Pakistan when he expressed strong opposition to the election of Modi and the BJP that year. The Hindu ultranationalists would like to send to Pakistan—alongside India’s Muslims—all those Indian citizens who dare dissent and whom they call “anti-nationals.”

This year’s inauguration of the Ram temple at the site of the demolished mosque in Ayodhya, with the prime minister administering the rites, achieved the BJP’s goal of deifying the Indian nationalist identity as Hindu. The frenzied state-aided celebrations, the kowtowing in the media, and the establishment of a mythical history as a near-constitutional fact put the seal of majoritarianism on everyday life.

The recent events represent the culmination of a process that has upended all that was meant by “postcolonial.” For me and many others, to be postcolonial was to share a sense of historical kinship with others who had suffered under the lash of colonialism. Chinua Achebe spoke to us, and Kincaid was recognizable to us, because they were witnesses to what our countries, too, had experienced. To be postcolonial also entailed the right to critique our current regimes, because our tainted present wasn’t what we had been promised, and this mandated a fight for greater equality and the rule of law. Yet Hindu ultranationalists no longer talk of British rule as colonial conquest. Instead, for them, it is the arrival of Mughal armies 500 years ago, and the Islamic dynasty they established, that signals the onset of colonialism.

This is a cunning strategy on the part of the BJP and its increasing ranks of faithful followers. By painting the Muslim as the enemy, the Hindu right succeeds in consolidating the Hindu vote across caste and class lines, all unified in opposition to ever more marginalized minorities. Prices, unemployment, and economic inequality are all rising, but we need not address those problems because our leaders have told us that the real danger is 14.2 percent of India’s population.

Am I Indian? Yes, if it means finding the common cause of freedom across religious lines. No, if it means the idolatry of a nation built around a singular religious identity and the cult worship of a single leader. ■

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AMITAVA KUMAR is a professor of English at Vassar College and Cullman fellow at the New York Public Library. He is the author of, most recently, the novel *My Beloved Life*.





## ADVANCING A GLOBAL AFFAIRS CAREER THROUGH GRADUATE EDUCATION

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### GRADUATE EDUCATION SPRING 2024

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**A** look at some of *Foreign Policy*'s headlines—such as “What AI Will Do to Elections” and “Italy’s Energy Deal Faces Backlash in Africa”—provides insight into the evolution of international relations as a discipline and career path. Transboundary, large-scale challenges, such as war and climate change, and technological advancements, including cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, are intersecting and demanding a broader range of knowledge and skills from international relations professionals.

Consequently, “multidisciplinary” and “interdisciplinary” are now the keywords in graduation education. This approach allows students to build a curriculum that combines several specializations that align with their interests and career objectives.

With this type of career preparation, professionals can also more easily move between sectors. This is a growing trend as conventional sector boundaries blur and there become more opportunities within the private sector to make a meaningful difference.

In this *FP Guide*, leaders from top-tier universities talk about employment trends in international relations and how they are shaping graduate education to prepare students for success in this competitive field.



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# Diverse Campus, Flexible Curriculum Prepare Graduates for Fulfilling International Careers



**“SIPA’s interdisciplinary curriculum and emphasis on practical skills development prepare graduates for diverse career paths in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, both domestically and internationally.”**

–Grace Han, Executive Director of Admissions and Financial Aid, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

Diversity is at the heart of Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), both in its student body and graduate program learning pathways. Students hail from nearly 100 countries, with more than 50 languages spoken on campus. SIPA’s interdisciplinary, flexible curriculum includes rigorous academic study and contextual learning experiences. The combination of these elements helps foster a deeper understanding of today’s pressing global issues, from geopolitical stability to preserving democratic governance to technological innovation and its impact on people.

Students can pursue a Master of International Affairs (MIA) degree or Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree, both of which are 21-month programs that are well suited for early-career professionals.

“SIPA’s MIA and MPA programs each feature a core curriculum that provides a firm grounding in economics, quantitative analysis, and management,” explains Grace Han, executive director of admissions and financial aid. “In addition to these requirements, students pursue a more flexible curriculum to gain more specialized knowledge in one of several concentrations, with opportunity for additional elective study as well.”

There is a broad range of program concentrations, which include: International Security Policy, International Finance and Economic



Policy, Economic and Political Development, Human Rights and Humanitarian Policy, Energy and Environment, and Urban and Social Policy.

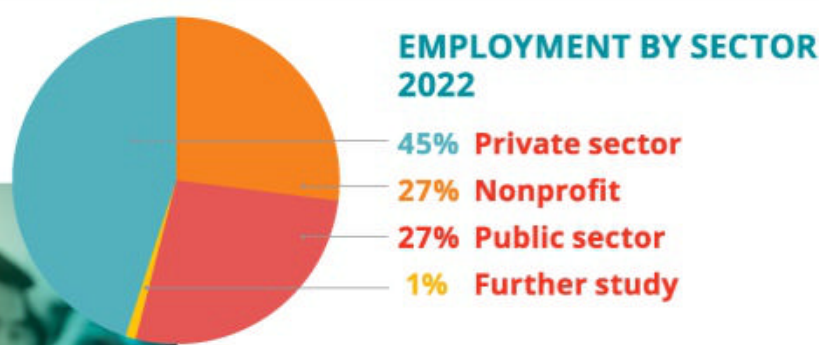
A required capstone workshop elevates and distinguishes SIPA’s MIA and MPA programs from others. During this experiential learning opportunity, teams of students are positioned as consultants for real-world organizations to solve current problems.

SIPA students graduate prepared to work in a diverse range of organizations across sectors, but Han notes a specific trend that has taken shape in recent years. “Some are surprised to learn how many SIPA graduates enter the private sector—more than 45 percent of the members of SIPA’s class of 2022, for example, versus about 27 percent each for the public and nonprofit sectors,” Han says. “Compared to previous generations, our societies are much more willing to use public-private partnerships and other creative tools to address the challenges of public policy. This opens more opportunities for SIPA graduates, whatever sector they technically work in.”

Additionally, some graduates have chosen the entrepreneurial route, launching start-ups and social enterprises, such as Revel, Laboratoria, and openigloo. Han says that “for students who are dedicated to a start-up journey, SIPA and Columbia University are committed to providing resources and guidance,” which includes plentiful networking opportunities, professional development programs, and career advancement workshops.

**Contact**

<https://www.sipa.columbia.edu>  
[sipa\\_admission@columbia.edu](mailto:sipa_admission@columbia.edu)  
212-854-6216



**EXAMPLE OF EMPLOYERS**

**Public sector**

World Bank, US Agency for International Development (USAID)

**Private sector**

EY, Deloitte, Morgan Stanley

**Nonprofit**

Bezos Earth Fund, National Public Radio





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**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE**

# Jobs in Political Risk, Government, and Intelligence Intrigue Students

**“The alumni community here is bigger, stronger, and more engaged than any alumni community I’ve worked with before. It’s the alumni recognizing they need to help build up the next generation of leaders.”**



–Nathan Slusher, Career Center Executive Director, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Career planning and development is a primary focus for Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service (SFS). Top student interests include diplomacy, intelligence and security, international business, international development, and political risk. These interests also align with employment trends that the School of Foreign Service has observed among its master’s degree graduates.

The two sectors that employed the largest share of SFS graduates between 2019 and 2023 were the private sector (37 percent average) and public sector (36 percent average), according to SFS Career Center Executive Director Nathan Slusher. The other sectors that graduates went into were the nonprofit (22 percent) and multilateral (5 percent) sectors.

Among graduates taking private sector jobs, many were interested in consulting, especially in the subfields of political risk, management consulting, and government contracting. Deloitte, Guidehouse, and Booz Allen Hamilton were three of the biggest employers.

The public sector—especially intelligence organizations—has always been keen on SFS students because of Georgetown University’s focus on public service, as a Jesuit institution, and the



school’s location in Washington, DC, Slusher says. Top 2023 public employers were the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, and Commerce, the Intelligence Community, the US Agency for International Development, and the US Congress. The State Department was the single largest 2023 employer, with 33 hires.

Recent SFS graduates taking government jobs bucks a nationwide trend of an aging US government workforce. At the end of 2020, only 7 percent of permanent full-time federal employees were younger than 30, compared with 20 percent in the broader labor market, according to the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization focused on improving government. The reasons that were cited included lengthy and convoluted hiring processes and an outdated pay system.

One source of support for job-hunting graduates across all industries is a network of engaged alumni, Slusher says. The School of Foreign Service celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019, which gives graduates a wide swath of alumni resources to draw from.

“The alumni community here is bigger, stronger, and more engaged than any alumni community I’ve worked with before,” Slusher says. “That goes back to the Jesuit value of ‘people for others.’”

**Contact**

<https://sfs.georgetown.edu/admissions/graduate-programs>  
sfsgrad@georgetown.edu  
202-687-9267

**JOBS BY SECTOR**

- Private sector 37%
- Public sector 36%
- Nonprofit 22%
- Multilateral 5%

**EMPLOYMENT LOCATION EXAMPLES**

- Colombia
- India
- Indonesia
- Nigeria
- Qatar
- Switzerland
- Turkey
- United Kingdom

**GRADUATES EMPLOYED**

- Domestically 87%
- Internationally 13%

**TOP EMPLOYERS**

- Booz Allen Hamilton
- Chemonics International
- Center for Strategic and International Studies
- Deloitte
- US Agency for International Development
- US Department of Defense
- US Department of Homeland Security
- US Intelligence Community
- US Department of State
- World Bank Group



Aggregate graduation outcomes data for the classes of 2019-2023.



SFS

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## Professional Development and Field Experience Prepare Graduates to Lead



**“Our program gives graduates the confidence to apply their knowledge and be impactful leaders in the field who will create a more just and peaceful world.”**



–McKenna Pencak, Associate Director of Professional Development and Alumni Engagement, Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame

From day one, students in the Master of Global Affairs (MGA) program at the University of Notre Dame’s Keough School of Global Affairs gain real-world, hands-on experience to prepare them for their postgraduate career. With a class size of approximately 45 students spread over the three concentrations of International Peace Studies, Sustainable Development, and Governance and Policy, this two-year, on-campus program places experiential learning at the core of the curriculum.

“All students participate in a fully funded field experience,” says McKenna Pencak, the Keough School’s associate director of professional development and alumni engagement. “Our students in the sustainable development and governance and policy concentrations spend three months in the field with a partner organization during the summer between their first and second years. Our peace studies students do a six-month internship in the field at an organization of their choosing anywhere in the world.”

Career preparation begins in the first year, with plentiful professional development opportunities from experts on the Keough School staff and graduate career consultants at Notre Dame’s Center for Career Development. This includes one-on-one advising and the Career Colloquium workshop series, which helps students define and meet their postgraduate goals. The Colloquium includes practical skill and tool development, such as resume and cover letter preparation and learning how to effectively network and interview, as well as an opportunity to connect with alumni. The MGA program

also organizes on-campus career talks and trips to major cities to learn about different career paths in global affairs.

“More than half of graduates go into the nonprofit sector,” Pencak notes. “The remaining graduates start careers in government and the public and private sectors. We have active alumni at Catholic Relief Services, Clinton Health Access Initiative, Oxfam, the United Nations, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Institute of Peace, Chemonics, and the National Immigrant Justice Center.”

The Keough School also offers grants that support students in pursuing additional professional development opportunities that are offered outside of the MGA program, such as attending conference presentations and participating in language studies.

“Throughout their two years here, students develop cross-cultural competence, practical skills, and training to help them meet their post-graduate career goals, and a broad worldview,” says Pencak. “Our program gives graduates confidence to apply their knowledge and be impactful leaders in the field who will create a more just and peaceful world.”

### WHERE KEOUGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WORK



US Department of Justice  
Chemonics International  
US Department of State  
Oxfam  
World Bank Group  
Mercy Corps  
International Rescue Committee  
Catholic Relief Services  
Meta  
United Nations Population Fund  
NSA Office of Nuclear Verification

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**“Our students are not only keenly aware that they’re inheriting a world beset with challenges, they are also eager to do something about it.”**

–Bhaskar Chakravorti, Dean of Global Business, The Fletcher School, Tufts University



On many minds at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, no matter what the master’s or PhD program, “are three big issues that cross international boundaries: data, money, and greenhouse gases,” says Bhaskar Chakravorti, dean of global business at The Fletcher School. “Those issues are very much the topic of conversation in practically every class.”

They also help explain graduates’ career choices. “We are seeing an increasing footprint in the private sector,” Chakravorti says, echoing employment statistics, which show, over the past few years, a boost in the percentage of “Fletcherites” entering the private sector and a decrease in those taking public-sector jobs. Numbers for the nonprofit and international organization sectors remain steady.

A few factors are at play. For one, the private sector’s influence has grown and, accordingly, so have the number of opportunities to

make a meaningful difference, “whether as part of a business unit committed to environmental responsibility or social equity, or part of an organization advancing impact investing,” Chakravorti explains. At the same time, budgetary shifts at employers like the United Nations and World Bank have increased the need to leverage consultants and contract workers.

To prepare its 500-plus students, Fletcher immerses them in multidisciplinary

studies taught by what Chakravorti calls “the complete table”—faculty representing all aspects of global affairs, including development, geopolitics, innovation, technology, and international law. The approach is apropos, seeing as many Fletcher graduates are focused on acquiring the skills needed to become problem solvers, he says, adding: “someone able to wrap their mind around an issue, bring evidence to the table, analyze it, and arrive at some kind of action. The destination for people in that space is consulting.”

Accordingly, one of Fletcher’s most popular programs is the Master of International Business, which requires that students focus on two fields of study—one in business and one in global affairs. Examples of the school’s many career-preparation opportunities include the Fletcher Social Investment Group, a student-run organization offering services to Boston-area nonprofits and companies trying to solve specific challenges; and Digital Planet, a research initiative in which students, studying technologies’ effects across 125 countries, engage in cutting-edge research and deliver outcomes to companies.

“It’s great synergy,” Chakravorti says. “The company gets cutting-edge advice, the students help solve a hard, real-world, market-facing challenge an enterprise has and, simultaneously, they advance a significant action—on climate or social inequalities or other issues.”

**Contact**

<https://fletcher.tufts.edu>  
fletcheradmissions@tufts.edu  
617-627-3040

**96% OF FLETCHER STUDENTS FOUND MEANINGFUL PLACEMENTS WITHIN 6 MONTHS OF GRADUATING (2023)**

**JOBS BY SECTOR**

- 34% Private sector
- 33% Nonprofit/non-governmental organizations
- 24% Public sector
- 8% Multilateral/International organizations







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# Multidisciplinary Curriculum and Career Planning Foster Flexibility and Public-Private Sector Transitions

“Students who come to SAIS aspire to tackle global issues and solve problems, and they’re discovering numerous approaches to shaping their careers and addressing the world’s challenges.”



–Julie Nussdorfer, Associate Director of Global Careers, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University

Amid the ever-changing terrain of international affairs careers, Julie Nussdorfer, associate director of global careers at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), has observed several transformative trends. Notably, there’s a growing demand for data analytics skills, coupled with ongoing discourse on the role of artificial intelligence—its risks and benefits—among employers.

Simultaneously, the global push for sustainability and decarbonization continues to propel SAIS students toward social-impact careers in the technology, environment, and energy spaces.

Nussdorfer underscores a trend in students’ recognition of the changing nature of career paths. In a post-COVID era, the conventional boundaries between private and public sectors are blurring, enabling students to be more flexible in leveraging their skills and knowledge across industries and sectors. “Previously, students would train to enter either private or public sectors, but now we’re seeing a lot of crossover and overlap,” she explains. “People in the public sector with knowledge of the defense and intelligence industry are transitioning into the tech industry or vice versa.”

Built on life-design principles, the school’s multidisciplinary curriculum promotes curiosity, versatility, adaptability, and flexibility—indispensable traits for thriving in an evolving field and making a positive impact on the world.

This curiosity-driven approach to education and career planning encourages students to explore a broader range of applications of their abilities and interests. Additionally, SAIS facilitates engagement through classes that integrate

academic knowledge with professional skills, global career events, personalized career support and workshops, career treks, internships, and meaningful interactions with alumni and potential employers that aid students in building a varied and extensive professional network.



## MAIR PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

### EMPLOYMENT LOCATIONS

83% United States  
17% International

### INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT LOCATIONS

- Belgium
- Canada
- China
- Germany
- Guatemala
- India
- Indonesia
- Italy
- Japan
- Morocco
- Nepal
- People’s Republic of China
- Rwanda
- Singapore
- Spain
- Taiwan

### EMPLOYER SAMPLE

- Amazon
- Center for European Policy Analysis
- Deloitte
- European Parliament
- Goldman Sachs
- International Monetary Fund
- McKinsey & Company
- United States Institute of Peace
- US Department of Defense
- US Department of State
- US Department of Treasury
- World Bank Group

*Data collected from 81% of MAIR students who graduated between August 2021-May 2022.*

“When students come to SAIS, they may have something in mind, but as they’re exposed to broader paths, they often uncover new career options that were not within their initial purview,” says Nussdorfer. “We encourage students to listen to their curiosity and try out different things. It gives them a chance to explore and find their best fit.”

SAIS is also broadening the ways in which students can pursue their degree. The school’s catalog now includes specialized one-year master’s programs like the Master of Arts in Strategy, Cybersecurity, and Intelligence (MASCI) and the Master of International Public Policy (MIPP), as well as online master’s programs focusing on sustainable energy and global risk. The school’s traditional two-year Master of Arts in International Relations (MAIR) remains versatile, allowing students to apply their knowledge and skills across diverse career paths.

### Contact

<https://sais.jhu.edu>  
[sais.dc.admissions@jhu.edu](mailto:sais.dc.admissions@jhu.edu)  
202-663-5700







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# Flexible Curriculum Allows Students to Follow Their Global Passions

“Whether a student is interested in the environment, development, national security, or any other global arena, they have the opportunity to take classes across the campus.”



–Elizabeth Gill, Assistant Dean for Career Development, Jackson School of Global Affairs, Yale University



The most popular courses for today’s global affairs students match developments making headlines: artificial intelligence and disinformation (fake news), authoritarianism and the weakening of democracy, and the environment.

Master’s degree students at Yale University’s Jackson School of Global Affairs who want to study these hot topics have the advantage of a curriculum that allows them to design individualized courses of study.

“The real heart of our program is the flexibility with the curriculum,” says Elizabeth Gill, assistant dean for career development.

Of the 16 credits required for the Jackson School’s two-year Master in Public Policy in Global Affairs degree, only four are required courses. The quantitative core classes are in statistics and economics, and the social science core classes

are in comparative politics and history. The remainder of a student’s coursework is structured around their career objectives. For example, someone interested in the intersection of AI, cybersecurity, and technology policy could take a multidisciplinary approach that combines coursework

at the Jackson School, Yale Law School, and the Department of Computer Science.

Small by design, the master’s program graduates 35 to 40 students annually, roughly half of which are international students. Six months after graduation, 100 percent either secure a job or enroll in an advanced degree program to further their education, Gill says.

Of graduates who take a job, 40 percent go into the public sector—the US government or the government of an international student’s home country, or a multinational organization, such as the United Nations or World Bank. For example, a 2023 graduate now works as an analysis lead for an AI task force for the UK government.

The remaining 60 percent of graduates are split between the private sector and nonprofit organizations. Two examples of jobs accepted by 2023 graduates include a senior associate at the Albright Stonebridge Group consulting firm, with a focus on Latin America, and a senior strategy and policy analyst for the nonprofit MITRE Corporation, working on national security.

Students are offered numerous networking opportunities, but one advantage exists right inside the classroom, where Jackson School faculty include prominent scholars and leading global affairs practitioners, such as Ernesto Zedillo, former president of Mexico; Bisa Williams, formerly US ambassador to Niger; and retired four-star US Army Gen. David Petraeus.

“These people can make connections or write a strong letter of recommendation or give advice on the sector they are interested in,” Gill says.

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— ADAM HAMMER, M.A. '20

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—John Ciorciari, Dean, Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University

One of the largest international affairs schools in the country, Indiana University’s Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies distinguishes itself by joining an international affairs education with the intensive study of strategic languages and world regions.

The Hamilton Lugar School offers more than 80 language programs, more than any university in the country, and more than 20 area studies centers, 10 of which are recognized as US Department of Education Title VI National Resource Centers. The school was recently awarded \$17.7 million from the Title VI program—more than any US college or university—which includes Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships that directly support students.

Hamilton Lugar combines language and area studies expertise with a strong international policy focus, featuring faculty experts on East Asian security, international law, global financial regulation, and climate change.

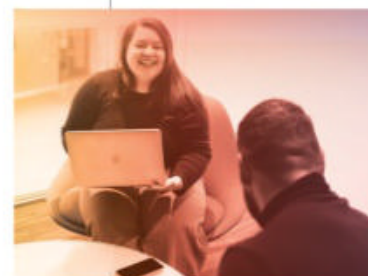
Hamilton Lugar School alumni build on the legacy of its namesakes, Rep. Lee H. Hamilton and the late Sen. Richard G. Lugar, both Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients and two of the most influential foreign policy voices of their generation.

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# THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF CLIMATE POLICY

**R**

**ISING GLOBAL** temperatures and increasingly frequent and severe weather events make effective

climate-related policy and investments ever more urgent. If unabated, severe and irreparable climate change could further destabilize food and water systems, contribute to migration, and adversely impact human health and security around the world. Paradoxically, if not carefully designed, climate policies could risk many of those same impacts, contributing to a political backlash against climate action. What are the most efficient and effective technology

pathways to address climate change, and how can climate policies be crafted to help ensure near-term impact?

World leaders and experts are seeking to galvanize action and mobilize investment for sustainable energy solutions. Against this backdrop, *Foreign Policy* and Florida International University at **FIU's Third Annual Environment Forum** offered a plenary discussion and needed debate about the potential and pitfalls of climate policy, and the climate-related strategies capable of driving impact at scale.



# REVIEW

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## The Lonely Prophet

What the world got wrong about Frantz Fanon.

*By Kevin Ochieng Okoth*

ARCHIVES FRANTZ FANON; GETTY IMAGES



**T**he name Frantz Fanon has become inseparable from the history of decolonization. It is almost impossible to speak of anti-colonial violence or the failings of postcolonial elites without referring to the figure who inspired generations of activists to revolt against colonialism. Since the publication of his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, in 1961, Fanon has been idealized by generations of activists in the global south and beyond. For them, the Black Martinican and Frenchman who devoted himself to Algerian independence is the fearless and uncompromising prophet of revolution.

The subtitle of Adam Shatz's new biography, *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon*, suggests that his life was not so simple. Shatz, the U.S. editor for the *London Review of Books*, is an expert guide through the thicket of Fanon-lore that has emerged since his death in 1961, and his book offers a compelling account of Fanon's transformation from a medical student into a global icon of anti-colonial revolution.

But *The Rebel's Clinic* tells another, more tragic story, too: the tale of a young Black man from the French colonies who never really belonged anywhere, no matter how closely he identified with a nation or cause. Despite his deep attachment to Algeria, he could never really embody the Algerian revolution, as hagiographic accounts of his life have suggested. His life and body of work were too complicated to be branded in this way. Although Fanon was a remarkable thinker, he could be conflicted and even contradictory, and simplifying him only simplifies the difficult and often fraught work that must go into anti-colonial movements.

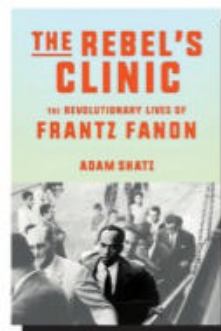
**THE FIRST WORDS** a young Fanon learned to spell were "*Je suis français*." As a child in Fort-de-France, the capital of the French colony of Martinique, in the 1920s and '30s, he enjoyed the privileges of a typical bourgeois family: servants, piano lessons, and a weekend home outside the city. This was not uncommon for Antillean *évolués*, or assimilated colonial subjects whose European education let them rise up the colonial hierarchy. Like many of their class, the Fanons looked down on the "*nègres*" from France's African colonies, who they believed weren't *really* French.

Fanon's parents identified so deeply with the French Republic that they behaved "more French than the French," Shatz writes. As for Fanon, whose father was largely absent, Shatz recounts that he would collect several adoptive fathers in his short life but the "symbolic father represented by France" was by far the most important. Fanon strongly believed in the universal values of the republic: liberty, equality, and fraternity.

It was not until Fanon joined the Free French Forces in World War II that his faith in European civilization was shaken. In the army, he witnessed the French generals' racism; the rigid separation between white, Antillean, and African soldiers; and the horrors of trench warfare. "Yet the incident that seems to have hurt him most," Shatz writes, "was returning to Toulon [in southern France], during the celebrations marking the liberation of France, and finding that no Frenchwoman was willing to share a dance with him." Though Fanon had risked his life for France, it would never truly accept him, and he never recovered from the rejection he experienced when he finally arrived in the *métropole*.

After the war, he studied medicine in Lyon, a city Shatz describes as "notorious for its suspicion of outsiders," and eventually practiced as a psychiatrist there. Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), grew out of a period of intense frustration and suffering. He dictated the book to his fiancée, Josie Dublé, in a burst of anger and creativity. (Fanon never typed anything himself.) It was his reckoning with a city, and a country, that he was beginning to despise—an attempt to make sense of what he described as the "lived experience" of Black men in white society. The desire to "become" white, he concluded, alienated racialized people from themselves, and assimilation constrained their freedom. Today, the book is celebrated as a foundational text in the study of Blackness and of alienation. But at the time, few readers appreciated or understood Fanon's methodology—a synthesis of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, memoir, and social theory.

As Fanon's awareness of the appalling situation of Algerians in France grew, he gradually lost "interest in the psychological dilemmas of middle-class people of color like himself," Shatz writes. His psychiatric study of the "North African syndrome"—a mysterious illness that plagued France's Algerian population—was a turning point. Algerians kept going to French doctors saying they were in pain but without clear physical symptoms. Fanon discovered that their pain couldn't simply be dismissed as "imaginary," as most French doctors had done. The racism of French society was making Algerians sick, he believed, and their ailments could only be treated by addressing this uncomfortable truth.



*The Rebel's Clinic:  
The Revolutionary  
Lives of Frantz  
Fanon*

ADAM SHATZ, FARRAR,  
STRAUS AND GIROUX,  
464 PP., \$32,  
JANUARY 2024





An undated photo shows Frantz Fanon (center top) in Tunis, Tunisia, with the staff of Africa's first psychiatric day clinic, which he founded.

For Fanon, mental illness could never be divorced from social conditions. He considered himself an activist and, Shatz writes, “approached psychiatry as if it were an extension of politics by other means.”

*The Rebel's Clinic* is at its best when Shatz describes Fanon's early efforts to develop an anti-colonial psychiatry. In 1953, Fanon was hired as the director of the French-run Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria. His time there opened his eyes to the brutality of colonialism, and under his guidance, the hospital transformed into a center for experiments in social therapy. Initially, the Algerian Muslim patients regarded Fanon with suspicion. To them, his cultural attitudes represented those of France. But, as Shatz writes, Fanon had a plan:

Working with a team of Muslim nurses, he created a *café maure*, a traditional Moorish café where men drink coffee and play cards, and later an “Oriental salon” for the hospital's small group of female Muslim patients. Muslim musicians and storytellers came to perform; Muslim festivals were celebrated; and, for the first time in the hospital's history, the mufti of Blida paid a visit during the breaking of the Ramadan fast.

French colonialism dehumanized Algerians by destroying their culture. By reminding them of their culture, Fanon hoped to help his patients assert a collective identity, which would give them the confidence to undergo a process of “disalienation” and fight back against the French.

At Blida, the Algerian nurses shared Fanon's radical politics, and together, they secretly treated fighters with the National Liberation Front (FLN), which sought to overthrow French colonial rule. The hospital staff formed a militant health care collective that challenged coercive approaches to psychiatry. For them, Blida wasn't an isolated institution where patients were locked away to recover; rather, their work in the hospital was part of the struggle waged outside its grounds. Fanon

and his staff even introduced day hospitalization so patients could maintain ties to their social environment.

In Shatz's view, Fanon's dedication to health care was perhaps his most important contribution to the Algerian revolution. (He never engaged in active combat during the war.) Providing health care remained a priority for the FLN throughout the years of fighting.

After the French discovered Fanon was secretly an FLN member, he fled to Tunis, Tunisia's capital, where the FLN's provisional government would be based, and took up a new role in the movement: He still treated patients traumatized by war but also worked as a propagandist championing the FLN's armed struggle. Although his democratic vision of a people-led revolution clashed with the FLN's authoritarianism, he dutifully justified its policies to an international audience. As Shatz points out, the strategic use of the phrase “we Algerians” in his articles for *El Moudjahid*, the FLN's French-language newspaper, was a way to prove how closely he identified with the Algerian cause. His writing and speeches during this period helped create the myth of Fanon as a leader of the revolution.

*The Rebel's Clinic* pushes back against this mythologizing. Fanon's identification with Algeria grew as the war intensified, but he was an outsider: He spoke neither Arabic nor Berber, was not Muslim, and had come to Algeria as a representative of the colonial government. And while FLN leaders respected Fanon's medical work, they never quite trusted him. Even as they presented him as a spokesperson of the movement to international audiences, Fanon had little influence over its direction and politics. When he learned that a close friend, key FLN figure Abane Ramdane, had been assassinated by another FLN faction, he was devastated. But he never questioned the leadership's decision and refused to break ranks. Fanon had become a captive of the revolution he'd hoped to ignite.

Shatz notes that *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon's first book about Algeria, “reads like a record of revolutionary hopes soon to be dashed.” Written in Tunis in 1959, the book gives an idealized account of Algerian liberation, pieced together from Fanon's memories of the war's early stages. But the social changes he praised—the emancipation of Algerian women (the subject of his famous essay “Algeria Unveiled”), the dissolution of classes, and the turn toward secularism—were never realized in practice.

Fanon never really understood his adopted home, especially when it came to religion. His belief in the revolution was so absolute that he failed to consider how the conservative, Islamist forces in the FLN might shape its outcome. Like Ramdane, Fanon argued for an independent Algeria that would welcome everyone who renounced their colonial privilege. He believed that the roles of “settler” and “native”



ascribed by colonialism were never fixed. After independence, he hoped, Algerians would finally be able to “discover the man behind the colonizer,” as sympathetic Europeans too became equal citizens in a secular Algeria. But, as Shatz argues, these ideals clashed with the FLN leadership’s more narrowly Arab-Islamic vision of post-independence Algeria. Even the people Fanon had hoped would lead the revolution—Algeria’s poor peasants—embraced the FLN’s social conservatism.

To avoid conflict over its social policies, the provisional government promoted secular leftists to diplomatic positions in West Africa. In 1960, Fanon was stationed in Accra, and he soon came to share the Pan-Africanist views of Ghana’s president, Kwame Nkrumah, who insisted that all Africans would be united by their common struggle against colonialism. Fanon was convinced that Algeria would lead the rest of the continent toward liberation. But ironically, his influence in the FLN waned as he became more famous, and he “would have little success in ‘Algerianizing’ the strategies of African liberation struggles,” Shatz writes.

Fanon wanted to convince African anti-colonial movements to engage in guerrilla warfare, as the FLN had done. But their leaders often chose peaceful organizing or negotiations as the preferred route to independence. Fanon rightly feared that this approach to decolonization would enable former colonial powers to “recolonize” Africa through favorable arrangements with compliant leaders. His evisceration of Africa’s post-independence bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth* was inspired by his work as a diplomat.

Fanon was not always prophetic about the future of African politics. As Shatz points out, he underestimated the impact of the Cold War on Africa, insisting that it was merely “a distraction from the larger drama of decolonization and the rise of the Third World.” Two of Fanon’s closest friends and political allies in sub-Saharan Africa—soon-to-be Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the Cameroonian communist Félix-Roland Moumié—would be assassinated in the early 1960s because of their leftist politics. (Fanon had himself survived an attempt on his life in Rome in 1959.) Another close friend, the Angolan Holden Roberto, turned out to be a CIA asset and was secretly working to undermine Lumumba, whom he described as a communist “puppet.”

**The process of decolonization was not only a struggle between anti-colonial movements and colonial powers but part of the global struggle among competing ideologies.**

The process of decolonization, then, was not only a struggle between anti-colonial movements and colonial powers but part of the global struggle among competing ideologies. As much as he tried to ignore it, the Cold War found Fanon, too. Following an FLN expedition to Mali to assess the possibility of a weapons corridor to southern Algeria, Fanon fell ill and was diagnosed with leukemia. In a show of “friendship” to the FLN, the CIA agreed to bring Fanon to the United States—a place he’d previously dismissed as “the country of lynchers”—for treatment. Fanon died in a hospital in Maryland in December 1961. A few months later, Algeria achieved its independence.

**TODAY, VARIOUS ACTIVIST CAUSES**, from Black Lives Matter to the Palestinian solidarity movement, have again embraced Fanon as a leading thinker. But his work has also found favor with scholars in disciplines such as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. In her recent interviews with Shatz, Marie-Jeanne Manuellan, Fanon’s former secretary, mentioned that she didn’t like him “to be chopped into little pieces.” Manuellan insisted that Fanon’s “pamphlets” were “texts written in the service of a political movement, not works of philosophical reflection,” Shatz writes.

Yet this is precisely what the canonization of Fanon has too often done. Fanon’s psychiatric and philosophical writings merit renewed attention. But this attention should not come at the cost of gaining a fuller understanding of how Fanon’s anti-colonial thought builds on his earlier psychiatric studies or of his fraught and often conflicted role in the revolution. *The Rebel’s Clinic* is careful not to reduce Fanon’s life and thought to a single interpretation. Fanon’s advocacy of anti-colonial violence cannot be separated from his belief in a revolutionary humanism. For him, violence was a necessary step in the struggle—a kind of “shock therapy” that would restore confidence to the colonized mind. But he also understood that the traumas of the war would not disappear at independence.

Shatz does suggest that one aspect of Fanon’s work is most relevant for our world today. Fanon knew very well that the struggle for decolonization was only a first step toward the birth of a new humanity, which would allow both colonizer and colonized to finally be free. He never described exactly what the social revolution he so strongly believed in would look like, but he was certain that the poor and oppressed of the “Third World,” not liberals or the European working classes, would lead the way. This anti-colonial *and* universalist Fanon is, perhaps, the one Shatz would like us to remember most. ■

KEVIN OCHIENG OKOTH is a writer based in London and the author of *Red Africa: Reclaiming Revolutionary Black Politics*.





## The Forgotten Revolution

### How 1848 transformed Europe.

*By Sheri Berman*

**I**n late 2022, historian and FP columnist Adam Tooze captured the zeitgeist when he wrote that the world is in the midst of a “polycrisis”—a time when “the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts.”

History is littered with such periods. Some we remember because they preceded revolutionary change. Others are less well known because revolutionary change did not occur, even if those who lived through them experienced great upheaval; these periods, to paraphrase historian G.M.

A painting depicts the burning of the Château d'Eau at the Palais-Royal in Paris on Feb. 24, 1848.

Trevelyan, are turning points at which history fails to turn.

1848—the year to which Trevelyan was referring—is one such failed turning point. Although that year saw political tumult across Europe, it does not receive as much attention as junctures such as 1789 or 1945. Yet, as historian Christopher Clark’s magisterial *Revolutionary Spring: Europe Aflame and the Fight for a New World, 1848-1849* makes clear, the long-term consequences of that year were profound.

His book serves as a reminder that if we want to understand why some periods of (poly)crisis lead to change, while others do not, it is every bit as important to closely examine the periods when history fails to turn.

**REVOLUTIONARY SPRING** is a history lover’s history book—800-plus pages full of details that illuminate the long-term trends that made revolution possible.

The first of these trends was economic development. In the decades preceding



1848, industrialization transformed Europe. Yet the benefits of economic growth were unevenly distributed, and those who benefited least from it lacked basic political rights. Artisans, craftsmen, and shopkeepers saw their status and incomes decline. The poor and workers suffered, as living conditions in new cities were abominable and working conditions despotic. Peasants, by far the largest group in European societies, came under immense strain: Commercial farming encouraged the enclosure and privatization of the common lands that they depended on; they did not have access to the new farming techniques and technology used by large farmers; and, especially in Eastern Europe, many nobles retained feudal privileges.

On its own, lower-class discontent is not enough to lead to revolution. As Clark writes, poverty is “more likely to render people ‘speechless’ and inactive than to drive them to concerted action.” If there were a direct link between suffering and revolution, the places where material conditions were the worst would have seen the greatest uprisings in 1848—but that did not happen.

Instead, Clark argues, revolution is more often the result of broad, cross-class discontent with the reigning order. And this began to emerge in the run-up to 1848. Although the European middle class was relatively small, economic development was increasing its size and wealth. Middle-class discontent stemmed less from economic concerns than political and social ones. At the top levels, businessmen and financiers were amassing fortunes that rivaled those of landed elites. Meanwhile, growing numbers of professionals, merchants, and white-collar workers were becoming more prosperous, educated, and informed. However, in much of Europe, members of these groups lacked the right to vote and were excluded from prestigious government and social positions.

Growing nationalism also fed widespread discontent. This was particularly disruptive in the empires of Central and Eastern Europe, where state boundaries did not coincide with ethnic, religious, and linguistic ones. Demands for autonomy, or even independence, in those places—most notably in present-day Hungary but also in the lands that would become Czechoslovakia and among various Slavic peoples—threatened dramatic changes to the status quo.

By the 1840s, there was a sense across Europe that the “political horizon was dark,” as Clark describes the observations of one Belgian radical, and that “[n]either nations nor governments knew where they were going.” But even with the polycrisis created by long-term developments, revolution was still not inevitable. As Clark writes, revolutions emerge in two phases: gradually and then suddenly. In the case of 1848, two major triggers finally sparked revolution.

The first was economic crisis. Beginning in 1845, a series of bad harvests hit Europe. The failure of the potato crop across

much of Europe was particularly devastating, and these crop failures were accompanied by an economic recession and financial panic. Together, these brought food shortages and even famine to some places, worst of all in Ireland.

The second trigger came in February 1848, when French workers as well as members of the middle class rose up in revolt against an increasingly autocratic king, Louis Philippe, and his prime minister, François Guizot. This led to the collapse of the reigning July Monarchy and the subsequent formation of the Second French Republic. As Klemens von Metternich, then-chancellor of the Austrian Empire, famously noted a decade earlier, “When France sneezes, Europe catches a cold.”

Despite the lack of social media, television, radio, or even widespread literacy, within weeks of the February revolution, massive uprisings broke out across Europe. Regimes that had seemed secure fell or were forced to make concessions that had hitherto been unimaginable. As Clark writes, “upheaval spread like a brush fire across the continent, leaping from city to city.” Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Munich, Milan, Venice, and other European cities all experienced what to contemporaries, at least, seemed to be the beginnings of revolution.

Contemporaries were overwhelmed and overjoyed. One German radical wrote, “I had to go out into the winter cold and walk and walk until I had worn myself out just to calm my blood and slow down the beating of my heart, which was in a state of unprecedented and baffled agitation and felt as if it were about to blow a hole in my chest.”

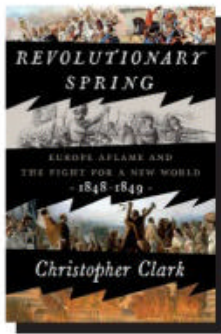
Yet within 18 months, monarchical dictatorships returned to all the areas of Europe they had been driven out of in the spring of 1848.

As *Revolutionary Spring* makes clear, perhaps the most important reason for Europe’s failure to turn was the weakness of opposition movements. These movements were united by a desire to get rid of the old order but lacked consensus on how to build a new one. Almost as soon as the old order collapsed, deep divisions within opposition movements came to the fore.

Members of the middle class generally wanted a liberal order, but not a fully democratic one, to replace the old one. They sought a political order they could participate in—and that did not grant the nobility special privileges—but they also rejected workers’ demands for universal suffrage and significant economic and social reforms. Peasants were less interested in political reform than in protecting their property or securing it via the abolition of feudal privileges and landholding in places where they still existed, including much of Eastern Europe.

Influenced by the memory of the 18th-century French Revolution, monarchs rapidly gave in to the more moderate demands in 1848—for example, by agreeing to establish constitutions and eliminate many feudal privileges—and thereby largely satisfied liberals and the peasantry. These changes did not, however, appease workers and radicals. These groups continued





*Revolutionary Spring:  
Europe Aflame and  
the Fight for a New  
World, 1848-1849*

CHRISTOPHER CLARK,  
CROWN, 896 PP., \$40,  
JUNE 2023

to riot and organize in an attempt to secure not only full democratization but also significant economic and social reforms, such as minimum wages, price controls, and the right to work.

These demands, along with the emergence of the working class as a political actor, are the reason that scholars consider 1848 to be the birthdate of the modern socialist movement. It was in 1848, of course, that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* was published with its famous first line: "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism."

The demands of the working class and radicals frightened liberals and much of the middle class. By the summer of 1848, Clark writes, liberals had a deep fear of the "lower orders" and "subaltern violence," and they "saw themselves locked in a zero-sum conflict with an enemy that represented the absolute negation of the social order." This fear, he writes, "paralysed the revolution in its later stages" and drove liberals back into the arms of conservatives.

Nationalist disputes also weakened opposition movements. In the Austrian Empire, various ethnic and linguistic groups that had been united in opposition to the old order began fighting among themselves. Germans and Czechs clashed over their relationship to each other and the emerging movement for German unity. Soon after the emperor granted Hungary significant autonomy, conflict broke out between the country's dominant Magyars and its other groups, since the Magyars were unwilling to provide them with greater autonomy. Poles also dismissed the demands of minorities. (As Clark cleverly puts it, "Like many Nationalists, the Poles were primordialists when it came to their own nation and constructivists when it came to the claims of others to the same terrain.") And attempts by Slavic groups to demand rights and autonomy were met with fury by Germans and Hungarians, who viewed them as "a sinister conspiratorial operation to prepare the ground for a Russian pan-Slavist hegemony in Eastern Europe."

Across Europe, political, socioeconomic, and national conflicts ripped apart opposition movements, enabling counter-revolutions that rolled back the revolutionary wave of 1848. By the early 1850s, monarchs and conservatives were back in power—and aspirations of national autonomy in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as hopes for Italian and German unification, were crushed.

**YET THE EUROPE THAT EMERGED** from the ashes of 1848 was not the same Europe that existed before. Some reforms instituted that year were not repealed—notably, the abolition of serfdom and other feudal privileges, including the right to collect dues, avoid certain taxes, and monopolize some political and military offices.

This marked the beginning of the end of the politics of tradition and a society of orders and eliminated major hindrances to capitalist development in parts of Europe. The end of the nobility's privileges gradually enabled members of the emerging middle classes and wealthy businessmen to hold positions of power in government and the military. It also enabled the expansion of land ownership, as peasants gained access to private property and control over the goods that they produced for the first time.

The monarchs, dictators, and conservatives who returned to power after 1848 understood that if they wanted to avoid another conflagration, they would have to rule differently. Most of them accepted that a constitutional rather than absolutist monarchy was the wave of the future. King Friedrich Wilhelm IV made Prussia a constitutional state that year (though a much less liberal one than revolutionaries had proposed). Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph soon began a cautious reform program, and in 1860, he agreed to form a constitution and parliament. In France, monarchy disappeared forever—and though it was not democratic, Napoleon III's regime rested at least in part on popular consent.

1848 was also the first time that some parts of Europe experienced popular mobilization, an open public sphere, parliaments, and elections, as well as freedoms of the press, assembly, and association. Many of the political organizations, civil society associations, and publications that were established that year remained in the decades to come.

The problems and grievances that caused Europe to explode in 1848 would continue to propel European politics in the years that followed. These included the struggle between monarchy and democracy; the working class's fight for political, social, and economic change; and the tensions that drove desires to reorganize existing states, such as the Austrian Empire, and form new ones, such as Italy and Germany.

Over time, the painful process of addressing these issues would indeed revolutionize Europe, leading to two world wars and political turmoil during the interwar years—but also eventually to the spread of democracy, the formation of welfare states, the collapse of empires, and the emergence of new nation-states. Although revolutions may seem to happen all at once, 1848 proved that their consequences may only gradually appear. ■

**SHERI BERMAN** is a professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University.





## A Man's World

On being a woman in the CIA.  
*By Valerie Plame*

**I**n 2003, senior White House officials outed me as a covert CIA officer. They leaked my identity after my then-husband, U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson, wrote an op-ed stating that the Bush administration had lied about the threat posed by Iraq ahead of its decision to invade the country.

I have spent a lot of time in the decades since processing the trauma of that experience. It endangered my assets, ended my covert career, and unsettled my family. Even events that happened much later took me back to that time, such as then-President Donald Trump's 2018 pardon of Scooter Libby, former Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, who was convicted of perjury and lying to the FBI during its investigation into the leak. In those years, I was called a liar, a traitor, and—in the words of one Republican congressman—a “glorified secretary.”

Yet when I read journalist Liza Mundy's new book, *The Sisterhood: The Secret History of the Women at the CIA*, uncomfortable memories came up that I had not

People walk across the entry hall of the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, on Feb. 1, 1993.



grappled with since my time as a spy. The book touched me in ways I did not expect. I realized that I had mostly repressed the toll inflicted on me and my female colleagues from the many years of working in a man's world.

**WHEN I WAS A CHILD**, the U.S. government passed Title IX, which prohibited sex-based discrimination in any school that received federal funding. By the time I was a teenager, my suburban Philadelphia high school had a variety of sports teams for me to choose from that were just as robust as what the boys had. I was fortunate to have parents who never suggested that my gender should dictate what I could pursue. In fact, my father made it a point to tell me that I could “do anything I wanted to, if I put my mind to it.” Even my college years passed in ignorance of the sexism ingrained in U.S. society.

Then, as a young woman, I joined the CIA. Suddenly, it became clear that the real world operated on a different set of principles.

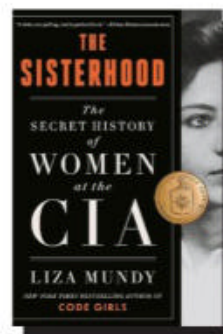
The CIA that I entered at the height of the Cold War was very much a man's world. The agency had only recently started to recruit women into intelligence operations, rather than into secretary positions and other support roles. A deep network of male officers still called the shots.

As I began the rigorous training to become a field operations officer, I looked around at the women already in the CIA. The more senior ones—none of whom were in the highest ranks—tended to be unmarried, childless, sometimes embittered, and tough as nails. Even then, I recognized that my opportunity to succeed came at the expense of their trailblazing.

I also knew I didn't want to become like them. Couldn't I be a successful officer *and* have a family? The terms “sexual harassment” and “gender discrimination,” much less “micro-aggression” and “unconscious bias,” had no meaning to my small cohort of female ops officers. We simply had to accept the casual misogyny that the agency's alpha males tossed around.

Sometimes, it was explicit: My friend was told by her boss, the station chief at her first assignment in Africa, that she should go home, get married, and have a baby—and what the hell did she think she was doing in operations anyway? Other times, it was implicit: Promotions went to young male bucks over female colleagues who were just as successful in running and recruiting spies.

The contributions of female spies to the CIA—and the barriers they faced—are the focus of Mundy's deeply researched and highly readable book. *The Sisterhood* starts off slowly, with a recap of women who entered the U.S. intelligence services during World War II. Thousands of women flocked to the job opportunities that the war opened up at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA's predecessor, as men were sucked into the giant warfighting machine. These OSS workers were



*The Sisterhood:  
The Secret History  
of Women at the CIA*

LIZA MUNDY, CROWN,  
480 PP., \$32.50,  
OCTOBER 2023

among the first women in U.S. history to be formally recruited into intelligence work.

As Mundy recounts, these early recruits were told to report to an unassuming brownstone in Washington's Foggy Bottom neighborhood. The men were instructed to change into Army fatigues in an attempt to strip them of social class, job, or military rank before the interview process. The women were taken to another room and asked to remove their coats and hats; since they were women, Mundy writes, “no further equalization was thought to be needed.”

Many of the women recruited into the OSS in the 1940s were highly educated, sophisticated, and multilingual. The test designed for female recruits assessed how well they could file papers. Yet once they were inside the agency, a few of these women moved into field intelligence operations. They demonstrated verve, bravery, and intellect at every turn as they set up effective spy rings, solicited intelligence from Nazi and other Axis officials, and passed important intelligence back to Washington.

After the war, a collective amnesia seemed to settle over Washington. As the country quickly forgot the vital role of women in the war effort, women were once again relegated to support jobs. The 1950s and '60s looked something like *Mad Men*, where secretaries wore white gloves and pantyhose to the office and deferred to their male bosses. President Harry S. Truman established the CIA in 1947, but the agency did not begin to hire more than primarily white men with Ivy League degrees for another couple decades. It was not until the 1970s and '80s that it recruited women of equal intelligence, nerve, and—as my father would say—moxie to do clandestine work. I was a beneficiary of this sea change. I joined the CIA because I wanted to serve my country, it would get me overseas, and it seemed as if it would be a lot more interesting than what my peers were doing.

Mundy's book picks up steam as she delves deeper into the era when women were admitted, grudgingly, into the heart of secret CIA missions. She follows a few of them closely, including Lisa Manfull, a top student at Brown University from a cosmopolitan family, who was hired in 1968 to join the CIA's career training program at a lower paygrade than male recruits. Manfull eventually became



Valerie Plame is sworn in before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington on March 16, 2007.



a successful clandestine operative despite higher-ups trying to keep her in desk jobs for years. Mundy also highlights fearsome agency legend Eloise Page, who started as a secretary to the OSS's founder and became the CIA's first female station chief in 1978.

Despite not being allowed to take the full operational courses at “The Farm,” the CIA training facility in Virginia, into the 1970s, these women proved their worth. They succeeded in work as varied as negotiating with terrorists who hijacked a plane in Malta and dealing adroitly with intelligence “walk-ins”—when a potential foreign agent shows up unexpectedly at an officer's home or an embassy with promises to provide intelligence in return for something they desire.

The 1991 confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas were a catalyst for change. During the hearings, the all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee listened as Anita Hill, a Black woman, calmly testified that Thomas had sexually harassed her a decade earlier. The Senate ultimately confirmed Thomas—and Hill faced criticism and death threats from the public—but the hearings brought a newfound awareness of gender-based discrimination to Washington. They influenced the elections of 1992, which media outlets dubbed “The Year of the Woman” after a record number of women won seats in the Senate.

That year, the CIA also commissioned a “Glass Ceiling Study,” which found that men rose to much higher ranks than women in the organization. Women filled 40 percent of the agency's professional positions but only 10 percent of the jobs in the Senior Intelligence Service, comprising top agency executives. Mundy writes that female employees

responded to the study with a sense of relief—maybe, they thought, the agency's culture would finally change. The men, by and large, seemed puzzled by it.

In 1994, Janine Brookner, then a CIA officer, sued the agency for sex-based discrimination after being falsely accused of professional misconduct and threatened with a demotion and criminal sanctions. The lawsuit ended with a cash settlement and Brookner's resignation. Brookner went on to law school and used her degree to specialize in federal discrimination cases. Around the same time, female case officers filed a class action suit, alleging that the CIA had a pattern of sex-based discrimination; in the 1995 settlement, Mundy recounts, the CIA admitted that it “discriminated systematically against its women secret agents for years,” as the *Los Angeles Times* reported at the time.

Mundy is at her sharpest when she writes about the women in Alec Station, a CIA unit that followed al Qaeda when few in Washington thought it was a threat. The analyst who led the unit, Mike Scheuer, filled his overlooked and underfunded team with women. Scheuer had no qualms about hiring women. As he told Mundy, women were “experts at minutiae, putting pieces of information together” that men might miss.

**As I read Mundy's book,  
I found myself empathizing  
with the women's hardships  
and remembering my own.**



As the search for al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden intensified, the women tracking him diligently compiled intelligence, but the Bush administration seemed to put their increasingly dire predictions on the back burner. On Aug. 6, 2001, CIA analyst Barbara Sude wrote a memo titled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the US.” The Bush cabinet did not meet until Sept. 4, 2001, to discuss the threat. A week later, 9/11 happened.

The grief and guilt of the women who had warned the U.S. government for years about a potential attack are palpable in Mundy’s book. As one undercover case officer told Mundy, “For two years of my life, I was trying to do the right thing, and people died, and you felt like it was your fault. ... And it really, it affected us a lot.” Their rage was channeled into the hunt for bin Laden that led to his capture and killing.

**MUNDY’S BOOK** left me both inspired and disheartened. Many of the women in her book are now retired or dead. At great personal cost, they poured their lives into their intelligence careers. As I read it, I found myself empathizing with their hardships and remembering my own.

On the first day of my initial overseas assignment, I was told to go see the chief of station, a highly respected CIA officer. As I nervously entered his paneled office, he leaned back in his chair, feet on the massive wooden desk and an unlit cigar in his mouth. He didn’t say anything to me. He merely took the cigar out of his mouth and motioned with it for me to turn around, a little twirl. Confused, I spun around and faced him again with a quizzical look. He broke into a smile. “Oh, you’ll do,” he said. I realized he was evaluating how I looked. It was crushing.

Thankfully, as Mundy shows, a lot has changed since then. Female CIA officers today have it better but still face quiet discrimination and barriers to success, as nearly all professional women do. Although the professional advances women have made are heartening, Mundy lets some women in the agency off the hook.

For instance, she glosses over the 2018 confirmation hearing of the CIA’s first female director, Gina Haspel, who admitted to a significant role in one of the agency’s darkest hours: the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” otherwise known as torture, in the aftermath of 9/11. The same can be said for Freda Bikowsky, an ex-CIA analyst known as the “queen of torture” who helped find bin Laden. I would have liked to see Mundy acknowledge that female officers in positions of power and responsibility—just like their male counterparts—have caused harm, exercised terrible judgment, and failed to mentor other women.

While Mundy’s book is a compelling and very good read, *The Sisterhood* is probably misnamed. It’s true that female CIA officers find comfort in their female friendships and can be supportive of each other as they advocate for equal rights in a male-dominated environment. But years of fighting for scraps—not just against their male counterparts but against each other—have extracted a price. A climate of suspicion and unhealthy competition remains, and ultimately, this weakens U.S. national security. ■

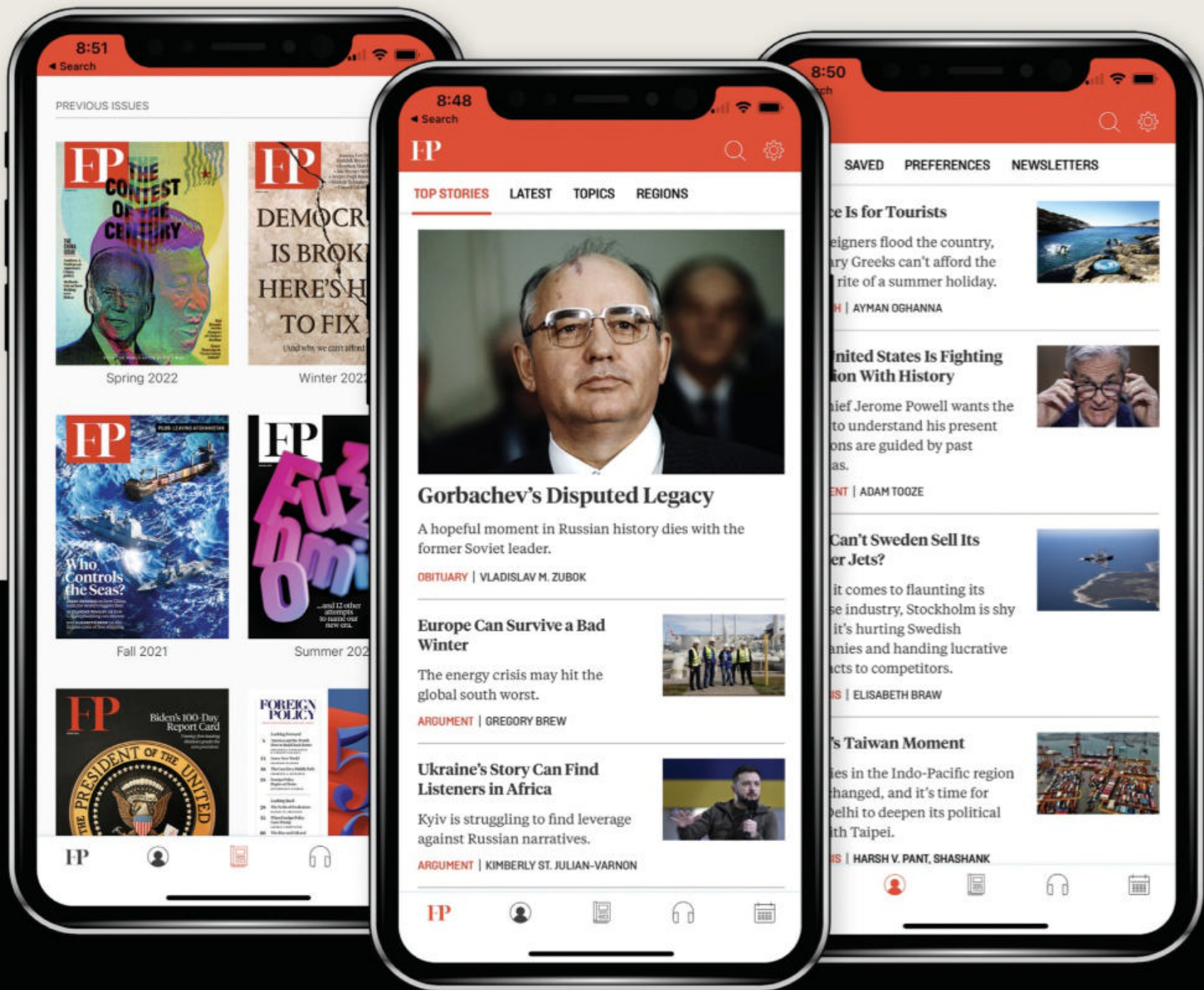
**VALERIE PLAME** is a former covert CIA operations officer and the author of *Fair Game: My Life as a Spy, My Betrayal by the White House*.



Gina Haspel appears before the Senate Intelligence Committee for a confirmation hearing to become CIA director on Capitol Hill in Washington on May 9, 2018.



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## Ukraine Isn't Just Putin's War

Exposing the Russian program  
of hijacking history.

*By Keir Giles*

**F**or years, as Moscow's intent to challenge the West became clearer, a key question loomed: whether the country as a whole or its leader was at fault—in effect, whether the world had a Russia problem or a Putin problem.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began two years ago, analysts have continued to debate the attitudes of ordinary Russians toward the war: Do a broad majority of Russians genuinely support the crimes and atrocities committed by their country's armed forces?

And if not, why do they give every appearance of doing so?

Two books published in 2023 by British historian Jade McGlynn provide uncomfortable answers. *Russia's War* gives one of those answers in its title: In direct and conscious contrast to a rash of other current book titles that lay the blame squarely on Russian President Vladimir Putin, McGlynn concludes that the Russian state, with the conscious collusion of part or most of its population, has achieved significant and widespread support at home for its war of colonial reconquest in Ukraine.

The other book, *Memory Makers*, gives us more explanation of how this was made possible through Russia's deliberate and long-term program of hijacking

People wave Russian flags as they gather to mark the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea in Moscow on March 18, 2022.



history and shaping the public's memory by re-creating the past in order to shape the present.

Together, they paint a portrait of the alternative reality inhabited by Russians, created and nurtured by the state, and explain how it provides a permissive environment for that state's worst crimes against both its own people and its victims abroad.

**RUSSIA'S WAR** will upset a lot of people. There's a substantial group among Russians abroad—or, at least, among those who do not wholeheartedly approve of the war—who make their point that not all Russians are to blame for it by attempting to attach that blame to Putin personally.

But McGlynn firmly rejects the idea that this is Putin's war alone. "Russia's war on Ukraine is popular with large numbers of Russians and acceptable to an even larger number," she writes. "Putin banked on the population's approval and he cashed it."

McGlynn's book is also a direct challenge to those Western journalists, academics, and Russophiles who cling to the belief that the country is a frustrated democracy, as well as the idea that left to their own devices, Russians would install a liberal government that was less inclined to repress its own subjects and wage wars of aggression abroad. That belief has often been formed in conversation with urban, liberal Russians—many of whom are now in exile or jail.

But there's no reason to think that conversations in Moscow and St. Petersburg are any better a guide to Russia's population as a whole than similar conversations in New York or London were at predicting Donald Trump's 2016 election victory or Brexit. When the idea of a country has been constructed on sampling that is as unrepresentative as this, it can be hard to come to terms with the fact that the behaviors that the world has witnessed in Ukraine are entirely within the mainstream of social norms in the further reaches of Russia.

McGlynn doesn't rule out the possibility that there may be Russians who disapprove of the war. But in addition to describing an instinct for self-preservation that may constrain many individuals from speaking out, she also argues that silent acquiescence is the easier path inside their own minds.

"Plenty of people believe the Kremlin propaganda because it is easier and preferable to admitting or accepting that you are the bad guys," McGlynn writes. In the absence of any discernible public opposition, Russians' attitudes range from complete apathy to the frenzied enthusiasm for the war encouraged by propagandist "Z-channels" on Telegram, urging the military on to commit ever greater savagery in Ukraine. These channels, broadcasting to hundreds of thousands of subscribers—where footage of atrocities receives a joyous reaction—would not be possible in a country where



*Russia's War*

JADE MCGLYNN, POLITY, 264 PP.,  
\$64.95, MAY 2023

*Memory Makers: The Politics  
of the Past in Putin's Russia*

JADE MCGLYNN, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC,  
248 PP., \$27, JUNE 2023

backing for the onslaught on Ukraine was not widespread.

Russia's state-aligned propaganda, McGlynn argues, does not seek to make everyone a warmonger. Instead, it aims to nudge people along a spectrum: It tries to render those in opposition apathetic, to make the apathetic feel attacked and side with their country whether right or wrong, and to induce quiet patriots to lend full-throated support.

A further twist, McGlynn suggests, is that we should not assume that the ideal outcome for the Kremlin is widespread pro-war activism. The Kremlin distrusts any spontaneous political act even if it is in support of the regime, she reminds us. So it sets clear boundaries for what is and is not an acceptable way to show allegiance and is content if the support shown is no more than lip service. But still, criticism of the war, where it does exist, primarily focuses on the competence with which it is being fought as opposed to whether it should be fought in the first place.

Many of the state narratives around the West and Ukraine are not Putinist inventions but instead are excuses for Russian state crimes that date back to Soviet and tsarist times. By tapping into the familiar tropes of Russia's artificial history, the Kremlin provides the basis for new and still evolving fictions about the world outside, brought together in what McGlynn calls "a time-worn ritual whereby Russian media and politicians slowly dismantle the truth and then replace it with a forgery."

That ritual is examined in detail in *Memory Makers*. Published after *Russia's War*, *Memory Makers* nonetheless lays the groundwork for it, exploring how Russia rewrote its history to provide justification for its present.

History is explicitly defined as a battleground in Russia's national security strategy and other doctrinal documents. But as ever in Russia's perverse newspeak, goals such as the



“defence of historical truth,” the “preservation of memory,” and “counteraction to the falsification of history” translate to the construction and defense of a fabricated version of Russian and Soviet history, accompanied by the denunciation of news and information from abroad as fake, all intended to protect and bolster Russia’s alternative reality.

As McGlynn explains, Russia’s reworking of history builds a narrative that “distracts from government failings, promotes government policies and reinforces the Kremlin’s view of current events.” The two books together offer an understanding of how Russia fostered the mentality that enables the war. *Memory Makers* explains how it was done; *Russia’s War* describes the effect.

Across the two books, McGlynn considers the role of state propaganda in forming the attitude that she describes and the cumulative impact of more than a decade of bombardment with relentless war propaganda that dehumanizes Ukrainians and sells the idea of a hostile West. Her conclusion is that the war propaganda fell on fertile ground. Russians were eager to be guided toward the state-approved attitude that tied in closely with many of their preconceptions about the world and Russia’s place in it.

And this has had practical and tragic results. McGlynn helps explain why Russia’s horrific casualty toll—with estimates varying widely but none smaller than the hundreds of thousands—has had less impact on popular support for the war than was widely and optimistically expected and why Russia’s soldiers are still fighting, despite their leadership’s palpable indifference to the scale of the slaughter. Meanwhile, the dehumanization of Ukrainians that forms an

The two books together offer an understanding of how Russia fostered the mentality that enables the war. *Memory Makers* explains how it was done; *Russia’s War* describes the effect.

integral part of the propaganda made atrocities in Ukraine not just likely but also inevitable.

**IN CONTRAST WITH** multiple books on Russia that have been produced after February 2022, both *Russia’s War* and *Memory Makers* have long been in gestation. They draw on close to a decade of research, including data analysis of television, print, and social media; extensive interviews; and—while it was still possible—firsthand investigation within Russia itself.

Perhaps inevitably, that means neither book offers simple answers. Optimists among academics, journalists, and even government officials cling to the belief that if only Russians could be reached with the truth about the outside world, including the horrors committed in their name in Ukraine, they would turn against their leadership. But McGlynn’s books and a mass of associated research show that far deeper and more radical societal change within Russia would be essential to reverse the effects of two decades of state propaganda.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, early hopes that new generations might embrace democracy and liberalism have faded to invisibility. Instead, Russian social development is accelerating in reverse. McGlynn’s research undercuts suggestions that this is being done to Russians against their will and instead highlights attitudes ranging from complicity to enthusiasm. The result is that Russia looks almost exclusively to the past to define its vision for the future.

The tragic implication is that Russia’s war against Ukraine cannot be ended in or by Ukraine. Its roots lie in Russians’ political and societal imagination of what their own country is and what it must be. That imagination, McGlynn shows, has been encouraged and facilitated—but not created—by a propaganda campaign that has lasted a generation.

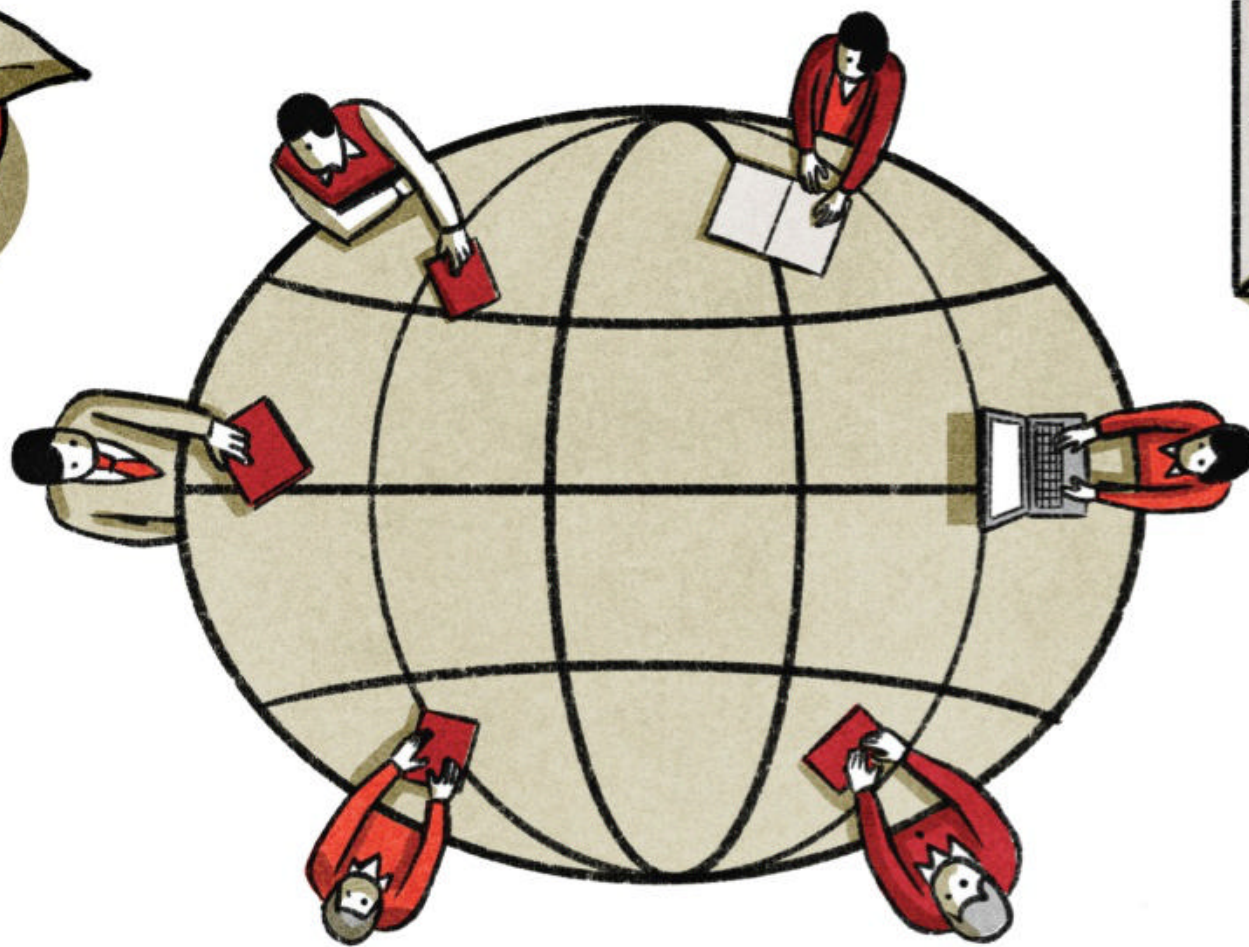
McGlynn has assembled the evidence for a conclusion that will disturb optimists hoping for a better Russia: The campaign would not have succeeded without a willing and complicit population, and too many ordinary Russians are entirely content to back their country’s most horrific actions. ■

**KEIR GILES** is the author of books including *Russia’s War on Everybody* and *Moscow Rules*.



Children salute as they attend an official initiation ceremony for the youth organization Young Pioneers in Moscow’s Red Square on May 21, 2023.





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## Rust Belt Renaissance

The latest in a spate of shows about China's devastated Northeast.

By James Palmer

**I**t's 1998. Wang Xiang is a big man among the factory workers in Hualin, a one-company steel town somewhere in Northeast China. Gong Biao is a young recruit to the firm, a university-educated, handsome, up-and-coming manager. But the future of the steel company is shaky, and even a model worker like Wang has to try to ensure his job is safe. Wang and a reluctant Gong team up with hard-as-nails detective Ma Desheng to investigate a gruesome murder, hoping to get a favorable mention from the police in the final report but not realizing that the case traces back to Wang's own family.

A scene from  
*The Long Season*.

Jump forward to 2016. The factory went bust years ago, and the town is dying. Gong is a failure, unhappily married and bloated, and Wang is an old and saddened man. Together, they scrape together a living sharing shifts in a taxi—until Gong tries to buy his own car and gets cheated. Their quest to catch the con artist ends up dredging up the murders of the 1990s—and the tragedies and mysteries that went unsolved.

And the police detective in 2016? Well, spoiling that would ruin one of the best jokes of the series.

This is *The Long Season*, not only one of the greatest Chinese dramas ever but one of the best TV shows of the last year made anywhere. Originally released on Tencent Video and available on Prime Video for U.S. viewers, it's a twisty, bleak





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noir about murder, revenge, and loss that jumps between different periods (including a tertiary plotline in 1997); it's also frequently hilarious, humane, and masterfully written and has the best de-aging effects and acting I've ever seen, with most actors playing both their 1998 and their 2016 selves. It has fantastic music, handpicked by director Xin Shuang, once a well-known punk rock guitarist, and beautiful cinematography in the slow, red Northeastern fall. This is a must-watch show, and it's amazing that it got made in today's China.

Forming the background to the show are the industrial layoffs at state-run firms that devastated Northeast China economically and socially in the late 1990s—something akin to the Rust Belt in the United States or the coal mining districts of the United Kingdom.

In 1998, Wang, brilliantly played by famous comic actor Fan Wei—like most of the cast, a Northeasterner himself—is bombastic, naive, and often blind to the failings of those around and above him. The older Wang is an undoubtedly superior person to his younger self—humbler, wiser, and more cunning. But, as we rapidly see, he only got that way through tragedy. Even more than the closure of the factory, his wife and son are conspicuously missing in 2016, although he's now responsible for another young man who calls him “father.”

The Wang of 2016 is a familiar figure in Chinese towns: the guy who can fix anything with two bits of wire. In many ways, he lives up to the ideals of the archetypal *Dongbeiren*, the people of the Northeast. A Northeastern man, at least in their own eyes, is tough, decent, stoic, hard-working, and hard-drinking. And as Wang demonstrates at home, he can cook—and cook well.

The older Gong, in contrast, is no stoic and not much of a cook. Chinese has a term, *sa jiao*, for women strategically pouting like children. There's no equivalent for petulant male whining, although it's equally common. Gong complains constantly: His wife doesn't treat him right. His back hurts. Everyone is cheating him. Why is life like this? Why isn't it what he was promised? He's a Chinese schlemiel. It's a tribute to actor Qin Hao that the older Gong is still sympathetic, not just annoying. (Qin himself was a heartthrob actor; in one scene in 1998, Gong's date is watching a movie and remarks on his resemblance to Qin Hao.)

One of the show's tragedies is how limited the language of love is for most characters. Gong, like most of them, can express affection only through complaint, even about his wife and his best friend. The exceptions are hard-earned and deeply moving.

These are broken men living in a broken town. Most Chinese dramas that move from the past to the present emphasize the modernity, progress, and glitz of today. Take the forgettable 2010 weepie *Aftershock* (“The Great Tangshan Earthquake” is the literal translation), a *Sophie's Choice* that starts during the



1976 quake, when a mother must choose which of her children to grab and save. The gray, poor world of the 1970s then gives way to a brighter and richer 2000s, and the heartbreaking decision of 1976 is healed by the government-led heroism of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake rescues.

None of that is true in *The Long Season*. There has been no redemption for Hualin; the town is grim and backward, ravaged, like most of the Northeast, by the industrial layoffs of the 1990s and stuck in the economic gloom that beset the region in the 2010s. The set design is fantastic, from the popular books and Western classic rock posters of a teenager's bedroom in 1998 to the shabby pharmacies, massage centers, and corrugated iron shack walls of 2016. The landscape is shaped by petty crime: entertainment centers that double as brothels, gambling dens full of slot machines, guys flogging fake license plate numbers outside the local vehicle registration office. Nobody has money, and the only way to get better is to get out.

If the show has a flaw, it's in the status of its female characters. This is a story about emasculated men, and even as it's deeply skeptical about masculinity, the women play second fiddle. The suffering and vengeance of women are key, and there are very well-done, disturbing scenes about coercion and abuse, but the roles themselves lack the fullness of the main characters. (If you want a fuller picture of the lives of some women in the Northeast, I recommend Tian-tian Zheng's *Red Lights*, a bleak study of sex work in Dalian.)

This is also a story about being old. Everyone's bodies are failing; protagonists and antagonists alike are diabetic, arthritic, or plagued by other ills. A stakeout has to be interrupted by frequent bathroom breaks and naps because, as one of the characters says, "We're old, and it's hard for us to stay up. ... Coffee goes right through me." Often, it's a deliberately slow show, taking its time with the characters' everyday complaints, quips, and small actions of clambering out of cramped cars or cooking at home—but it's never boring.

And there's no help coming. Health care costs are extortionate, promised compensation never shows up, and the authorities are bumbling at best. The show steers clear of actually portraying the police, unlike the factory authorities, as corrupt—but while well-meaning, they're mostly half-competent. For our protagonists, they're more of an obstacle than an aid. (Compare this to the portrayal of the police as efficient and patriotic on another hit Tencent show, the time-loop drama *Reset*.)

There's one problem with the show as currently available: The English subtitles are mediocre. They're mostly not terrible, but they're clunky, clearly not done by a native English speaker, and include a few outright mistakes and deeply confusing phrases. Wang, for instance, takes pride in being an "elected vigilante" when he's talking about being on the local

neighborhood committee. A professional retranslation could seriously help the show reach an international audience.

Yet the overall brilliance of *The Long Season* raises the question: How does something this good get made in Xi Jinping's China, where artistic ambition is usually crushed? This is a country where a single inoffensive joke about a military slogan destroyed multiple comics' careers and produced a \$2 million fine, where the mistaken appearance of a tank pulled the country's top livestreamer offline for three months, and where TV plotlines are tightly controlled. Censorial dumbness, albeit often spottily and inconsistently enforced, hangs over everything.

Most of the time, writers and directors opt for mediocrity for the sake of safety when they're not making outright, if sometimes entertaining, propaganda. When something good makes it through the system, you can usually see the joins—dangling plotlines after scenes were cut, clumsily inserted lines, or contrived explanations that what was obviously magic (superstitious, bad) was actually acupuncture and fungi ("traditional Chinese medicine," good). Even Xin's previous series, 2020's acclaimed *The Bad Kids*, had overdubbed lines.

But *The Long Season* seems somehow to have dodged all this. It is an artistically complete work, with its own untouched vision of its characters and their world. The censors must have touched it somewhere, but they didn't leave a mark. Perhaps somebody high up has a fondness for the "Dongbei renaissance," the spate of high-quality films and TV shows about China's rust belt since 2020.

One theory about how this happened, elegantly laid out by law professor Henry Gao on X (formerly Twitter), is that the show matches one of the current leadership's ideological goals: portraying the 1990s and that era's market reforms as corrupt and failed. Yet I think this does *The Long Season* an injustice; the present is not portrayed in substantially better terms than the past. There's no narrative of redemption led by Xi here, only the weight of real suffering.

And while state media have praised the show, this strikes me as clumsy bandwagon-jumping on the back of its popularity, not a concerted campaign. Take the *Global Times* piece that claimed the show "presents the warm, sunny, bright and vibrant autumn in Northeast China, or Dongbei in Chinese, as well as the enthusiasm, positivity, optimism and humor of local people" and that it "meets Chinese people's demand for quality productions that deliver positive messages." That's like praising *Chinatown* for being a film about how important family is in sunny Los Angeles.

One of the final lines of the show is "Look forward, not back." But the line is as steeped in irony and tragedy as the rest of *The Long Season*. The show is about fall—and while spring will arrive, winter comes first. ■

JAMES PALMER is a deputy editor at FOREIGN POLICY.





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# What in the World?

By Drew Gorman

The following is adapted from past editions of FP's weekly online news quiz.  
Test yourself every week at ForeignPolicy.com.



**1. Hearings on whether Israel was committing acts of genocide in Gaza began at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in January. Which African nation petitioned the case?**

- a. South Africa      b. Nigeria
- c. Mozambique      d. Egypt



**2. How old did North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reportedly turn on Jan. 8?**

- a. 32      b. 37      c. 40      d. 51

**3. In late January, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi consecrated a Hindu temple on the site of a former mosque. To which Hindu god is the new temple dedicated?**

- a. Brahma      b. Shiva
- c. Ganesh      d. Ram



**4. About what percentage of ballots did Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele win in his Feb. 4 reelection bid?**

- a. 53 percent      b. 74 percent
- c. 85 percent      d. 96 percent



**5. Which African country became the first this year to roll out a new malaria vaccine for routine vaccinations?**

- a. Nigeria      b. Cameroon
- c. Senegal      d. Ivory Coast



**6. Whom did Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky pick to be the new leader of Ukraine's military in early February?**

- a. Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky
- b. Lt. Gen. Serhiy Shaptala
- c. Lt. Gen. Yuriy Sodol
- d. Maj. Gen. Viktor Khorenko

**7. Which Middle Eastern country opened its first liquor store in more than 70 years in January?**

- a. Oman      b. Saudi Arabia
- c. Iraq      d. Yemen



**8. German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said in mid-February that she wants to make it easier to track what aspect of right-wing extremist organizations in the country?**

- a. Their membership numbers
- b. Their financing
- c. Their social media accounts and posts
- d. Their public gatherings

**9. Why did Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh offer his resignation on Feb. 26?**

- a. To challenge Mahmoud Abbas for the presidency
- b. To protest the Israel-Hamas war
- c. To convalesce from a recent illness
- d. To enable reforms in the Palestinian Authority

**10. FIFA announced in February that which North American city will host the opening match of the 2026 World Cup for men's soccer?**

- a. Mexico City
- b. Vancouver
- c. Los Angeles
- d. Atlanta



ANSWERS: 1. a; 2. c; 3. d; 4. c; 5. b; 6. a; 7. b; 8. b; 9. d; 10. a



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