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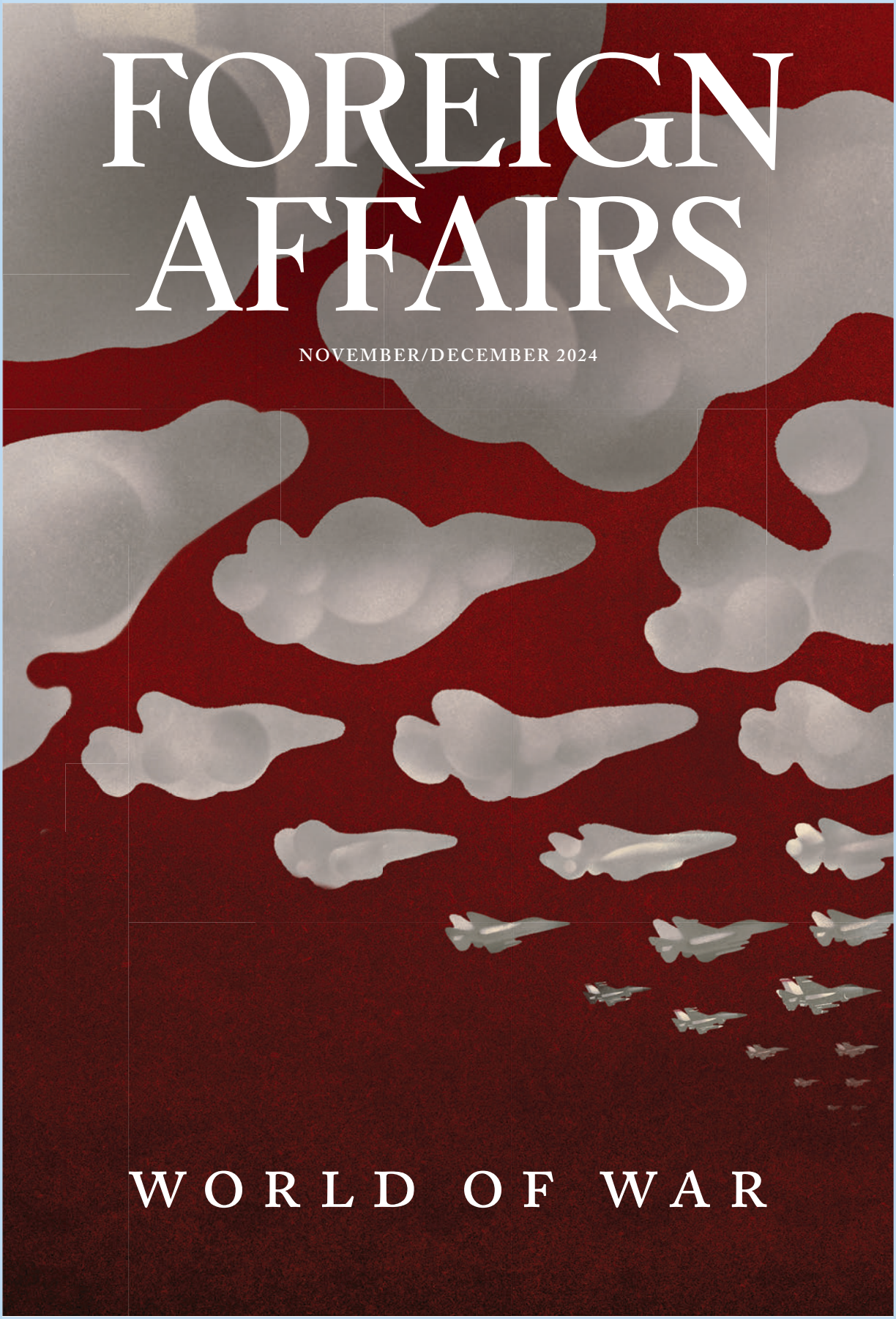

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WORLD OF WAR

The Return of Total War

Understanding—and Preparing for—a New Era of Comprehensive Conflict

MARA KARLIN

"Every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions," the defense theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in the early nineteenth century. There is no doubt that Clausewitz was right. And yet it is surprisingly difficult to characterize war at any given moment in time; doing so becomes easier only with hindsight. Harder still is predicting what kind of war the future might bring. When war changes, the new shape it takes almost always comes as a surprise.

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, American strategic planners faced a fairly static challenge: a Cold War in which superpower conflict was kept on ice by nuclear deterrence, turning hot only in proxy fights that were costly but containable. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought that era to an end. In Washington during the 1990s, war became a matter of assembling coalitions to intervene in discrete conflicts when bad actors invaded their neighbors, stoked civil or ethnic violence, or massacred civilians.

After the shock of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, attention shifted to terrorist organizations, insurgents, and other nonstate groups. The resulting "war on terror" pushed thinking about state-on-state conflict onto the sidelines. War was a major feature of the post-9/11 period, of course. But it was a highly circumscribed phenomenon, often limited in scale and waged in

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Illustration by Eduardo Morciano

remote locations against shadowy adversaries. For most of this century, the prospect of a major war among states was a lower priority for American military thinkers and planners, and whenever it took center stage, the context was usually a potential contest with China that would materialize only in the far-off future, if ever.

Then, in 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The result has been the largest land war in Europe since World War II. And although forces under Russian and Ukrainian command are the only troops fighting on the ground, the war has reshaped geopolitics by drawing in dozens of other countries. The United States and its NATO allies have offered unprecedented financial and materiel support to Ukraine; meanwhile, China, Iran, and North Korea have all assisted Russia in crucial ways. Less than two years after Russia's invasion, Hamas carried out its brutal October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, provoking a highly lethal and destructive Israeli assault on Gaza. The conflict quickly widened into a complex regional affair, involving multiple states and a number of capable nonstate actors.

In both Ukraine and the Middle East, what has become clear is that the relatively narrow scope that defined war during the post-9/11 era has dramatically widened. An era of limited war has ended; an age of comprehensive conflict has begun. Indeed, what the world is witnessing today is akin to what theorists in the past have called "total war," in which combatants draw on vast resources, mobilize their societies, prioritize warfare over all other state activities, attack a broad variety of targets, and reshape their economies and those of other countries. But owing to new technologies and the deep links of the globalized economy, today's wars are not merely a repeat of older conflicts.

These developments should compel strategists and planners to rethink how fighting happens today and, crucially, how they should prepare for war going forward. Getting ready for the kind of war the United States would most likely face in the future might in fact help the country avoid such a war by strengthening its ability to deter its main rival. To deter an increasingly assertive China from taking steps that might lead to war with the United States, such as blockading or attacking Taiwan, Washington must convince Beijing that doing so wouldn't be worth it and that China might not win the resulting war. But to make deterrence credible in an age of comprehensive conflict, the United States needs to show that it is prepared for a different kind of war—drawing on the lessons of today's big wars to prevent an even bigger one tomorrow.

THE CONTINUUM OF CONFLICT

Just under a decade ago, there was a growing consensus among many experts about how conflict would reconfigure itself in the years ahead. It would be faster, waged through cooperation between people and intelligent machines, and heavily reliant on autonomous tools such as drones. Space and cyberspace would be increasingly important. Conventional conflict would involve a surge in "anti-access/area-denial" capabilities—

tools and techniques that would limit the reach and maneuverability of militaries beyond their shores, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Nuclear threats would persist, but they would prove limited compared with the existential perils of the past.

Some of these predictions have been borne out; others have been turned on their heads. Artificial intelligence has in fact further enabled the proliferation and utility of uncrewed systems both in the air and under the water. Drones have indeed transformed battlefields—and the need for counterdrone capabilities has skyrocketed. And the strategic importance of space, including the commercial space sector, has been made clear, most recently by Ukraine's reliance on the Starlink satellite network for Internet connectivity.

On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly made veiled threats to use his country's nuclear weapons and has even stationed some of them in Belarus. Meanwhile, China's historic modernization and diversification of its nuclear capabilities have ignited alarm over the possibility that a conventional conflict could escalate to the most extreme level. The expansion and improvement of China's arsenal has also transformed and complicated the dynamics of nuclear deterrence, since what was historically a bipolar challenge between the United States and Russia is now tripolar.

What few, if any, defense theorists foresaw was the broadening of war that the past few years has witnessed, as the array of features that shape conflict expanded. What theorists call "the continuum of conflict" has changed. In an earlier era, one might have seen the terrorism and insurgency of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis as inhabiting the low end of the spectrum, the armies waging conventional warfare in Ukraine as residing in the middle, and the nuclear threats shaping Russia's war and China's growing arsenal as sitting at the high end. Today, however, there is no sense of mutual exclusivity; the continuum has returned but also collapsed. In Ukraine, "robot dogs" patrol the ground and autonomous drones launch missiles from the sky amid trench warfare that looks like World War I—all under the specter of nuclear weapons. In the Middle East, combatants have combined sophisticated air and missile defense systems with individual shooting attacks by armed men riding motorcycles. In the Indo-Pacific, Chinese and Philippine forces face off over a sole dilapidated ship while the skies and seas surrounding Taiwan get squeezed by threatening maneuvers from China's air force and navy.

The emergence of sea-based struggles marks a major departure from the post-9/11 era, when conflict was largely oriented around ground threats. Back then, most maritime attacks were sea-to-ground, and most air attacks were air-to-ground. Today, however, the maritime domain has become a site of direct conflict. Ukraine, for example, has taken out more than 20 Russian ships in the Black Sea, and control of that critical waterway remains contested. Meanwhile, Houthi attacks have largely closed the Red Sea to commercial shipping. Safeguarding freedom of

navigation has historically been a top mission of the U.S. Navy. But its inability to ensure the security of the Red Sea has called into question whether it would be able to fulfill that mission in an increasingly turbulent Indo-Pacific.

The plural character of conflict also underscores the risk of being lured by today's weapon of choice, which might turn out to be a flash in the pan. Compared with the post-9/11 era, more countries now have greater access to capital and more R & D capacity, allowing them to respond more quickly and adeptly to new weapons and technologies by developing countermeasures. This exacerbates a familiar dynamic that the military scholar J. F. C. Fuller described as "the constant tactical factor"—the reality that "every improvement in weapons has eventually been met by a counter-improvement which has rendered the improvement obsolete." For example, in 2022, defense experts hailed the efficacy of Ukraine's precision-guided munitions as a game-changer in the war against Russia. But by late 2023, some of those weapons' limitations had become clear when electronic jamming by the Russian military severely restricted their ability to find targets on the battlefield.

ALL IN

Another feature of the age of comprehensive conflict is a transformation in the demography of war: the cast of characters has become increasingly diverse. The post-9/11 wars demonstrated the outsize impact of terrorist groups, proxies, and militias. As those conflicts ground on, many policymakers wished they could go back to the traditional focus on state militaries—particularly given the enormous investments some states were making in their defenses. They should have been careful what they wished for: state militaries are back, but nonstate groups have hardly left the stage. The current security environment offers the misfortune of dealing with both.

In the Middle East, multiple state militaries are increasingly fighting or enmeshed with surprisingly influential nonstate actors. Consider the Houthis. Although in essence still a relatively small rebel movement, the Houthis are nevertheless responsible for the most intense set of sea engagements the U.S. Navy has faced since World War II, according to navy officials. With help from Iran, the Houthis are also punching above their weight in the air by manufacturing and deploying their own drones. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, Kyiv's regular forces are fighting alongside cadres of international volunteers in numbers likely not seen since the Spanish Civil War. And to augment Russia's traditional forces, the Kremlin has incorporated mercenaries from the Wagner paramilitary company and sent tens of thousands of convicts to war—a practice that Ukraine's military recently started copying.

In this environment, the task of building partner forces becomes even more complex than during the post-9/11 wars. U.S. programs to build the Afghan and Iraqi militaries focused on countering terrorist and insurgent threats with the aim of enabling friendly regimes to exert sovereignty

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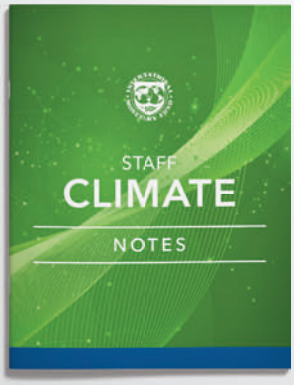

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over their territories. To help build up Ukraine's forces for their fight against another state military, however, the United States and its allies have had to relearn how to teach. The Pentagon has also had to build a new kind of coalition, convening more than 50 countries from across the world to coordinate materiel donations to Ukraine through the Ukraine Defense Contact Group—the most complex and most rapid effort ever undertaken to stand up a single country's military.

Nearly a decade ago, I noted in these pages that although the United States had been building militaries in fragile states since World War II, its record was lackluster. That is no longer the case. The Pentagon's new system has demonstrated that it can move so quickly that materiel support for Ukraine has at times been delivered within days. The system has surged in ways that many experts (including me) thought impossible. In particular, the technical aspect of equipping militaries has improved. For example, the U.S. Army's use of artificial intelligence has made it much easier for Ukraine's military to be able to see and understand the battlefield, and to make decisions and act accordingly. Lessons from the rapid delivery of assistance to Ukraine have also been applied to the Israel-Hamas war; within days of the October 7 attacks, U.S.-supplied air defense capabilities and munitions were in Israel to protect its skies and help it respond.

But even though Washington has now demonstrated that it can build a foreign military with alacrity, the question will always remain as to whether it should. The cost of transferring valuable equipment to a partner involves considerations of the U.S. military's own readiness levels and combat credibility. Moreover, such assistance is not merely a technical effort but a political exercise, as well, and the system has occasionally slowed down as it wrestles with dilemmas regarding the full implications of U.S. security aid. For example, to avoid tripping Russia's redlines, Washington has spent inordinate time debating where, when, and under what circumstances Ukraine should use U.S. military assistance. This puzzle is not new, but given the destructive abilities of the rivals that Washington is now facing or preparing to confront, the stakes of solving it correctly are much higher than during the post-9/11 era.

The role of defense industrial bases in rival countries has also shaped the new contours of war-making. In the dozens of countries supporting Ukraine, domestic defense industries have not been able to keep up with the demand. Meanwhile, Russia's defense industrial base has been revived after speculations about its demise proved to be greatly exaggerated. Although China's support to Russia appears to exclude lethal assistance, it has nevertheless involved Beijing's providing Moscow with critical technologies. And both Iran and North Korea have supported their defense industries by selling munitions and other wares to Moscow. The United States is not the only power to have recognized the value (both on the battlefield and back home) of supplying partner forces and building up their capacities; its adversaries have, as well.

Understanding the new diversity of warfighters and the increased complexity of their relationships to one another will be crucial in any future conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Lessons from Ukraine have informed the Biden administration's turbocharged effort to strengthen Taiwan, which received foreign military financing for the first time in 2023. More broadly, strategists should consider how future state-on-state warfare might be combined with insurgency. They should also think through how a panoply of actors on and off the battlefield, including nonstate groups and commercial entities, might support the primary antagonists.

And as in Ukraine, regional coalition building will be critical to any support Washington supplies to Taiwan in the face of Chinese aggression. Although the number of countries that support Taiwan's military remains slim, Washington's European allies seem increasingly willing to acknowledge Taipei's outsize relevance for regional security and stability. Chinese support for Russia's destabilizing war has disabused most European leaders of the false notion that Beijing values stability above all else. This evolution in European views was reflected by the "strategic concept" NATO released in 2022, which noted that China's "coercive policies" challenge the alliance's "interests, security and values."

THE RETURN OF DETERRENCE

During the two decades of the post-9/11 era, the concept of deterrence was rarely invoked in Washington since the idea seemed largely irrelevant to conflicts against nonstate actors such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). What a difference a few years make: today, almost every debate about U.S. foreign policy and national security boils down to the challenge of deterrence, which is one key to managing escalation—the task, although neither glamorous nor gratifying, that broadly shapes Washington's policy in both Ukraine and the Middle East.

In this new environment, traditional approaches to deterrence have regained relevance. One is deterrence by denial—the act of making it difficult for an enemy to achieve its intended objective. Denial can quell escalation even if it fails to prevent an initial act of aggression. In the Middle East, Israel was unable to stop Iran's first major conventional attack on Israeli territory earlier this year, but it largely denied Iran the benefits it hoped to gain. Israel's military repulsed almost all of the hundreds of Iranian missiles and drones thanks to its sophisticated air and missile defense systems and the collaboration of the United States and countries across the Middle East and Europe. (Shoddy Iranian equipment also played a role.) The limited repercussions of the attack enabled Israel to wait nearly a week to respond and to do so in a more limited way than would have been likely had Iran's operation been more successful.

The win was costly, however. The United States and Israel may have spent around ten times more in responding to Iran's attack than Iran did in launching it. Similarly, the Houthis have used relatively inexpensive and small-scale tools to attack

ships in the Red Sea dozens of times, disrupting a major shipping route and imposing massive costs on the global economy. In response to the Houthis' low-cost, high-impact attacks, U.S. Navy ships have frequently depleted their magazines without significantly reducing the threat. Accounting for the extended deployments the navy has undertaken in the Middle East for deterrence purposes, including confronting the Houthis by using munitions to counter their attacks and strike their assets in Yemen, rebuilding and recovering ship readiness after this fight with a small local militia amid broader regional hostilities will wind up costing the navy at least $1 billion over the next several years.

Another traditional means of deterrence that has resurfaced is punishment, which requires threatening an adversary with severe consequences if it takes certain actions. At a few key junctures, Putin's saber rattling brought the potential for nuclear weapons use to its highest point since the Cold War. During one especially fraught period in October 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden and his team worried there was a 50 percent chance that Putin would employ his nuclear arsenal. In calls with their Russian counterparts, senior American leaders made stern and timely warnings of "catastrophic" consequences if Moscow made good on its threats. Those warnings worked, as did a broader effort to persuade key Asian and European countries, most notably China and India, to publicly and prospectively condemn any role for nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Tugging Putin down the escalation ladder required a baseline understanding of how he viewed threats, serious attention to the signals and noise being sent across the entire U.S. government, and active feedback loops to ensure those assessments were accurate—all paired with robust diplomatic engagements.

SIGNAL ACHIEVEMENT

The return of total war, with its many moving parts and elevated risks, has revived an understanding of how signaling works in a crisis. The Biden administration postponed a routine intercontinental ballistic missile test soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine to demonstrate how responsible nuclear powers act in times of potential escalation. This test could have inadvertently conveyed to Putin an inaccurate signal with respect to future U.S. policy at a sensitive time—particularly as his invasion of Ukraine was stumbling, scores of countries were coming together to support Kyiv, and Ukraine's military was fighting doggedly. The United States wanted to ensure that Putin picked up the right signals about U.S. intentions and didn't get distracted by the noise that a missile test might have introduced.

Signaling has also been crucial to preventing escalation in the Middle East. During three key moments—the immediate wake of Hamas's October 7 attacks in 2023, Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel in April, and the days following Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July—a calibrated mix of deft diplomacy, surges in military assets, coalition building, and crystal-clear public messaging prevented a massive regional conflict. Just after the

October 7 attacks, Biden sent a message to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warning against attacking U.S. personnel in the region, and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin deployed two aircraft carriers plus additional aircraft to the Middle East to make clear that Iran should not escalate by directly entering the conflict. The presence of robust U.S. capabilities such as air defense was also critical to preventing further escalation after Iran's large-scale attack on Israel in April. But without U.S. partnerships with countries across the Middle East and Europe, the limits of those capabilities would have become clear, since the efficacy of those capabilities benefited, to some extent, from the cooperation and participation of these countries. And following Haniyeh's killing, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken asked the Qatari prime minister and the Jordanian foreign minister, among other officials, to help dissuade Iran from responding. The Pentagon also further boosted the U.S. regional military presence, including by publicly announcing the deployment of a nuclear-powered submarine to the Middle East.

Of course, there are drawbacks to relying too heavily and for too long on military force in pursuit of deterrence. So far, surging U.S. military assets in the Middle East for deterrence purposes has been the right approach; through September, Hezbollah had largely kept its attacks on Israel below a certain threshold rather than overwhelmingly intervening in support of Hamas. But as time passes, the deterrent value of military buildups abates, and they grow susceptible to the sunk cost fallacy—that is, adversaries become accustomed to factoring in the threat such buildups pose rather than fearing them, and they learn how to plan around them. There are also costs to military readiness, which may create an opening for adversaries to question the credibility of threats because they know that Washington cannot indefinitely sustain a bulked-up presence. And there are opportunity costs to consider. The U.S. military must juggle multiple threats around the world while pacing itself for a long-term competition with China. Bolstering deterrence in the Middle East over the last year has been important, but it has inherently limited the time, attention, and resources Washington has devoted to Indo-Pacific security.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

As the United States grapples with the challenges of deterrence on the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East, it is doing so with one eye on the Indo-Pacific, where China's modernized military is undermining regional security. In the mounting U.S.-Chinese rivalry, the Pentagon's approach will rely on another form of deterrence, which the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy dubbed "deterrence by resilience"—that is, "the ability to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption." Resilience is the rationale behind the ongoing dispersal of U.S. military bases in the Indo-Pacific, which will allow American forces to absorb an attack and continue fighting. This effort has involved gaining access to

four military bases in the Philippines; advancing new U.S. Marine and U.S. Army capabilities in Japan; forging several major initiatives with Australia, including increased submarine port visits and aircraft rotations, deep cooperation in outer space, and substantial U.S. and Australian investment in basing upgrades; and securing a defense cooperation agreement with Papua New Guinea that will allow for U.S. assistance in upgrading the country's military, increasing its interoperability with the U.S. military, and performing more joint exercises. Meanwhile, over the last year and a half, a U.S. submarine with the ability to fire a nuclear-armed ballistic missile made a port call to South Korea, and an American B-52 bomber capable of deploying a nuclear weapon landed there.

The presence of increasingly capable U.S. military assets dispersed across the region (alongside those of allied and partner militaries) complicates Chinese planning. To some extent, this approach turns Thomas Schelling's deterrence theory upside down. Schelling stressed the utility of certainty in signaling. What Washington is doing with its military in the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, creates several potential pathways to preclude Chinese efforts to overturn the status quo, increases the complexity of those contingencies, and induces uncertainty about which may be the most relevant. It's true that it will be difficult to know whether any particular U.S. partner will prove willing to use or allow the use of military assets from its territory in a conflict. But that uncertainty is a feature, not a bug. Simply put, although the United States may not have full clarity about what role specific allies and partners will play should a conflict erupt, neither does China.

Adding further complexity to the picture is the way that in recent years, U.S. diplomacy has brought countries within the Indo-Pacific together and created connections between regions. The former is illustrated by the historic U.S.-brokered progress between Japan and South Korea, which has yielded more than 60 meetings and military engagements between them and the United States since 2023; the latter is represented by the creation of AUKUS, a major military partnership joining Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Less formal but meaningful relationships have formed, as well. A grouping nicknamed "the Squad" is composed of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States; their defense ministers have met a few times, and their militaries ran maritime patrols in the South China Sea earlier this year. And nearly 30 countries in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere participated in RIMPAC 2024, a U.S.-led military exercise held in the Indo-Pacific.

Taken together, these campaigns demonstrate a modernized approach to collaborating with allies and partners in the service of deterrence. They are increasingly integrated by design and thus require a huge amount of work. The transformation of export control systems to enable the AUKUS partnership, for instance, took countless hours of collaboration among all three countries and involved scaling

major bureaucratic hurdles even though the arrangement involved two long-standing U.S. allies.

Expanded partnerships of this sort can be unwieldy, and adversaries and competitors will do what they can to fracture them. U.S. partners may take ill-considered risks when facing rivals if they believe they hold an insurance policy in the form of American support. And deeper collaboration among Washington and its friends could be interpreted in a way that inadvertently escalates a competitor's perceptions of insecurity. But overall, these tighter relationships are a net positive, and increasing the size, scope, and scale of collaboration makes the challenge tougher for those who seek to upend the security environment.

AVOIDING TOTAL WAR

Prevailing in an era of comprehensive conflict requires a sense of urgency and vigilance and, above all, a wide aperture. The circumscribed struggles of the post-9/11 era are gone, and today's wars are increasingly whole-of-society phenomena. Focusing on boutique capabilities is shortsighted; both newer and older systems remain relevant. Participants on and off the battlefield proliferate, and parties increasingly collaborate. Actions and activities rarely affect just one domain; spillage seems unavoidable.

For Washington, understanding this new kind of total war will be essential to preparing for contingencies in the Indo-Pacific. The United States must continue expanding and diversifying its military posture in the region. Deterring and, if necessary, prevailing in conflict will mean gaining access to more bases in more places. Washington's military support for Taiwan will be crucial. The United States must keep improving the speed at which it can deliver assistance to Taiwan and use more realistic conflict scenarios to inform what equipment it sends. This aid should continue alongside efforts to encourage meaningful personnel and organizational reform of Taiwan's military, which would involve prioritizing and sufficiently resourcing training (including by preparing troops for more realistic scenarios) and further investing in asymmetric platforms and operational concepts.

Building on U.S. alliances and partnerships in the region will require serious and steadfast attention. Some relationships are ripe for revitalization. U.S. relations with India have moved slowly since the two countries announced a strategic partnership nearly 20 years ago. But clashes between China and India since 2020 have fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of New Delhi's approach to Beijing; India now recognizes that this is a tense competition.

Today's global security environment is the most complex since the end of the Cold War. Learning from wars that others wage can be difficult, but it is ultimately better than learning those lessons directly. The destruction and loss of life in Ukraine and the Middle East have been heartbreaking. In addition to helping its allies prevail in those conflicts and fostering peace, Washington should get ready to fight the kind of total war that has ripped apart those places—which is the best way to avoid one.

WORLD OF WAR

Wars Are Not Accidents

Managing Risk in the Face of Escalation

ERIK LIN-GREENBERG

Israel's assassination of a top Hamas leader in Tehran in July, Ukraine's incursion over the summer into Russia, and a recent series of increasingly assertive Chinese air and maritime interceptions in the South China Sea have fanned fears that long-simmering conflicts could escalate into broader wars. In the wake of these provocations, analysts fret about the heightened risk of military accidents and strategic misperceptions. They worry that incidents of this sort could ratchet up tensions until policymakers lose control and stumble into wars they do not intend to fight. As U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in August, attacks in the Middle East "raise the risk of dangerous outcomes that no one can predict and no one can fully control."

Although provocative incidents can push crises up the escalation ladder, truly inadvertent wars are rare. History provides few examples of conflicts that have erupted without policymakers' authorization, and leaders frequently exercise restraint to avoid combat, especially in high-stakes situations. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, U.S. policymakers held off on retaliating after Soviet troops shot down an American spy plane, stepping back from the brink of war. When faced with the risk of a spiraling conflict, rivals often find off-ramps to de-escalate crises. This brinkmanship requires careful choreography: states must learn how to pressure their adversaries just enough to shape their behavior without crossing thresholds that could trigger a significant response.

Even then, crossing redlines does not make conflict inevitable. The death of three U.S. soldiers in an Iranian-backed

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drone strike in January did not start a war between Washington and Tehran. In April, the massive drone and missile attack that Iran launched against Israel did not ignite a full-scale conflict between those two states. But to avoid war, leaders on both sides must restrain themselves at moments of crisis without losing face or showing weakness. To do so, they must carefully consider their actions—how, when, and where to pressure rivals in ways that avoid triggering escalatory retaliation. They must also establish direct or indirect communication with adversaries, facilitating arrangements that permit both sides to claim success in their coercive actions while reducing the potential for misinterpretation. Understanding how to navigate the interplay of pressure and restraint empowers leaders to step back from the edge of war.

THE SECRET HISTORY

The fear of inadvertent escalation is not new to international relations. Political scientists have spent decades arguing about whether military mobilization plans caused European states to "sleepwalk" into World War I. During the Cold War, policymakers worried that weapon malfunctions, false alarms from early warning systems, and unauthorized actions by military officers could spark a nuclear conflagration. Some academics have explored how unintended wars could unfold from technical failures in military systems. Others have suggested that states stumble into conflicts when military actions create momentum that makes it impossible for political leaders to back away from the brink. Still others have argued that leaders might respond with major military strikes if they mistakenly perceive a rival's limited actions as an existential threat.

Although scholars describe different pathways to inadvertent war, their frameworks have a common trait: the assumption that policymakers have limited control over escalation. According to these researchers, states end up in wars they did not choose to fight because of chance or chain reactions in the military. But this does not accord with reality. Even during the tensest moments of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union never accidentally fell into conflict. Instead, leaders always found a way out.

The Cuban missile crisis was a close call. Soviet air defenses had shot down a U.S. spy plane over Cuba without approval from Moscow, and the United States considered responding with retaliatory airstrikes that could have led to war. U.S. President John F. Kennedy and his joint chiefs, however, refrained from retaliating for fear that airstrikes could start a nuclear exchange. During another exceptionally tense moment, in 1983, the Soviet Union mobilized forces after mistakenly assessing a NATO military exercise as Western preparation for a nuclear first strike. But senior U.S. commanders again held off on responding. In each of these cases, policymakers ultimately decided to step back from war, recognizing the potentially catastrophic implications of escalation.

BLURRED LINES

Rival countries routinely engage in brinkmanship during crises, taking risky actions that heighten the prospects of war. The reason why is obvious: doing so can push a rival to change its behavior.

Even if that doesn't work, by ratcheting up tensions, leaders demonstrate that they are committed to achieving their objectives. Provocations such as raids, aerial interceptions, and ground incursions signal leaders' willingness to act against adversaries and suggest that additional actions will follow if rivals don't accede to their demands.

But provocations are inherently dangerous. Chinese fighter jets, for example, frequently use risky maneuvers when intercepting U.S. reconnaissance planes, making collisions more likely. The unpredictable nature of these actions heightens the risk of accidents, miscommunication, or misjudgments that could lead a minor incident to spiral into a broader conflict.

What makes crises so unpredictable is that the thresholds, or redlines, that might trigger a war are often not publicly known. They also do not fall into neat categories. They can be geographic: attacks in certain locations, for example, will trigger escalation, whereas strikes elsewhere may be ignored. But they can be based on the type of target, as well. Attacks on military contractors may fall below the threshold for retaliation, for instance, but attacks that kill military members may trigger a sharp response. The intensity of a rival's actions can also help determine thresholds. A large-scale attack may spark more significant retaliation than a single precision strike.

Policymakers often deliberately keep these limits vague to strengthen their hands. Although officials sometimes announce explicit thresholds, too much clarity can weaken deterrence by enabling rivals to know just how far they can go. In contrast, ambiguity can enhance deterrence by forcing opponents to exercise restraint, lest they cross an escalation threshold.

Consider the Philippines' calculations for responding to Chinese provocations in the water around its territory. It is unclear what would drive Manila to use force in response to aggressive Chinese moves against Philippine ships. It is equally unclear how Beijing would respond to Manila's actions and whether such a crisis would lead the Philippines to invoke the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty, which commits Washington to defend the country and could thus draw U.S. forces into the dispute. The uncertainty surrounding these interactions may make Beijing more cautious than it otherwise would be.

But uncertainty also raises the prospect that provocations will lead to a crisis that could spiral out of a leader's control. The tension between using brinkmanship to pressure a rival and the desire to limit escalation forces leaders to navigate crises cautiously, probing how far they can go while keeping a situation under control.

ON THE LEDGE

Policymakers have to carefully calibrate their actions. They must show enough capability and resolve to advance their objectives while providing rival leaders with the space to back down. They do so, in large part, by avoiding significant affronts to a rival's honor and by anticipating and then not crossing a rival's redlines.

States often control escalation by limiting the physical effects of their coercive actions. Avoiding casualties or major infrastructure damage makes it easier for targeted states to refrain from serious retaliation. Russia and Iran

have downed U.S. military drones to convey their displeasure with Washington's reconnaissance missions, for example, but they have avoided the escalation risks of downing a manned aircraft. Likewise, Israel responded to Iran's April attack by striking a single radar at a critical Iranian air defense site rather than launching a larger and more destructive operation. Although the attack caused little physical damage, it demonstrated Israel's ability to target advanced systems deep within Iran. Since the strike generated limited harm, Tehran could downplay the attack at home and avoid launching a significant retaliation.

In addition to selecting targets and using precision munitions, states can minimize harm by forewarning of their actions, allowing the targeted states to strengthen defenses and otherwise prevent damage. Before retaliating for Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus this April, for instance, Tehran telegraphed its response plan. Iranian officials publicly threatened imminent strikes, privately warned regional governments of the impending attack, and messaged to Israel and the rest of the world that they did not seek a full-scale war. By the time Iran launched its missile and drone barrage nearly two weeks later, Israel and its partners were prepared to shoot most of them out of the sky, ensuring minimal physical damage and casualties.

But limiting destruction and the loss of lives is only part of the story. The location, timing, and method of attack can be just as important for managing escalation, even if the physical outcomes are the same. Iranian officials would undoubtedly have seen Israel's killing of Hamas's political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, as far less provocative if it had taken place in Gaza instead of in Tehran. Similarly, Moscow would likely view a Ukrainian ground force assault on a Russian military base as more escalatory than a drone strike on the same facility.

As a result, decision-makers frequently avoid actions that directly challenge a rival's territory. For example, Washington seeks to deter Iranian-sponsored attacks on U.S. forces by targeting Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps facilities and Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq and Syria instead of carrying out direct strikes in Iran. In doing so, the United States tacitly acknowledges that attacking Iranian territory would cross an escalation threshold.

Policymakers can also use coercive tools that are more deniable or otherwise less visible to the public. In the 1950s, Soviet and American pilots waged a covert air war over the Korean Peninsula that Washington and Moscow both kept hidden from the public. Today, Ukraine often refuses to take responsibility for its drone strikes on Russia. States also increasingly use "gray zone" tactics such as cyberwarfare or rely on proxies such as Russia's Wagner paramilitary company to further their aims in a plausibly deniable manner. The political scientist Austin Carson has argued that these "backstage" activities allow governments to secretly apply pressure while avoiding demands for escalation from the public, which often grows more hawkish after visible confrontations.

Once a state carries out coercive actions, policymakers can announce their intent to avoid further escalation. After Iran's January 2020 missile attack on a U.S. military base in Iraq, Tehran

issued a public statement to the UN secretary-general stating that it "took and concluded" military operations to retaliate for Washington's assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian commander, noting that it "does not seek escalation or war." Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted a similar message, stressing that Iran's military actions were done. The United States launched no military response to the attack, opting instead to impose additional economic sanctions on Iranian firms and officials.

But even after an attacker has achieved its goals and suggested it wants to go no further, its rival must find some way to reestablish deterrence. Officials must rewrite their rules of engagement, creating new thresholds that make clear that future aggression will be met with resistance. Iran's response to Israel's embassy attack signaled a new normal by demonstrating a willingness to directly attack Israeli territory, a task Tehran had previously delegated to its regional proxies. Such new, unwritten rules and thresholds push already fraught relations up the escalation ladder, creating uncertainty and fear that should cause leaders to exercise greater restraint.

Controlling escalation, however, comes with tradeoffs. Actions that are too restrained may not shape a rival's behavior. U.S. strikes on Yemeni drone and missile sites, for example, have failed to halt Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea. Although this is partly a tactical issue—the Houthis are adept at hiding and moving launchers—Washington has also failed because its actions have not imposed costs large enough to force the Houthis and their Iranian patrons to back down. More aggressive U.S. actions might deter the Houthis more effectively, but they are also more likely to provoke Iranian escalation. Getting the Houthis to back down through force, then, might come at the cost of a general escalation in the region, ultimately a more counterproductive (not to mention dangerous) outcome for all involved.

IT TAKES TWO

Even the best efforts to avoid escalation can fail. Decision-makers may misjudge their rivals' thresholds, taking actions that opponents perceive as more provocative than intended, as Israel did when it attacked Iran's embassy in Syria. Israeli officials expected a minor retaliation, not an onslaught of hundreds of missiles and drones.

If tensions do rise, states can try to de-escalate. But that can be challenging since policymakers face pressure to ramp up during crises. Leaders understandably fear that looking weak will harm them politically. Constituents may punish leaders at the polls for failing to act. Other rivals closely observe a state's crisis behavior to assess capability and resolve, and appearing weak in one crisis can weaken a state's bargaining position in future confrontations. Such concerns are particularly severe when backing down involves reneging on a commitment, such as an agreement to defend another country or a public pledge to stand firm in a crisis. In September, for instance, Gilberto Teodoro, the Philippine defense secretary, announced that he expected American intervention in the event of a Chinese attack on Philippine military outposts. Similarly, U.S. President Joe Biden has repeatedly described Washington's defense commitment to the

Philippines as "ironclad." As a result, it will be difficult for the United States to back down from its treaty obligations without being labeled as untrustworthy.

To complicate matters, new technologies make it harder to avoid escalation pressures. Commercial imagery satellites, cellphones, and other smart devices create a world with fewer secrets. This increased transparency makes it difficult to hide the covert and gray-zone actions that leaders often use to engage in less escalatory backstage confrontations. Meanwhile, social media provides a platform for inflammatory content that can stoke escalation.

Still, as the tit for tat between Iran and Israel showed, war is almost never inevitable. The road to conflict is an action-reaction process. Leaders decide whether and how to respond to a rival's moves, and they often search for ways to lower the temperature. Escalation to war, after all, is not always in a state's interest. Victory is not guaranteed, and the costs of fighting might outweigh the gains. As a result, states are often better off coming to a settlement that advances their strategic objectives without going to battle—even if a leader suffers political or reputational consequences because of it.

CLIMBING DOWN THE LADDER

To avoid playing what the international relations scholar James Fearon has called the "costly lottery" of war, leaders find ways to back down from intense crisis escalation while preserving their reputation and ensuring deterrence. To do so, policymakers must craft arrangements in which all parties can claim success or find face-saving off-ramps. In Iran and Israel's exchange last spring, for instance, Tehran was able to project strength to both domestic and international audiences simply by showcasing its ability to launch large-scale strikes on Israel, even though the attack caused minimal damage. For their part, Israeli leaders emphasized that they can safeguard the country from even a mass attack.

Rival leaders can also tacitly collude with each other to avoid war. This frequently involves mutually deciding to keep each other's actions hidden from the public. In the 1950s, to avoid stoking pressures to escalate, neither Moscow nor Washington disclosed their air war over Korea. Beyond such unspoken coordination, communication between rivals—either directly or through intermediaries (such as Qatar, in the case of Israel and Hamas)—can help leaders step back from war. Officials can clarify intentions and thresholds and diffuse tension after accidents, avoiding miscalculations and further escalation. There is significant precedent for this type of coordination. The close calls of the Cuban missile crisis spurred Washington and Moscow to set up a crisis hotline in 1963, and the United States established a similar connection with Beijing in 2007. Other rivals might benefit from emulating this approach.

As crises become more common and intense, the role leaders play in pulling states away from the precipice of war becomes increasingly important. When tensions push states to the brink, decision-makers must play a high-stakes bargaining game and identify ways to pursue their aims and deter future harm while avoiding war. But they need not panic about inadvertent war. The tools of restraint lie in their hands.

WORLD OF WAR

China's Agents of Chaos

The Military Logic of Beijing's Growing Partnerships

ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO

At a joint press conference in June 2024, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg fretted over the strengthening ties between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. They are hardly the only politicians to have done so. The informal pact between these four autocracies has become a major focus in Washington, described by both Democratic and Republican officials as a new "axis of evil." These countries, analysts point out, coordinate military and diplomatic activity. They have similar rhetoric and common interests. And they seem to share one aim above all: weakening the United States.

Each of these countries, by itself, has formidable capabilities. But China is the bloc's central player. It has the biggest population and economy, and it doles out the most aid. Beijing is North Korea's primary trade ally and benefactor. It has helped Iran contend with international sanctions, signing a "comprehensive strategic partnership" agreement with Tehran in 2021. And China has provided Russia with over $9 billion in dual-use items—goods with both commercial and military applications—since the latter's invasion of Ukraine. This support has kept Russia's economy from collapsing, despite Western sanctions aimed at crippling the country's war effort. (Chinese goods now make up 38 percent of all imports into Russia.)

But China doesn't want to be seen as the leader of this group. It doesn't even want to be viewed as a member. In April 2023, Chinese Premier

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Li Qiang claimed that "China-Russia relations adhere to the principles of nonalignment, nonconfrontation, and nontargeting of third parties." In 2016, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying said that Beijing had "no interest" in forming "an anti-U.S. or anti-Western bloc of any kind." The government has, accordingly, refrained from signing defense treaties with Iran and Russia. It sometimes works against Iranian, North Korean, and Russian positions in international conflicts.

There is a reason for this ambiguity. China wants to supplant the United States as the world's dominant power, and although partnering with Iran, North Korea, and Russia helps Beijing in that effort, the trio can also undermine its aims. The three states weaken Washington by attracting its resources and distracting it from Beijing. But they have also greatly antagonized powerful neighbors—such as Germany, Japan, and Saudi Arabia—that China doesn't want to alienate. As a result, Chinese officials must walk a fine line. Their relationship with the axis must be close enough that they can wield it, but not so close that they are blamed for its misbehavior.

Unfortunately, the United States is letting China have the best of both worlds. Washington has been too focused on figuring out whether these countries will form a traditional defense alliance to understand Beijing's existing entrepreneurial approach to partnerships—or to see that it is very successful. Under the present arrangement, Iran, North Korea, and Russia all cause trouble for the West. Yet because those countries are not formal Chinese allies, Washington's partners have not penalized China for their transgressions. In fact, if anything, the axis is splitting the U.S. alliance system. Many of the United States' friends, preoccupied with their own regional troublemakers, have refused to join with Washington in its competition against Beijing.

China's approach could be especially effective in the event of a war. If Beijing and Washington had to battle, the axis is now powerful enough and coordinated enough on military matters that it could fight together and defeat the United States. But because axis states are not a tightly coordinated bloc, they could just as easily launch separate conflicts that divide American resources, distract U.S. allies, and thus help Beijing prevail.

Washington must therefore change course. Rather than trying to guess how close these countries are to each other or working to pull them apart, the U.S. government must start treating them as the autocratic bloc they are. It must encourage its allies around the globe to do the same. And it needs to treat China as the master of the axis—whether or not that is the reality of the situation.

HALF IN, HALF OUT

In 1950, at the onset of the Cold War, the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Communist Party formalized a 30-year Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. The agreement, forged in the aftermath of the Communists' victory over the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, was framed by both sides as the natural coming together of two revolutionary socialist states. As such, it called on Beijing and Moscow to defend and consult each other "regarding all important international

questions affecting the common interests of the Soviet Union and China."

In practice, however, the Chinese-Soviet relationship quickly became complicated. The countries did often collaborate, most notably by supporting North Korean founder Kim Il Sung in his war against South Korea. But they also clashed over who would lead the communist bloc. Beijing and Moscow, for example, vied to arm the North Vietnamese. China resisted Soviet efforts to forge a détente with the United States.

Today, China's relationship with U.S. antagonists is again half in, half out. There is, on the one hand, plenty of cooperation. In 2021, Beijing renewed the Chinese–North Korean mutual defense treaty, and as of 2023, China purchases 90 percent of Iran's oil. China, Iran, and Russia conduct regular joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman. And in 2018, China agreed to join Russia in a national military exercise in which the two countries practiced, among other things, how they might handle war on the Korean Peninsula. But Beijing has not endorsed the invasion of Ukraine, nor has it provided direct military aid. When Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met in June and signed a treaty in which they pledged to support each other militarily if either was attacked, the Chinese Foreign Ministry called it a bilateral matter between Moscow and Pyongyang. When the United Arab Emirates had a maritime dispute with Iran, Beijing released a joint statement with the UAE declaring its support for a "peaceful solution." And in January 2024, Chinese officials told their Iranian counterparts to curb Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, signaling that continued hostilities might jeopardize their economic relationship.

During the Cold War, China paid a price for sending mixed messages to its

CINTA FOSCH

Soviet ally. Over time, Moscow moved away from Beijing, eventually leading to what analysts call the Sino-Soviet split. But this time, China's authoritarian partners appear not to mind Russia's behavior. Despite Beijing's detachment, China is getting natural gas from Russia at a 44 percent discount compared with what Europe pays. Iran did not sign a letter condemning China for its violence against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and Tehran has offered Beijing political support for its takeover of Hong Kong and its claims to Taiwan.

All the while, Beijing has managed to stay on good terms with most U.S. allies. South Korea, and to a degree Japan, does not fully support U.S. deterrence efforts against China. Beijing remains both Japan's and South Korea's largest trading partner, even though it aids North Korea. Beijing has put enough distance between itself and Moscow that the EU felt comfortable trading over $800 billion in goods with China in 2023, or 15 percent of the EU's total trade. During his 2023 visit to China, French President Emmanuel Macron said that his country would not blindly follow the United States in crises that are not its concern, specifically in reference to Taiwan. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has on multiple occasions claimed that Germany is not a part of a geopolitical bloc and will not join one. Similarly, China's partnership with Iran has not jeopardized its ties with the Gulf States or Israel.

ORDER OF DISORDER

At first, it may seem as if China's mixed approach to Iran, North Korea, and Russia should be tolerable for the United States. Under the status quo, after all, China is not giving Russia outright military aid with which to attack Ukraine. Beijing continues to support diplomacy to halt Iran's nuclear program. The EU-Chinese relationship, meanwhile, could moderate Iran's behavior.

The status quo is better than a situation in which Beijing provides full-throated support for these countries. But U.S. officials should take no comfort in the current situation. Neither the distance between China and its partners nor Beijing's outreach to the West has truly acted as a constraint. China may occasionally wag its finger at Iran or quietly criticize Russia, but when push comes to shove, it is giving an enormous amount of help to these states. Beijing, for example, bolstered a disinformation campaign in 2022 claiming that U.S.-funded Ukrainian biolabs were making biological weapons—helping provide the justification for the invasion of Ukraine. The states work together to challenge the traditional human rights language used by international institutions, arguing that concepts such as civil liberties and the rule of law are exclusively Western constructs. Iran, North Korea, and Russia all use Chinese technology to repress their populations.

Beijing's support for these states is most pronounced on matters of security and defense. It has provided them with sophisticated military technology and assistance. It has shared intelligence with Russia, including from its extensive satellite network, helping Moscow's war efforts. Moscow, in turn, supplies Beijing with billions of dollars in weapons annually. These shipments have dramatically improved China's ability to

target U.S. jets, bases, and ships. Moscow has also given Beijing technology it can use to develop or enhance its domestic weapons production.

Partly as a result of this cooperation, the United States may be at a military disadvantage for the first time in decades. China alone has more active soldiers than does the United States. Beijing and Moscow together have more warships and tanks than Washington. Given how readily the former two governments cooperate, there is a good chance they might overpower U.S. forces if they fought together in a single military theater—for example, if China and Russia aid North Korea in a war against its southern neighbor or if Russia helps China with an attack on Taiwan.

The autocratic quad could also wreak havoc by fighting separately but simultaneously. The United States would struggle to win a two-front war. Instead, the American armed forces are structured to fight one major war while deterring smaller regional conflicts. That means if wars were raging in Europe, in the Middle East, on the Korean Peninsula, and over Taiwan, the United States would have to leave all but one of those theaters to largely fend for itself, at least initially.

Many U.S. allies have capable militaries that could battle axis members. But because they face their own regional demons, they are reluctant to help other states with their conflicts. In the event of a multifront war, they will want to keep their forces at home for self-defense. That means Washington cannot count on its allies to help U.S. troops even where it needs them most. If, for instance, the United States focused on defending Taiwan while North Korea was trying to seize South Korea, then Seoul and Tokyo would be either entirely or largely unwilling to give the United States support. In fact, concerns about North Korea have already made South Korea reluctant to let U.S. forces stationed within its borders take any actions beyond the Korean Peninsula. Europe, trying to protect its commercial ties, would almost certainly stay out of such a conflict.

To be sure, China would struggle to help its partners with their own fights if it had to take on the United States. During the Chinese Civil War, the Communists lost Taiwan partly because they chose to aid North Korea, giving U.S. President Harry Truman time to dispatch the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait and prevent an invasion. Chinese leader Xi Jinping will not want to repeat that mistake.

But any of these axis members can create crises that divert U.S. and allied resources without launching risky, full-blown conflicts. They can also give China an edge without joining its war. Russia, for example, could help China withstand an energy blockade by sending it oil and gas overland. The Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline, which sends Russian oil to Asian markets, can export about 35 million metric tons annually to China. The Power of Siberia pipeline, which transports natural gas to China, is expected to send 38 billion cubic meters per year by 2025—nearly equal to the amount of natural gas consumed annually by Australia. Moscow could also contribute its capital and labor to help China with manufacturing. The two states already have joint manufacturing

systems in place, including those related to making weapons.

If Moscow chose to become just slightly more involved in a U.S.-Chinese war, it would create even bigger headaches. Russian fighter jets, for instance, could conduct defensive joint air patrols with Chinese forces, as they have done in the past. The United States might then refrain from hitting Chinese targets, if only to stop Russia from becoming a direct combatant.

Whatever Russia's degree of involvement, its partnership with China adds a terrifying new dynamic to U.S. calculations. In the past, the United States has never had to contend with more than one nuclear peer. Now, with Beijing and Moscow, it has two. Unfortunately for Washington (and the world), attempts to prevent conflict with one of these governments could undermine deterrence against the other. For example, the United States signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1987 to eliminate their ground-launched intermediate-range missiles. It broadly succeeded and lowered tensions between the two countries. But the deal also left Beijing unconstrained, helping it gain a significant regional advantage in intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Future negotiations between any two of the three countries could again give the third an incentive for nuclear proliferation.

UNITE AND CONQUER

Some American strategists have suggested that to handle this axis, Washington should try dividing it. U.S. officials appear to be listening. In March 2023, for example, Blinken sought to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow by preying on the latter's insecurities: "Russia is very much the junior partner in this relationship," he said. Such efforts could hark back to the Cold War, when Washington worked to divide the fraught Chinese-Soviet axis. As Beijing and Moscow grew more distant, U.S. diplomats established channels of communication with their Chinese counterparts, leading to U.S. President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. Seven years later, China and the United States established formal relations. Eventually, they even worked together to spy on the Soviets.

But today, such efforts would be for naught. The autocratic axis provides Beijing with political support, energy supplies, and technology that it just cannot get from the West. Attempts to convince any of these countries that their autocratic colleagues present a greater threat than the United States are as ineffective as they are foolish.

Instead of trying to split the bloc, the United States must do the opposite: treat its members as entirely interlinked. That means ensuring poor behavior on the part of one leads to penalties for the others. Instead of exclusively sanctioning Chinese companies that support Russia's war effort, the United States could treat the Chinese state as a supporting entity and implement economic restrictions against the whole country. It could tell Beijing those restrictions will remain in place until Russia comes to the negotiating table. Beijing will cry foul, claiming it has no influence over Moscow. This might, indeed, be the case. But with skin in the game, China will work harder to acquire the influence it needs to successfully pressure Russia.

Grouping China and its partners could also help Washington unify its own coalition. Europe may not fully grasp the threat Beijing poses to the international order, but it surely understands the dangers emanating from Moscow. Yet the United States has not done nearly enough to explain to European countries why China and Russia are broadly connected, instead emphasizing the narrow links Beijing has to Moscow's invasion. If Washington can explain the bigger relationship, Europeans will be more likely to take Beijing's security challenge seriously and be more proactive in attempting to shape its behavior.

Yet the United States should still avoid an ideological approach. Although it should treat these autocratic countries as a bloc, it should avoid framing the global competition as one of democracies against autocracies. Autocratic partners (such as Saudi Arabia) will not want to help Washington prevail against China if the contest is about systems of government. Neither will many potential democratic partners in the developing world, such as Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa. In fact, China has built a wide network of friends by being regime agnostic and focusing on development. In his speeches to foreign audiences, for example, Xi loves to play up Beijing's respect for "state sovereignty," its commitment to "noninterference," and its desire to see poor countries grow rich. The developing world has listened. In the summer of 2024, when Xi met with José Ramos-Horta, the president of East Timor—a small, impoverished, and highly democratic state—Ramos-Horta declared that he did not care about great-power rivalries or the character of his country's allies. If China can alleviate East Timor's poverty and malnutrition, Ramos-Horta said, "then China is my hero."

Washington should take a page from Beijing's book. If it wants to be the leader of the whole world, not just the free world, it will need to gain support from developing democracies and autocracies alike. (According to Freedom House, 80 percent of people on earth live in countries that are either not free or only partly free.) It needs to be more agile, tailoring its offerings and messaging to address what each country cares about. This process involves not only offering more aid but also contributing to the right types of projects, such as ones related to health care, higher education, and cybersecurity. It means greater diplomatic engagement, military cooperation, and people-to-people ties.

It is true that, by applying more pressure, Washington and its allies may push Beijing to forge stronger connections with Iran, North Korea, and Russia. But China already substantially benefits from these relationships, so the United States has no choice but to take a tougher stance. The reality is that anything the United States does to impose costs on China will upset Beijing. The only way to avoid that is to give it what it wants, which is territorial control over Taiwan, maritime control of the South China Sea, and economic, military, and political dominance in Asia. Washington cannot be afraid to make China pay for helping bad actors, especially when holding back lets Beijing pretend to be above the fray.

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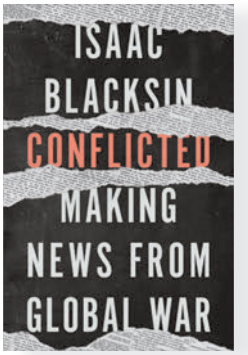
Samar Al-Bulushi



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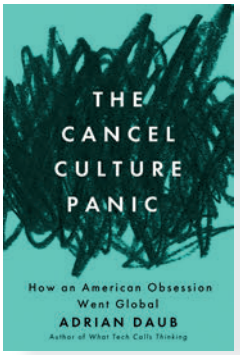

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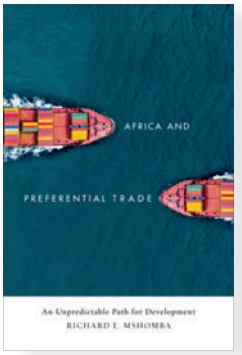

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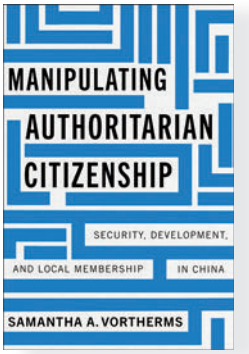

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Battles of Precise Mass

Technology Is Remaking War—and America Must Adapt

MICHAEL C. HOROWITZ

At the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian forces deployed a handful of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 uncrewed aerial vehicles to hit Russian targets. Those precise drone strikes were a sign of things to come. More than two years into the war, the TB2 is still a fixture of Ukraine's arsenal, but it has been joined by a plethora of other uncrewed systems. Similar technology features in the current conflicts in the Middle East. Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen launch one-way attack systems (drones armed with explosives that slam into their targets) and missiles at Israel, commercial shipping, and the U.S. Navy. For its part, Israel is using a range of unmanned vehicles in its war in Gaza. China is exploring ways to use uncrewed systems to blockade Taiwan and prevent outside powers from helping the island in the event of a Chinese attack. And the United States has launched several initiatives to help it rapidly field affordable uncrewed systems at greater scale. In all these cases, advances in artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, combined with a new generation of commercially available technologies and reduced manufacturing costs, are allowing militaries and militant groups to bring "mass" back to the battlefield.

For millennia, commanders considered mass—that is, having numerically superior forces and more materiel than the other side—critical to victory in battle. An army stood a greater chance of vanquishing its foes if it could deploy

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a greater number of troops, whether armed with spears, bows, and rifles or sitting in tanks. This principle dictated how militaries, especially those of great powers, pursued and achieved victory, from Roman legions in Gaul to the Soviet army on the eastern front of World War II. Having the biggest navy allowed the British empire to rule the seas, and having more planes empowered the Allies to bomb the Axis powers to smithereens. Mass has never been everything—better prepared, smaller militaries can thwart bigger and ostensibly more powerful ones—but it has traditionally established the odds in wars.

The last 50 years, however, saw a turn away from mass toward precision, a trend accelerated by the end of the Cold War. Militaries such as that of the United States discovered greater efficiency and effectiveness in the use of expensive advanced weapons that could accurately strike targets all over the world. Leaders chose to scale down the size of their forces and focus instead on honing their technological advantages.

Today's wars and the assiduous investments made by the United States and China show that mass is making a comeback, but not at the expense of precision. Indeed, the current age of warfare is collapsing the binary between mass and precision, scale and sophistication. Call it the age of "precise mass." Militaries find themselves in a new era in which more and more actors can muster uncrewed systems and missiles and gain access to inexpensive satellites and cutting-edge commercially available technology. With these tools, they can more easily conduct surveillance and stage accurate and devastating attacks. Its imperatives already shape warfare in Ukraine and the Middle East, influence dynamics in the Taiwan Strait, and inform planning and procurement in the Pentagon.

In the era of precise mass, war will be defined in large part by the deployment of huge numbers of uncrewed systems, whether fully autonomous and powered by artificial intelligence or remote-controlled, from outer space to under the sea. The U.S. military has positioned itself to lead in adapting to these changes in the character of warfare, but it must be ready to adopt innovations quickly and at scale. The pioneering breakthroughs evident in today's conflicts merely foreshadow how wars will be waged in the years and decades to come as militaries grapple with the imperatives of both mass and precision.

THE QUEST FOR PRECISION

Countries long believed that they could achieve success on the battlefield by having more troops, equipment, and provisions than their opponents. The weight of numbers would deliver victory, the thinking went. But in the late 1960s, that theory started to change. The U.S. military began seeing virtue in precision over sheer quantity. U.S. forces sought to identify, track, and hit targets with ever-greater accuracy. That emphasis reduced the number of platforms and weapons necessary for military operations while also helping the United States comply with international humanitarian law by limiting the likely collateral damage of strikes.

In the 1970s, the United States and its European allies faced numerically superior Soviet forces. They could not match the Soviets tank for tank. Top U.S. military analysts feared that

Moscow would win a war in Europe because of its quantitative advantage. To address these concerns, the United States introduced a program called Assault Breaker to integrate then-emerging technologies into military planning, with the intention of using precision missiles and bombs to devastate Soviet forces. Even if the Soviets achieved an initial breakthrough in an attack on central Europe, they would be unable to punch deep holes in Western lines. With sensors, early forms of guidance systems, and long-range weapons, the United States built the capability to destroy the second, third, and succeeding waves of Soviet forces in Europe.

The Cold War never turned hot in Europe, but precision strike capabilities would make their public debut in the first Gulf War in 1991. People around the world tuned into footage of laser-guided bombs slamming into Iraqi tanks. The decline of great-power competition—with the world focused on smaller conflicts such as those in Bosnia and Kosovo, and then counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq—placed an enormous premium on accuracy, as most military operations happened between smaller forces in populated areas.

Throughout the first part of the twenty-first century, the United States maintained a generational lead in precision strike capabilities. At a time when the Pentagon faced skyrocketing costs for ground vehicles, aircraft, submarines, ships, and weapons, that advantage convinced the U.S. military that it could triumph by slimming down and prioritizing efficiency and accuracy over sheer numbers. The United States consciously chose to reduce the scale of its military and rely on precision. The overall inventory of the air force and the fleet size of the navy are about a third of the size they were in 1965, but the striking power of each aircraft and each ship or submarine is much larger.

A FALSE BINARY

The wheel has turned once again. The United States no longer enjoys the vast lead in precision strike capabilities that it once did. The technology underlying those capacities—conventional munitions, sensors, and guidance systems—has become cheaper over time and accessible to many countries and militant groups beyond the United States. From Azerbaijan to North Korea, other forces can strike some targets with the precision, power, and range that were once the preserve of the U.S. military. They have benefited from advances made in the private sector in artificial intelligence and the widening availability of sensing and communications platforms, such as global positioning systems. With this proliferation of know-how, technology, and weaponry, warfare is changing. Crucially, advances in manufacturing and software have lowered the price of key equipment. A cheap commercial drone equipped with weapons, guided by another cheap drone packed with sensors, can hit specific faraway targets or conduct surveillance operations. And because they are relatively inexpensive, such aircraft can be deployed at scale. Militaries are beginning to realize that they don't have to choose between precision and mass; they can have both.

Systems of this kind are, in military parlance, "attritable"—that is, their relatively low cost makes the loss of

any one system relatively insignificant. They are inferior in comparison with the most advanced weapons deployed by the U.S. or Chinese militaries—an F-35 stealth fighter, for example, or a Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile—but these systems can be deployed at a much greater scale than their more expensive counterparts. Their unit costs are low enough that their aggregate capabilities are more affordable.

To be sure, these cheap and precise systems are not making tanks, artillery, and other elements of modern warfare obsolete. They complement what came before, just as past innovations have; the advent of air warfare, for instance, did not spell the end of the use of infantry in battle. Future battlefields will be characterized by a mix of high-end systems deployed in smaller numbers, with these attritable systems deployed in far greater numbers.

These new trends and technologies have turned the war in Ukraine into a "battle lab," as British Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace put it in 2023. Both sides have used flocks of relatively cheap drones to surveil and strike the other. In the sea, Ukraine's robotic boats have delivered devastating blows to the Russian navy as part of a campaign that has damaged or destroyed a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, according to Ukrainian estimates. Russia is now trying to eliminate these Ukrainian uncrewed vessels with remotely controlled drones guided by first-person-view piloting and targeting.

What's different today, as opposed to in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, is the scale at which these capabilities are employed—their undeniable mass. Both Ukraine and Russia use, and sometimes lose, thousands of drones per week for tasks including surveillance and combat. Some of these drones are recoverable, whereas others are designed for one-way missions traveling hundreds of miles. Ukrainian President Volodymyr

CHRISTIAN BLAZA

Zelensky announced in December 2023 that his country would produce over one million drones in 2024 and has created a separate branch of the military focused on uncrewed forces, informally known as Ukraine's "army of drones."

MASSIVE ATTACK

This shift in the character of war is occurring because of its potential advantages on the battlefield, not just because of its technical feasibility. Every actor, not just smaller states or nonstate actors, can generate immense striking power by deploying cheaper systems at great scale. For example, Ukraine can spend anywhere from a few hundred dollars for a tactical drone to help a small unit conduct surveillance to up to $30,000 for longer-range strike systems that can hit targets over 500 miles away. Russia employs a great number of Iranian-made Shahed-136 one-way attack systems, which have a range of roughly 1,500 miles and cost between $10,000 and $50,000. With weapons like these, it might take an army several shots to knock out a given target, but the aggregate cost for eliminating each target will be lower than it would be with more expensive weapons systems. For the sake of contrast, consider the sophisticated and very capable U.S. Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range. It will do the job, but public estimates place the cost of each missile at between $1 million and $2 million.

It is also much more expensive at present to defend against such attacks than it is to launch them. In April, Iran flung more than 300 weapons, including one-way attack drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, at Israel. With support from the United States and a handful of Middle Eastern countries, Israel repulsed almost all of the weapons. But at what cost? One report suggests the strike cost about $80 million to launch but $1 billion to defend against. A wealthy country and its allies could afford that sort of expense a few times—but maybe not 20 times, 30 times, or 100 times. Fending off this form of attack is not only expensive but also difficult. An assailant can strike at an adversary with a variety of systems; that adversary may be able to repel one specific system but struggle to deal with others. Commanders and analysts are only beginning to figure out how to counter precise mass at scale.

From the vantage point of the attacker, militaries can no longer assume that small numbers of high-end weapons will deliver victory. For example, some of Ukraine's most advanced weapons, including U.S.-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems and GPS-guided artillery shells, have faced challenges on the battlefield because Russia has developed the ability to jam their targeting and navigation systems. That is why Ukraine also needs the scale afforded by cheaper weapons systems to overwhelm Russian defenses.

The use of a great quantity of cheaper weapons systems can help make expensive, higher-end weapons more effective. A precise mass strike can exhaust an adversary's air defenses, allowing more sophisticated but less numerous systems a better chance of hitting their targets. Russia, for instance, has mixed firing low-cost weapons with more expensive cruise missiles, including hypersonic missiles, against Ukraine.

The war that has now raged for more than two years in Ukraine shows that

conflicts between states may remain nasty and brutish, but they are not always short. Countries stand a better chance of enduring such a protracted war with deep reserves of cheaper weapons systems, given that trying to maintain sufficient stocks of more expensive systems will be much more difficult. Focusing on precise mass allows militaries to prepare for the possibility that a war will not finish quickly and that years of combat lie ahead.

SHARPENING THE CUTTING EDGE

The Pentagon is often accused of being slow to innovate and adopt innovations, a struggle acknowledged by Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. Several recent initiatives and programs, however, demonstrate growing Defense Department interest in precise mass and the adoption of these evolving technologies. The air force, for instance, is seeking to acquire lower-cost uncrewed combat aircraft that can fly alongside platforms such as F-35 fighters. It plans to procure these uncrewed aircraft by the end of the decade and deploy thousands of them. The secretary of the air force, Frank Kendall, even rode in an F-16 guided by artificial intelligence to highlight his branch's embrace of new technologies. The air force is also working with the private sector to produce cruise missiles that could cost as little as $150,000 each, a fraction of the current cost of $1 million to $3 million. For its part, the navy has begun hiring specialists in robotic warfare, created a new squadron focused on uncrewed surface vessels, and experimented with large numbers of uncrewed platforms in the Middle East.

The most prominent U.S. military investment in precise mass is the Replicator initiative, which is focused on accelerating the adoption of innovations that the U.S. military needs now, not in five or ten years. The program's first area of emphasis is in scaling "all-domain attritable autonomous" systems—the affordable platforms that define the new era of warfare—that can function everywhere from the air to underwater, with the goal of deploying many thousands of these systems by August 2025. The Pentagon has announced that the first Replicator investments include Switchblade 600, a one-way attack drone, along with uncrewed surface vessels and systems that can fend off aerial drones. Through Replicator, the Defense Department has made progress in developing capability in less than a year that would generally take multiple years to complete—leading Hicks to announce that the Defense Department is on track to achieve Replicator's 2025 goals for attritable autonomous systems.

In addition to specific investments in precise mass, the U.S. military is making organizational adjustments to help the armed forces adapt to and adopt new technologies, refining how U.S. forces are organized, trained, equipped, and deployed. Marine units are experimenting with AI-enabled sensors that help soldiers understand the surrounding environment and monitor adversaries' vessels. The army has created task forces working across multiple domains to test emerging capabilities in air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace and see how they can be effectively employed on the battlefield. The elevation of the Defense Innovation Unit—an organization within the Defense Department tasked

with accelerating the development and deployment of commercially available technology—to report directly to the secretary of defense, and the dramatic budget increase it received from Congress in 2024, prove that both the Pentagon and Capitol Hill are taking these changes in warfare seriously.

Finally, the Rapid Defense Experimentation Reserve funds experimentation with capabilities that the U.S. military views as the most important for addressing challenges in the Indo-Pacific and other theaters. Already, three projects that came through the reserve's initial set of activities are moving into the U.S. military, including the acceleration by five years of improvements to the Marine Corps' ability to perform strike operations in the Indo-Pacific. Although there is more to be done, these advances demonstrate that the United States has laid the groundwork not only to take advantage of precise mass but also whatever comes next.

THE FOG OF THE FUTURE

The signs of major change in how wars are waged are unmistakable. The small, inexpensive drones deployed en masse in Ukraine over the last two years provide only a glimpse of what such wars could look like in the future. Militaries will have to figure out ways to defeat a precise mass strategy, and that effort will lead to further change. For instance, directed-energy weapons—arms that use highly focused energy, such as lasers or particle beams, instead of a solid projectile—could lower the cost per shot of defending against swarms of drones. American and British militaries have recently tested and deployed directed-energy systems designed to defend against aerial drones, including in the Middle East. To be sure, directed energy has been imagined as the technology of the future for at least four decades. But such weapons could indeed find a place in the wars to come.

What is certain is that standing still means falling behind. China, Russia, Iran and its proxies, and a range of other actors are not holding back in pursuing precise mass and its tangible benefits on the battlefield. Policymakers in Washington should be alarmed in particular by China's rapid advances in everything from ships to hypersonic missiles to antiship missiles, combined with its enormous investments in artificial intelligence, interest in precise mass concepts, and ability to produce systems far more rapidly than the United States can today.

The U.S. military must stride forward faster; today's innovations and prototypes must become tomorrow's everyday military force if the United States is to preserve global leadership. The growing evidence of the effectiveness of precise mass systems should trigger not just conversations about future changes but also real changes in investments today—outlays that will influence a wide array of decisions, from the ships the navy builds to the missiles purchased by the army to the artificial intelligence infrastructure that every military service will need to use. Since the core underlying technologies driving these advances in precise mass come from the commercial sector, strategists will need to think through the consequences of the large-scale proliferation of such capabilities. The relative accessibility of precise mass systems will shape the way every country, not just the United States and China, prepares for the future.

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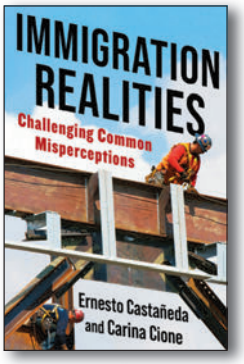

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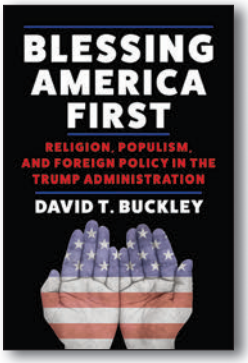

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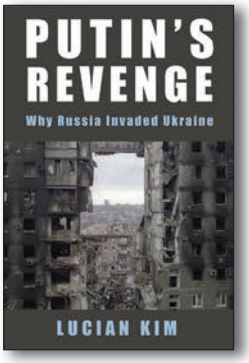

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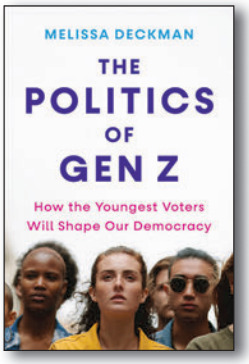

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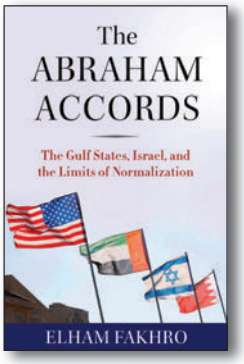

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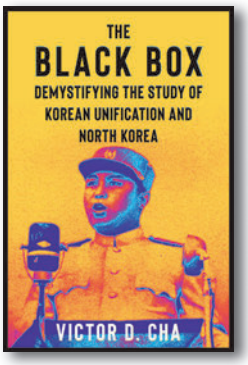

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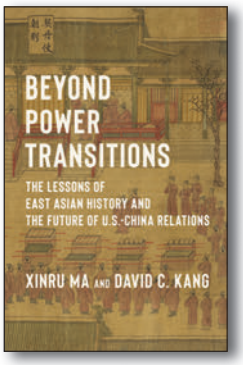

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The Age of Depopulation

Surviving a World Gone Gray

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

Although few yet see it coming, humans are about to enter a new era of history. Call it "the age of depopulation." For the first time since the Black Death in the 1300s, the planetary population will decline. But whereas the last implosion was caused by a deadly disease borne by fleas, the coming one will be entirely due to choices made by people.

With birthrates plummeting, more and more societies are heading into an era of pervasive and indefinite depopulation, one that will eventually encompass the whole planet. What lies ahead is a world made up of shrinking and aging societies. Net mortality—when a society experiences more deaths than births—will likewise become the new norm. Driven by an unrelenting collapse in fertility, family structures and living arrangements heretofore imagined only in science fiction novels will become commonplace, unremarkable features of everyday life.

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Human beings have no collective memory of depopulation. Overall global numbers last declined about 700 years ago, in the wake of the bubonic plague that tore through much of Eurasia. In the following seven centuries, the world's population surged almost 20-fold. And just over the past century, the human population has quadrupled.

The last global depopulation was reversed by procreative power once the Black Death ran its course. This time around, a dearth of procreative power is the cause of humanity's dwindling numbers, a first in the history of the species. A revolutionary force drives the impending depopulation: a worldwide reduction in the desire for children.

So far, government attempts to incentivize childbearing have failed to bring fertility rates back to replacement levels. Future government policy, regardless of its ambition, will not stave off depopulation. The shrinking of the world's population is all but inevitable. Societies will have fewer workers, entrepreneurs, and innovators—and more people dependent on care and assistance. The problems this dynamic raises, however, are not necessarily tantamount to a catastrophe. Depopulation is not a grave sentence; rather, it is a difficult new context, one in which countries can still find ways to thrive. Governments must prepare their societies now to meet the social and economic challenges of an aging and depopulating world.

In the United States and elsewhere, thinkers and policymakers are not ready for this new demographic order. Most people cannot comprehend the coming changes or imagine how prolonged depopulation will recast societies, economies, and power politics. But it is not too late for leaders to reckon with the seemingly unstoppable force of depopulation and help their countries succeed in a world gone gray.

A SPIN OF THE GLOBE

Global fertility has plunged since the population explosion in the 1960s. For over two generations, the world's average childbearing levels have headed relentlessly downward, as one country after another joined in the decline. According to the UN Population Division, the total fertility rate for the planet was only half as high in 2015 as it was in 1965. By the UNPD's reckoning, every country saw birthrates drop over that period.

And the downswing in fertility just kept going. Today, the great majority of the world's people live in countries with below-replacement fertility levels, patterns inherently incapable of sustaining long-term population stability. (As a rule of thumb, a total fertility rate of 2.1

births per woman approximates the replacement threshold in affluent countries with high life expectancy—but the replacement level is somewhat higher in countries with lower life expectancy or marked imbalances in the ratio of baby boys to baby girls.)

In recent years, the birth plunge has not only continued but also seemingly quickened. According to the UNPD, at least two-thirds of the world's population lived in sub-replacement countries in 2019, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economist Jesús Fernández-Villaverde has contended that the overall global fertility rate may have dropped below the replacement level since then. Rich and poor countries alike have witnessed record-breaking, jaw-dropping collapses in fertility. A quick spin of the globe offers a startling picture.

Start with East Asia. The UNPD has reported that the entire region tipped into depopulation in 2021. By 2022, every major population there—in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—was shrinking. By 2023, fertility levels were 40 percent below replacement in Japan, over 50 percent below replacement in China, almost 60 percent below replacement in Taiwan, and an astonishing 65 percent below replacement in South Korea.

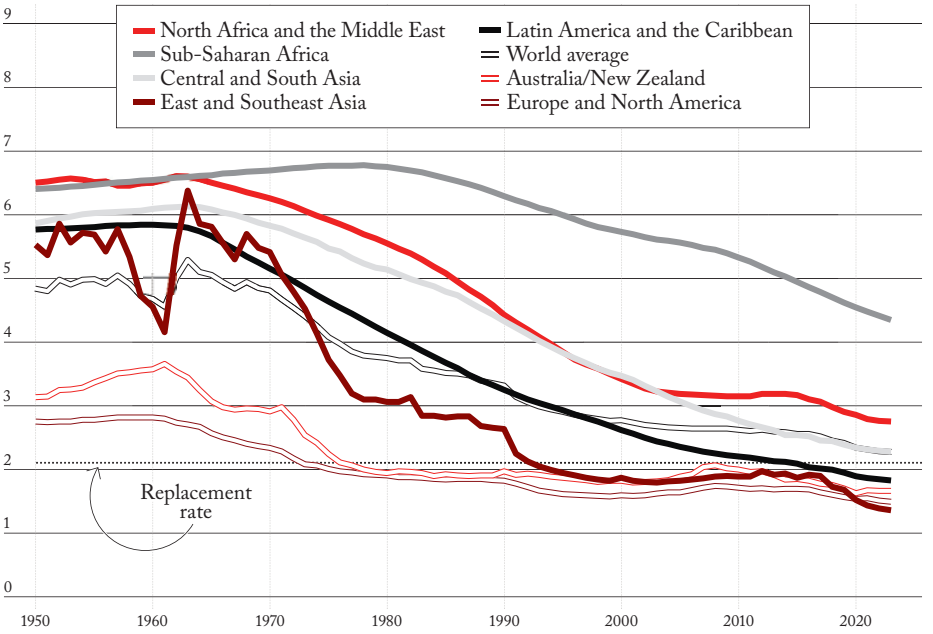
As for Southeast Asia, the UNPD has estimated that the region as a whole fell below the replacement level around 2018. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam have been sub-replacement countries for years. Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world, joined the sub-replacement club in 2022, according to official figures. The Philippines now reports just 1.9 births per woman. The birthrate of impoverished, war-riven Myanmar is below replacement, too. In Thailand, deaths now exceed births and the population is declining.

In South Asia, sub-replacement fertility prevails not only in India—now the world's most populous country—but also in Nepal and Sri Lanka; all three dropped below replacement before the pandemic. (Bangladesh is on the verge of falling below the replacement threshold.) In India, urban fertility levels have dropped markedly. In the vast metropolis of Kolkata, for instance, state health officials reported in 2021 that the fertility rate was down to an amazing one birth per woman, less than half the replacement level and lower than in any major city in Germany or Italy.

Dramatic declines are also sweeping Latin America and the Caribbean. The UNPD has calculated overall fertility for the region in 2024 at 1.8 births per woman—14 percent below the replacement rate. But

THE BABY BUST

Total fertility rate, selected regions, 1950–2022



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

that projection may understate the actual decline, given what the Costa Rican demographer Luis Rosero-Bixby has described as the "vertiginous" drop in birthrates in the region since 2015. In his country, total fertility rates are now down to 1.2 births per woman. Cuba reported a 2023 fertility rate of just over 1.1, half the replacement rate; since 2019, deaths there have exceeded births. Uruguay's rate was close to 1.3 in 2023 and, as in Cuba, deaths exceeded births. In Chile, the figure in 2023 was just over 1.1 births per woman. Major Latin American cities, including Bogota and Mexico City, now report rates below one birth per woman.

Sub-replacement fertility has even come to North Africa and the greater Middle East, where demographers have long assumed that the Islamic faith served as a bulwark against precipitous fertility declines. Despite the pro-natal philosophy of its theocratic rulers, Iran has been a sub-replacement society for about a quarter century. Tunisia has also dipped below replacement. In sub-replacement Turkey, Istanbul's 2023 birthrate was just 1.2 babies per woman—lower than Berlin's.

For half a century, Europe's overall fertility rates have been continuously sub-replacement. Russian fertility first dropped below replacement in the 1960s, during the Brezhnev era, and since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has witnessed 17 million more deaths than births. Like Russia, the 27 countries of the current European Union are about 30 percent below replacement today. Together, they reported just under 3.7 million births in 2023—down from 6.8 million in 1964. Last year, France tallied fewer births than it did in 1806, the year Napoleon won the Battle of Jena; Italy reported the fewest births since its 1861 reunification; and Spain the fewest since 1859, when it started to compile modern birth figures. Poland had its fewest births in the postwar era in 2023; so did Germany. The EU has been a net-mortality zone since 2012, and in 2022 it registered four deaths for every three births. The UNPD has marked 2019 as the peak year for Europe's population and has estimated that in 2020, the continent entered what will become a long-term population decline.

The United States remains the main outlier among developed countries, resisting the trend of depopulation. With relatively high fertility levels for a rich country (although far below replacement—just over 1.6 births per woman in 2023) and steady inflows of immigrants, the United States has exhibited what I termed in these pages in 2019 "American demographic exceptionalism." But even in the United States, depopulation is no longer unthinkable. Last year, the Census Bureau projected that the U.S. population would peak around 2080 and head into a continuous decline thereafter.

The only major remaining bastion against the global wave of sub-replacement levels of childbearing is sub-Saharan Africa. With its roughly 1.2 billion people and a UNPD-projected average fertility rate of 4.3 births per woman today, the region is the planet's last consequential redoubt of the fertility patterns that characterized low-income countries during the population explosion of the middle half of the twentieth century.

But even there, rates are dropping. The UNPD has estimated that fertility levels in sub-Saharan Africa have fallen by over 35 percent since the late 1970s, when the subcontinent's overall level was an astonishing 6.8 births per woman. In South Africa, birth levels appear to be just fractionally above replacement, with other countries in southern Africa close behind. A number of island countries off the African coast, including Cape Verde and Mauritius, are already sub-replacement.

The UNPD has estimated that the replacement threshold for the world as a whole is roughly 2.18 births per woman. Its latest medium variant projections—roughly, the median of projected outcomes—for 2024 have put global fertility at just three percent above replacement, and its low variant projections—the lower end of projected outcomes—have estimated that the planet is already eight percent below that level. It is possible that humanity has dropped below the planetary net-replacement rate already. What is certain, however, is that for a quarter of the world, population decline is already underway, and the rest of the world is on course to follow those pioneers into the depopulation that lies ahead.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

The worldwide plunge in fertility levels is still in many ways a mystery. It is generally believed that economic growth and material progress—what scholars often call "development" or "modernization"—account for the world's slide into super-low birthrates and national population decline. Since birthrate declines commenced with the socioeconomic rise of the West—and since the planet is becoming ever richer, healthier, more educated, and more urbanized—many observers presume lower birthrates are simply the direct consequence of material advances.

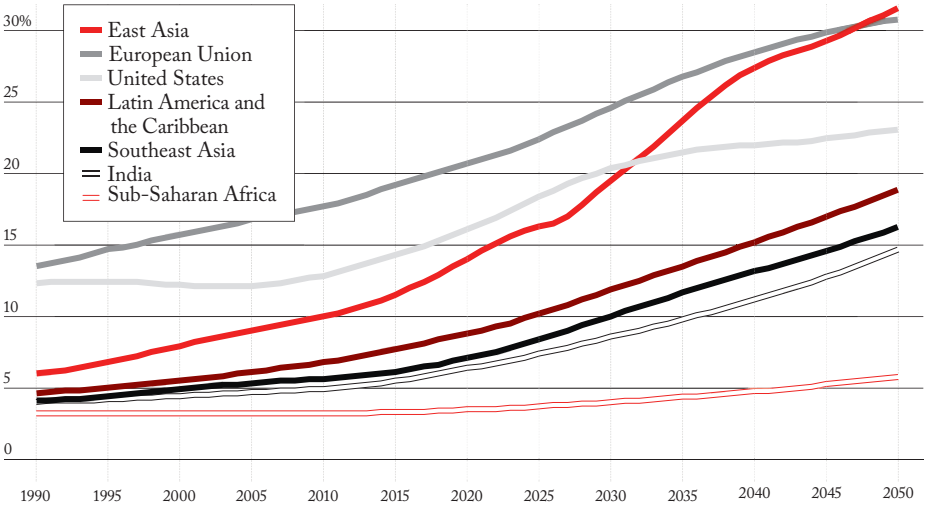
But the truth is that developmental thresholds for below-replacement fertility have been falling over time. Nowadays, countries can veer into sub-replacement with low incomes, limited levels of education, little urbanization, and extreme poverty. Myanmar and Nepal are impoverished UN-designated Least Developed Countries, but they are now also sub-replacement societies.

During the postwar period, a veritable library of research has been published on factors that might explain the decline in fertility that picked up pace in the twentieth century. Drops in infant mortality rates, greater access to modern contraception, higher rates of education and literacy, increases in female labor-force participation and the status of women—all these potential determinants and many more were extensively scrutinized by scholars. But stubborn real-life exceptions always prevented the formation of any ironclad socioeconomic generalization about fertility decline.

Eventually, in 1994, the economist Lant Pritchett discovered the most powerful national fertility predictor ever detected. That decisive factor turned out to be simple: what women want. Because survey

THE AGING WORLD

Percentage of population 65 and older, selected regions and countries, 1990–2050



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

data conventionally focus on female fertility preferences, not those of their husbands or partners, scholars know much more about women's desire for children than men's. Pritchett determined that there is an almost one-to-one correspondence around the world between national fertility levels and the number of babies women say they want to have. This finding underscored the central role of volition—of human agency—in fertility patterns.

But if volition shapes birthrates, what explains the sudden worldwide dive into sub-replacement territory? Why, in rich and poor countries alike, are families with a single child, or no children at all, suddenly becoming so much more common? Scholars have not yet been able to answer that question. But in the absence of a definitive answer, a few observations and speculations will have to suffice.

It is apparent, for example, that a revolution in the family—in family formation, not just in childbearing—is underway in societies around the world. This is true in rich countries and poor ones, across cultural traditions and value systems. Signs of this revolution include what researchers call the "flight from marriage," with people getting married

at later ages or not at all; the spread of nonmarital cohabitation and temporary unions; and the increase in homes in which one person lives independently—in other words, alone. These new arrangements track with the emergence of below-replacement fertility in societies around the globe—not perfectly, but well enough.

It is striking that these revealed preferences have so quickly become prevalent on almost every continent. People the world over are now aware of the possibility of very different ways of life from the ones that confined their parents. Certainly, religious belief—which generally encourages marriage and celebrates child rearing—seems to be on the wane in many regions where birthrates are crashing. Conversely, people increasingly prize autonomy, self-actualization, and convenience. And children, for their many joys, are quintessentially inconvenient.

Population trends today should raise serious questions about all the old nostrums that humans are somehow hard-wired to replace themselves to continue the species. Indeed, what is happening might be better explained by the field of mimetic theory, which recognizes that imitation can drive decisions, stressing the role of volition and social learning in human arrangements. Many women (and men) may be less keen to have children because so many others are having fewer children. The increasing rarity of large families could make it harder for humans to choose to return to having them—owing to what scholars call loss of "social learning"—and prolong low levels of fertility. Volition is why, even in an increasingly healthy and prosperous world of over eight billion people, the extinction of every family line could be only one generation away.

COUNTRIES FOR OLD MEN

The consensus among demographic authorities today is that the global population will peak later this century and then start to decline. Some estimates suggest that this might happen as soon as 2053, others as late as the 2070s or 2080s.

Regardless of when this turn commences, a depopulated future will differ sharply from the present. Low fertility rates mean that annual deaths will exceed annual births in more countries and by widening margins over the coming generation. According to some projections, by 2050, over 130 countries across the planet will be part of the growing net-mortality zone—an area encompassing about five-eighths of the world's projected population. Net-mortality countries will emerge in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, starting with South Africa. Once a

society has entered net mortality, only continued and ever-increasing immigration can stave off long-term population decline.

Future labor forces will shrink around the world because of the spread of sub-replacement birthrates today. By 2040, national cohorts of people between the ages of 15 and 49 will decrease more or less everywhere outside sub-Saharan Africa. That group is already shrinking in the West and in East Asia. It is set to start dropping in Latin America by 2033 and will do so just a few years later in Southeast Asia (2034), India (2036), and Bangladesh (2043). By 2050, two-thirds of people around the world could see working-age populations (people between the ages of 20 and 64) diminish in their countries—a trend that stands to constrain economic potential in those countries in the absence of innovative adjustments and countermeasures.

Global fertility has plunged since the population explosion in the 1960s.

A depopulating world will be an aging one. Across the globe, the march to low fertility, and now to super-low birthrates, is creating top-heavy population pyramids, in which the old begin to outnumber the young. Over the coming generation, aged societies will become the norm.

By 2040—except, once again, in sub-Saharan Africa—the number of people under the age of 50 will decline. By 2050, there will be hundreds of millions fewer people under the age of 60 outside sub-Saharan Africa than there are today—some 13 percent fewer, according to several UNPD projections. At the same time, the number of people who are 65 or older will be exploding: a consequence of relatively high birthrates back in the late twentieth century and longer life expectancy.

While the overall population growth slumps, the number of seniors (defined here as people aged 65 or older) will surge exponentially—everywhere. Outside Africa, that group will double in size to 1.4 billion by 2050. The upsurge in the 80-plus population—the "super-old"—will be even more rapid. That contingent will nearly triple in the non-African world, leaping to roughly 425 million by 2050. Just over two decades ago, fewer than 425 million people on the planet had even reached their 65th birthday.

The shape of things to come is suggested by mind-bending projections for countries at the vanguard of tomorrow's depopulation: places with abidingly low birthrates for over half a century and favorable life expectancy trends. South Korea provides the most stunning vision of a

depopulating society just a generation away. Current projections have suggested that South Korea will mark three deaths for every birth by 2050. In some UNPD projections, the median age in South Korea will approach 60. More than 40 percent of the country's population will be senior citizens; more than one in six South Koreans will be over the age of 80. South Korea will have just a fifth as many babies in 2050 as it did in 1961. It will have barely 1.2 working-age people for every senior citizen.

Should South Korea's current fertility trends persist, the country's population will continue to decline by over three percent per year—crashing by 95 percent over the course of a century. What is on track to happen in South Korea offers a foretaste of what lies in store for the rest of the world.

WAVE OF SENESCENCE

Depopulation will upend familiar social and economic rhythms. Societies will have to adjust their expectations to comport with the new realities of fewer workers, savers, taxpayers, renters, home buyers, entrepreneurs, innovators, inventors, and, eventually, consumers and voters. The pervasive graying of the population and protracted population decline will hobble economic growth and cripple social welfare systems in rich countries, threatening their very prospects for continued prosperity. Without sweeping changes in incentive structures, life-cycle earning and consumption patterns, and government policies for taxation and social expenditures, dwindling workforces, reduced savings and investment, unsustainable social outlays, and budget deficits are all in the cards for today's developed countries.

Until this century, only affluent societies in the West and in East Asia had gone gray. But in the foreseeable future, many poorer countries will have to contend with the needs of an aged society even though their workers are far less productive than those in wealthier countries.

Consider Bangladesh: a poor country today that will be an elderly society tomorrow, with over 13 percent of its 2050 population projected to be seniors. The backbone of the Bangladeshi labor force in 2050 will be today's youth. But standardized tests show that five in six members of this group fail to meet even the very lowest international skill standards deemed necessary for participation in a modern economy: the overwhelming majority of this rising cohort cannot "read and answer basic questions" or "add, subtract, and round whole numbers and decimals." In 2020, Ireland was roughly as elderly as Bangladesh will be in 2050—but in Ireland nowadays, only one in six young people lacks such minimal skills.

The poor, elderly countries of the future may find themselves under great pressure to build welfare states before they can actually fund them. But income levels are likely to be decidedly lower in 2050 for many Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and North African countries than they were in Western countries at the same stage of population graying—how can these countries achieve the adequate means to support and care for their elderly populations?

In rich and poor countries alike, a coming wave of senescence stands to impose completely unfamiliar burdens on many societies. Although people in their 60s and 70s may well lead economically active and financially self-reliant lives in the foreseeable future, the same is not true for those in their 80s or older. The super-old are the world's fastest-growing cohort. By 2050, there will be more of them than children in some countries. The burden of caring for people with dementia will pose growing costs—human, social, economic—in an aging and shrinking world.

Policymakers are not ready for the coming demographic order.

That burden will become all the more onerous as families wither. Families are society's most basic unit and are still humanity's most indispensable institution. Both precipitous aging and steep sub-replacement fertility are inextricably connected to the ongoing revolution in family structure. As familial units grow smaller and more atomized, fewer people get married, and high levels of voluntary childlessness take hold in country after country. As a result, families and their branches become ever less able to bear weight—even as the demands that might be placed on them steadily rise.

Just how depopulating societies will cope with this broad retreat of the family is by no means obvious. Perhaps others could step in to assume roles traditionally undertaken by blood relatives. But appeals to duty and sacrifice for those who are not kin may lack the strength of calls from within a family. Governments may try to fill the breach, but sad experience with a century and a half of social policy suggests that the state is a horrendously expensive substitute for the family—and not a very good one. Technological advances—robotics, artificial intelligence, human-like cyber-caregivers and cyber-"friends"—may eventually make some currently unfathomable contribution. But for now, that prospect belongs in the realm of science fiction, and even there, dystopia is far more likely than anything verging on utopia.

THE MAGIC FORMULA

This new chapter for humanity may seem ominous, perhaps frightening. But even in a graying and depopulating world, steadily improving living standards and material and technological advances will still be possible.

Just two generations ago, governments, pundits, and global institutions were panicking about a population explosion, fearing mass starvation and immiseration as a result of childbearing in poor countries. In hindsight, that panic was bizarrely overblown. The so-called population explosion was in reality a testament to increases in life expectancy owing to better public health practices and access to health care. Despite tremendous population growth in the last century, the planet is richer and better fed than ever before—and natural resources are more plentiful and less expensive (after adjusting for inflation) than ever before.

The same formula that spread prosperity during the twentieth century can ensure further advances in the twenty-first and beyond—even in a world marked by depopulation. The essence of modern economic development is the continuing augmentation of human potential and a propitious business climate, framed by policies and institutions that help unlock the value in human beings. With that formula, India, for instance, has virtually eliminated extreme poverty over the past half century. Improvements in health, education, and science and technology are fuel for the motor generating material advances. Irrespective of demographic aging and shrinking, societies can still benefit from progress across the board in these areas. The world has never been as extensively schooled as it is today, and there is no reason to expect the rise in training to stop, despite aging and shrinking populations, given the immense gains that accrue from education to both societies and the trainees themselves.

Remarkable improvements in health and education around the world speak to the application of scientific and social knowledge—the stock of which has been relentlessly advancing, thanks to human inquiry and innovation. That drive will not stop now. Even an elderly, depopulating world can grow increasingly affluent.

Yet as the old population pyramid is turned on its head and societies assume new structures under long-term population decline, people will need to develop new habits of mind, conventions, and cooperative objectives. Policymakers will have to learn new rules for development amid depopulation. The basic formula for material advance—reaping the rewards of augmented human resources and technological innovation

through a favorable business climate—will be the same. But the terrain of risk and opportunity facing societies and economies will change with depopulation. And in response, governments will have to adjust their policies to reckon with the new realities.

The initial transition to depopulation will no doubt entail painful, wrenching changes. In depopulating societies, today's "pay-as-you-go" social programs for national pension and old-age health care will fail as the working population shrinks and the number of elderly claimants balloons. If today's age-specific labor and spending patterns continue, graying and depopulating countries will lack the savings to invest for growth or even to replace old infrastructure and equipment. Current incentives, in short, are seriously misaligned for the advent of depopulation. But policy reforms and private-sector responses can hasten necessary adjustments.

To adapt successfully to a depopulating world, states, businesses, and individuals will have to place a premium on responsibility and savings. There will be less margin for error for investment projects, be they public or private, and no rising tide of demand from a growing pool of consumers or taxpayers to count on.

As people live longer and remain healthy into their advanced years, they will retire later. Voluntary economic activity at ever-older ages will make lifelong learning imperative. Artificial intelligence may be a double-edged sword in this regard: although AI may offer productivity improvements that depopulating societies could not otherwise manage, it could also hasten the displacement of those with inadequate or outdated skills. High unemployment could turn out to be a problem in shrinking, labor-scarce societies, too.

States and societies will have to ensure that labor markets are flexible—reducing barriers to entry, welcoming the job turnover and churn that boost dynamism, eliminating age discrimination, and more—given the urgency of increasing the productivity of a dwindling labor force. To foster economic growth, countries will need even greater scientific advances and technological innovation.

Prosperity in a depopulating world will also depend on open economies: free trade in goods, services, and finance to counter the constraints that declining populations otherwise engender. And as the hunger for scarce talent becomes more acute, the movement of people will take on new economic salience. In the shadow of depopulation, immigration will matter even more than it does today.

Not all aged societies, however, will be capable of assimilating young immigrants or turning them into loyal and productive citizens. And not all migrants will be capable of contributing effectively to receiving economies, especially given the stark lack of basic skills characterizing too many of the world's rapidly growing populations today.

Pragmatic migration strategies will be of benefit to depopulating societies in the generations ahead—bolstering their labor forces, tax bases, and consumer spending while also rewarding the immigrants' countries of origin with lucrative remittances. With populations shrinking, governments will have to compete for migrants, with an even greater premium placed on attracting talent from abroad. Getting competitive migration policies right—and securing public support for them—will be a major task for future governments but one well worth the effort.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF NUMBERS

Depopulation will not only transform how governments deal with their citizens; it will also transform how they deal with one another. Humanity's shrinking ranks will inexorably alter the current global balance of power and strain the existing world order.

Some of the ways it will do so are relatively easy to foresee today. One of the demographic certainties about the generation ahead is that differentials in population growth will make for rapid shifts in the relative size of the world's major regions. Tomorrow's world will be much more African. Although about a seventh of the world's population today lives in sub-Saharan Africa, the region accounts for nearly a third of all births; its share of the world's workforce and population are thus set to grow immensely over the coming generation.

But this does not necessarily mean that an "African century" lies just ahead. In a world where per capita output varies by as much as a factor of 100 between countries, human capital—not just population totals—matters greatly to national power, and the outlook for human capital in sub-Saharan Africa remains disappointing. Standardized tests indicate that a stunning 94 percent of youth in the region lack even basic skills. As huge as the region's 2050 pool of workers promises to be, the number of workers with basic skills may not be much larger there than it will be in Russia alone in 2050.

India is now the world's most populous country and on track to continue to grow for at least another few decades. Its demographics

virtually assure that the country will be a leading power in 2050. But India's rise is compromised by human resource vulnerabilities. India has a world-class cadre of scientists, technicians, and elite graduates. But ordinary Indians receive poor education. A shocking seven out of eight young people in India today lack even basic skills—a consequence of both low enrollment and the generally poor quality of the primary and secondary schools available to those lucky enough to get schooling. The skills profile for China's youth is decades, maybe generations, ahead of India's youth today. India is unlikely to surpass a depopulating China in per capita output or even in total GDP for a very long time.

The coalescing partnership among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia is intent on challenging the U.S.-led Western order. These revisionist countries have aggressive and ambitious leaders and are seemingly confident in their international objectives. But the demographic tides are against them.

China and Russia are long-standing sub-replacement societies, both now with shrinking workforces and declining populations. Iran's population is likewise far below replacement levels. Population data on North Korea remain secret, but the dictator Kim Jong Un's very public worrying late last year about the national birthrate suggests the leadership is not happy about the country's demographics.

Russia's shrinking numbers and its seemingly intractable difficulties with public health and knowledge production have been reducing the country's relative economic power for decades, with no turnaround in sight. China's birth crash—the next generation is on track to be only half as large as the preceding one—will unavoidably slash the workforce and turbocharge population aging, even as the Chinese extended family, heretofore the country's main social safety net, atrophies and disintegrates. These impending realities presage unimagined new social welfare burdens for a no longer dazzling Chinese economy and may end up hamstringing the funding for Beijing's international ambitions.

To be sure, revisionist states with nuclear weapons can pose outsize risks to the existing global order—witness the trouble North Korea causes despite a negligible GDP. But the demographic foundations for national power are tilting against the renegades as their respective depopulations loom.

As for the United States, the demographic fundamentals look fairly sound—at least when compared with the competition. Demographic

trends are on course to augment American power over the coming decades, lending support for continued U.S. global preeminence. Given the domestic tensions and social strains that Americans are living through today, these long-term American advantages may come as a surprise. But they are already beginning to be taken into account by observers and actors abroad.

Although the United States is a sub-replacement society, it has higher fertility levels than any East Asian country and almost all European states. In conjunction with strong immigrant inflows, the United States' less anemic birth trends give the country a very different demographic trajectory from that of most other affluent Western societies, with continued population and labor-force growth and only moderate population aging in store through 2050.

The lack of desire for children is why the extinction of every family line could be only one generation away.

Thanks in large measure to immigration, the United States is on track to account for a growing share of the rich world's labor force, youth, and highly educated talent. Continuing inflows of skilled immigrants also give the country a great advantage. No other population on the planet is better placed to translate population potential into national power—and it looks as if that demographic edge will be at least as great in 2050. Compared with other contenders, U.S. demographics look great today—and may look even better tomorrow—pending, it must be underscored, continued public support for immigration. The United States remains the most important geopolitical exception to the coming depopulation.

But depopulation will also scramble the balance of power in unpredictable ways. Two unknowns stand out above all others: how swiftly and adeptly depopulating societies will adapt to their unfamiliar new circumstances and how prolonged depopulation might affect national will and morale.

Nothing guarantees that societies will successfully navigate the turbulence caused by depopulation. Social resilience and social cohesion can surely facilitate these transitions, but some societies are decidedly less resilient and cohesive than others. To achieve economic and social advances despite depopulation will require substantial reforms in government institutions, the corporate sector, social organizations,

and personal norms and behavior. But far less heroic reform programs fail all the time in the current world, doomed by poor planning, inept leadership, and thorny politics.

The overwhelming majority of the world's GDP today is generated by countries that will find themselves in depopulation a generation from now. Depopulating societies that fail to pivot will pay a price: first in economic stagnation and then quite possibly in financial and socioeconomic crisis. If enough depopulating societies fail to pivot, their struggles will drag down the global economy. The nightmare scenario would be a zone of important but depopulating economies, accounting for much of the world's output, frozen into perpetual sclerosis or decline by pessimism, anxiety, and resistance to reform. Even if depopulating societies eventually adapt successfully to their new circumstances, as might well be expected, there is no guarantee they will do so on the timetable that new population trends now demand.

National security ramifications could also be crucial. An immense strategic unknown about a depopulating world is whether pervasive aging, anemic birthrates, and prolonged depopulation will affect the readiness of shrinking societies to defend themselves and their willingness to sustain casualties in doing so. Despite all the labor-saving innovations changing the face of battle, there is still no substitute in war for warm—and vulnerable—bodies.

The defense of one's country cannot be undertaken without sacrifices—including, sometimes, the ultimate sacrifice. But autonomy, self-actualization, and the quest for personal freedom drive today's "flight from the family" throughout the rich world. If a commitment to form a family is regarded as onerous, how much more so a demand for the supreme sacrifice for people one has never even met? On the other hand, it is also possible that many people, especially young men, with few familial bonds and obligations might be less risk averse and also hungry for the kind of community, belonging, and sense of purpose that military service might offer.

Casualty tolerance in depopulating countries may also depend greatly on unforeseen contingent conditions—and may have surprising results. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided a test. Both countries had very low birth rates on the eve of the invasion. And both the authoritarian aggressor and the democratic defender have proved willing to absorb grievous casualties in a war now grinding through its third year.

China presents perhaps the biggest question mark when it comes to depopulation and a willingness to fight. Thanks to both the one-child policy that was ruthlessly enforced for decades and the unexpected baby bust since the program was suspended nearly ten years ago, China's military will perforce be manned in large part by young people who were raised without siblings. A mass-casualty event would have devastating consequences for families across the country, bringing entire lineages to an end.

It is reasonable to wager that China would fight ferociously against a foreign invasion. But such casualty tolerance might not extend to overseas adventures and expeditionary journeys that go awry. If China, for example, decides to undertake and then manages to sustain a costly campaign against Taiwan, the world will have learned something grim about what may lie ahead in the age of depopulation.

A NEW CHAPTER

The era of depopulation is nigh. Dramatic aging and the indefinite decline of the human population—eventually on a global scale—will mark the end of an extraordinary chapter of human history and the beginning of another, quite possibly no less extraordinary than the one before it. Depopulation will transform humanity profoundly, likely in numerous ways societies have not begun to consider and may not yet be in a position to understand.

Yet for all the momentous changes ahead, people can also expect important and perhaps reassuring continuities. Humanity has already found the formula for banishing material scarcity and engineering ever-greater prosperity. That formula can work regardless of whether populations rise or fall. Routinized material advance has been made possible by a system of peaceful human cooperation—deep, vast, and unfathomably complex—and that largely market-based system will continue to unfold from the current era into the next. Human volition—the driver behind today's worldwide declines in childbearing—stands to be no less powerful a force tomorrow than it is today.

Humanity bestrides the planet, explores the cosmos, and continues to reshape itself because humans are the world's most inventive, adaptable animal. But it will take more than a bit of inventiveness and adaptability to cope with the unintended future consequences of the family and fertility choices being made today.

America's Strategy of Renewal

Rebuilding Leadership for a New World

ANTONY J. BLINKEN

A fierce competition is underway to define a new age in international affairs. A small number of countries—principally Russia, with the partnership of Iran and North Korea, as well as China—are determined to alter the foundational principles of the international system. While their forms of governance, ideologies, interests, and capabilities differ, these revisionist powers all want to entrench autocratic rule at home and assert spheres of influence abroad. They all wish to resolve territorial disputes by coercion or force and weaponize other countries' economic and energy dependence. And they all seek to erode the foundations of the United States' strength: its military and technological superiority, its dominant currency, and its unmatched network of alliances and partnerships. While these countries are not an axis, and the administration has been clear that it does not seek bloc confrontation, choices these revisionist powers are making mean we need to act decisively to prevent that outcome.

ANTONY J. BLINKEN is U.S. Secretary of State.

Illustration by Patrick Leger

When President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris came into office, these revisionist powers were already aggressively challenging U.S. interests. These countries believed that the United States was in irreversible decline at home and divided from its friends abroad. They saw an American public that had lost its faith in government, an American democracy that was polarized and paralyzed, and an American foreign policy that was undermining the very alliances, international institutions, and norms that Washington had built and championed.

President Biden and Vice President Harris pursued a strategy of renewal, pairing historic investments in competitiveness at home with an intensive diplomatic campaign to revitalize partnerships abroad. This twin-pillared strategy, they believed, was the best way to disabuse competitors of their assumptions that the United States was declining and diffident. These were dangerous assumptions, since they would lead the revisionists to continue undermining the free, open, secure, and prosperous world that the United States and most countries seek. It's a world where countries are free to choose their own paths and partners, and where the global economy is defined by fair competition, openness, transparency, and broad-based opportunity. A world where technology empowers people and accelerates human progress. A world where international law, including the core principles of the UN Charter, is upheld, and universal human rights are respected. A world that can evolve to reflect new realities, give voice to emerging perspectives and players, and meet the shared challenges of the present and future.

The Biden administration's strategy has put the United States in a much stronger geopolitical position today than it was four years ago. But our work is unfinished. The United States must sustain its fortitude across administrations to shake the revisionists' assumptions. It must be prepared for the revisionist states to deepen cooperation with one another to try to make up the difference. It must maintain its commitments to and the trust of its friends. And it must continue to earn the American people's confidence in the power, purpose, and value of disciplined American leadership in the world.

BACK IN THE GAME

The United States' strategic fitness rests in large measure on its economic competitiveness. That is why President Biden and Vice President Harris led Democrats and Republicans in Congress in passing legislation to make historic investments to upgrade infrastructure, bolster the industries

and technologies that will drive the twenty-first century, recharge the manufacturing base, boost research, and lead the global energy transition.

These domestic investments constituted the first pillar of the Biden administration's strategy, and they have helped American workers and businesses power the strongest U.S. economy since the 1990s. The United States' GDP is larger than that of the next three countries combined. Inflation has fallen to some of the lowest levels among the world's advanced economies. Unemployment has held at or below four percent for the longest stretch in more than 50 years. Household wealth has reached a record high. And while too many Americans are still struggling to make ends meet and prices are still too high for many families, the recovery has slashed poverty and inequality and spread its benefits to more people and more places.

These investments in American competitiveness and the success of the United States' rebound are powerfully attractive. After Congress passed the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022—the largest-ever investment in climate and clean energy—South Korea's Samsung committed tens of billions of dollars to manufacturing semiconductors in Texas. Japan's Toyota put billions of dollars toward making electric vehicles and batteries in North Carolina. All five of the world's top semiconductor manufacturers have pledged to build new plants in the United States, investing $300 billion and creating over 100,000 new American jobs.

The United States is now the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment. It is also the largest provider of foreign direct investment, showing the unmatched power of the American private sector to expand economic opportunity around the world. These investments don't just benefit American workers and communities. They also reduce the United States' dependencies on China and other revisionists and make the country a better partner to countries that want to reduce their dependencies, too.

While some friends worried at first that the Biden administration's domestic investments and incentives would threaten their economic interests, with time, they have seen how American renewal can redound in their favor. It has boosted demand for their goods and services and catalyzed their own investments in chips, clean tech, and more resilient supply chains. And it has allowed the United States and its friends to continue driving technological innovation and setting technological standards that are crucial to safeguarding their shared security, values, and welfare.

PARTNERS IN PEACE

The second pillar of the Biden administration's strategy was to reinvigorate and reimagine the United States' network of relationships—enabling Washington and its partners to pool their strength in advancing a shared vision for the world and compete vigorously yet responsibly against those seeking to undermine it.

Competing vigorously means using all the instruments of U.S. power to advance U.S. interests. It means enhancing the United States' force posture, military and intelligence capabilities, sanctions and export control tools, and mechanisms for consulting with allies and partners so that the country can credibly deter—and, if necessary, defend against—aggression. While Washington doesn't seek to climb up the ladder of escalatory actions, it must prepare for and manage greater risk.

Competing responsibly, meanwhile, means maintaining channels of communication to prevent competition from veering into conflict. It means making clear that the United States' goal is not regime change and that even as both sides compete, they must find ways to coexist. It means looking for ways to cooperate when it serves the national interest. And it means competing in ways that benefit the security and prosperity of friends, instead of coming at their expense.

China is the only country with the intent and the means to reshape the international system. President Biden made clear early on that we would treat Beijing as the United States' "pacing challenge"—its most consequential long-term strategic competitor. We undertook determined efforts to protect the United States' most advanced technologies; defend American workers, companies, and communities from unfair economic practices; and push back against China's growing aggression abroad and repression at home. We set up dedicated channels with friends to share Washington's assessment of the economic and security risks posed by Beijing's policies and actions. We nevertheless resumed military-to-military communication and underscored that serious disagreements with China wouldn't prevent the United States from maintaining strong commercial relations with the country. Nor would we allow friction in U.S.-Chinese relations to preclude cooperation on priorities that matter to the American people and the rest of the world, such as dealing with climate change, stopping the flow of synthetic drugs, and preventing nuclear proliferation.

On Russia, we had no illusions about President Vladimir Putin's revanchist aims or the possibility of a "reset." We did not hesitate to act forcefully against Moscow's destabilizing activities, including its

cyberattacks and interference in U.S. elections. At the same time, we worked to reduce nuclear danger and the risk of war by extending the New START treaty and launching a strategic stability dialogue.

We were similarly clear-eyed when it came to Iran and North Korea. We increased diplomatic pressure and strengthened the U.S. military's force posture to deter and constrain Tehran and Pyongyang. The Trump administration's unilateral and misguided exit from the Iran nuclear deal freed Tehran's nuclear program from its confinement, undermining the security of the United States and its partners. We demonstrated to Iran that there was a path back to a mutual return to compliance—if Iran was willing to take it—while maintaining a robust sanctions regime and our commitment that Iran will never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. And we made clear our willingness to engage in direct talks with North Korea, but also that we would not submit to its saber rattling or its preconditions.

The Biden administration's commitment to compete vigorously yet responsibly along these lines took away the revisionists' pretext that the United States was the obstacle to maintaining international peace and stability. It also earned the United States greater trust from its friends—and, along with it, stronger partnerships.

We worked to realize the full potential of these partnerships in four ways. First, we recommitted to the country's core alliances and partnerships. President Biden reassured NATO allies that the United States would honor its pledge to treat an attack on one as an attack on all; reaffirmed the country's ironclad security commitments to Japan, South Korea, and other allies in Asia; and restored the G-7 to its role as the steering committee of the world's advanced democracies.

Second, we infused U.S. alliances and partnerships with new purpose. We elevated the Quad—the partnership with Australia, India, and Japan—and took concrete steps to realize a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, from enhancing maritime security to manufacturing safe, effective vaccines. We launched the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, marshaling the world's biggest economic partnership to shape global standards for emerging technologies and protect the United States' and Europe's most sensitive innovations. We raised the ambition of critical bilateral relationships, such as the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership, and revived regional engagement, with President Biden hosting summits with leaders from Africa, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, and Southeast Asia.

Third, we knit together U.S. allies and partners in new ways across regions and issues. We launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which brings together 14 countries representing 40 percent of the world's GDP to build more secure supply chains, combat corruption, and transition to clean energy. We created AUKUS, a trilateral defense partnership through which Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have teamed up to build nuclear-powered submarines and deepen their scientific, technological, and industrial cooperation.

Fourth, we built new coalitions to address new challenges. We rallied a variety of governments, international organizations, businesses, and civil society groups to manufacture and distribute hundreds of millions of free COVID-19 vaccines, end the acute phase of the pandemic, save lives, and strengthen the world's capacity to prevent and respond to future health emergencies. We launched a global coalition to address the scourge of illicit synthetic drugs and a regionwide effort to share responsibility for the historic migration challenges in the Western Hemisphere.

In building these and other coalitions, the Biden administration has always made fellow democracies its first port of call. It's why the president launched the Summit for Democracy, bringing together democratic leaders and reformers from every region. But if the goal is to solve the problems facing the American people, democracies can't be the United States' only partners. The evolving opportunities and risks of artificial intelligence, for example, need to be addressed through multiple coalitions that include nondemocracies, so long as they want to deliver for their citizens and are willing to help solve shared challenges. That is why the Biden administration worked with the rest of the G-7 to develop governance frameworks for AI and then led more than 120 countries—including China—in the UN General Assembly to craft and pass the first-ever UN resolution on leveraging AI for good. And it's why the administration crafted a framework for the responsible development and use of military AI that more than 50 countries have signed on to.

REACTING TO REVISIONISM

While our strategy shored up the foundations of the United States' strength at home and abroad, our statecraft capitalized on that strength to turn a crisis into opportunity. In the Biden administration's first year, we made significant progress in deepening alignment with allies and partners on our approach to strategic competition. Conversations in allied capitals led to a palpable shift. For example, in negotiations to shape a

new strategic concept for NATO, I saw that allies were, for the first time, intensely focused on the challenge China posed to transatlantic security and values. In my discussions with officials from allied countries in East Asia, I heard them grappling with how to respond to Beijing's coercive behavior in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Putin's decision to try to wipe Ukraine off the map—along with China's decision first to provide Russia with cover and then fuel its aggression—accelerated the convergence of views among Asian and European countries about the seriousness of the threat and the collective action required to address it. Before Russia's invasion, we took a number of steps to prepare: warning the world of Moscow's impending aggression, sharing intelligence with allies, sending military support for Ukraine's self-defense, and coordinating with the EU, the G-7, and others to plan immediate and severe economic sanctions on Russia. We learned hard lessons during the necessary but difficult U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, lessons about everything from contingency planning to allied coordination, and we applied them.

When Putin ultimately launched his full-scale invasion, NATO swiftly moved troops, aircraft, and ships as part of its Response Force, reinforcing the alliance's eastern flank. The EU and its member states surged military, economic, and humanitarian aid into Ukraine. The United States created the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which grew to more than 50 countries working with the Ukrainian military to fill urgent needs. And a broad coalition of countries imposed the most ambitious sanctions ever, freezing more than half of Russia's sovereign assets.

Because it was an attack not just on Ukraine but also on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity at the heart of the UN Charter, Putin's war stoked fears beyond Europe. If Putin had been allowed to proceed with impunity, would-be aggressors everywhere would have taken note, opening a Pandora's box of conflict. China's decision to aid Russia underscored the degree to which the fates of U.S. allies in Europe and Asia were tied together. Until that point, many in Europe continued to see China primarily as an economic partner—even if they were increasingly wary of relying too much on Beijing. But when Beijing made its choice, more and more Europeans saw China as a systemic rival.

The longer Putin pressed on with his war, the more Russia relied on the support of its fellow revisionists to stay in the fight. North Korea delivered trainloads of weapons and ammunition, including millions of artillery rounds and ballistic missiles and launchers, in direct violation

of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. Iran built a drone factory in Russia and sent Moscow hundreds of ballistic missiles. And Chinese companies quickened their supply of the machines, microelectronics, and other dual-use items Russia needed to churn out weapons, munitions, and other materiel.

The more dependent Russia became on their support, the more the revisionists expected—and got—in return. Putin agreed to share Russia's advanced weapons technology with North Korea, exacerbating an already grave threat to Japan and South Korea. He and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un revived a Cold War–era pact pledging to provide military aid if either one went to war. Russia increased military and technical support to Iran and accelerated negotiation of a strategic partnership with the country, even as Tehran continued to arm, train, and fund proxies who carried out terrorist attacks on U.S. personnel and partners in the Middle East and international shipping in the Red Sea. Russia and China's cooperation has expanded across nearly every domain, and the two countries have staged increasingly aggressive and wide-ranging military exercises, including in the South China Sea and the Arctic.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea have complicated histories and divergent interests, and their partnerships with one another do not come close to the United States' long-standing alliance architecture. Underneath their grand claims of friendship and support, these countries' relationships are largely transactional, and their cooperation entails tradeoffs and risks that each may find more distasteful over time. That's especially true for China, whose economic health at home and standing abroad are threatened by the global instability fomented by its revisionist partners. And yet all four revisionists share an abiding commitment to the overarching objective of challenging the United States and the international system. That will continue to drive their cooperation, especially as the United States and other countries stand up to their revisionism.

The Biden administration's answer to this growing alignment has been to accelerate convergence among allies about the threat. We made NATO bigger, stronger, and more united than ever, with the alliance welcoming in Finland and Sweden despite their long history of nonalignment. At the start of the administration, nine of 30 NATO members were meeting their commitment to spend two percent of their GDP on defense; this year, at least 23 of 32 allies will meet that mark.

We have deepened and modernized U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, strengthening the U.S. military's force posture and capabilities by signing

new agreements to upgrade bases from Japan to the Philippines to the South Pacific. And we have found new ways to weave allies together. In 2023, President Biden held the first-ever trilateral Leaders' Summit with Japan and South Korea at Camp David, where the three countries agreed to increase cooperation to defend against ballistic missile attacks and cyberattacks from North Korea. This year, he hosted the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan and the Philippines at the White House, where the three parties committed to deepening joint efforts to defend freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

THE GREAT CONVERGENCE

Arguably the most consequential shift we achieved has not been within regions but across them. When he launched his invasion, Putin thought he could use Europe's reliance on Russian gas, oil, and coal to sow division and weaken its support for Ukraine. But he underestimated the resolve of European countries—and the willingness of allies in Asia to help them.

Japan has committed more than $12 billion in assistance to Ukraine, and in June, it became the first country outside Europe to sign a ten-year bilateral security agreement with Kyiv. Australia has provided more than $1 billion in military aid to Ukraine and is part of a multinational coalition training Ukrainian personnel in the United Kingdom. South Korea has declared that it will consider supplying weapons to Ukraine, in addition to the considerable economic and humanitarian support it is already providing. The United States' Indo-Pacific partners are coordinating with Europe to levy sanctions on Russia and cap the price of Russian oil, shrinking the amount of money Putin can funnel into his war machine.

Meanwhile, China's support for Russia—and the administration's innovative use of intelligence diplomacy to reveal the breadth of that support—has further focused U.S. allies in Europe on the threat posed by Beijing. The massive economic disruption caused by Putin's invasion has made real the catastrophic consequences that would result from a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, through which roughly half of the world's commercial container ships pass every year. More than 90 percent of the world's most advanced semiconductors are manufactured in Taiwan.

When the Biden administration came into office, key European partners were determined to gain autonomy from the United States while deepening economic ties with China. Since the invasion, however, they have reoriented much of their economic agenda around "de-risking" from China. In 2023, the EU adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act

to reduce its dependence on China for the inputs required to manufacture products such as electric vehicles and wind turbines. In 2024, the EU launched new initiatives to further bolster its economic security, including improvements to its screening of foreign and outbound investments, research security, and export controls. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania pulled out of China's "17+1" investment initiative in central and eastern Europe. Italy left China's Belt and Road Initiative. And a growing number of European countries, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have banned Chinese tech companies from providing equipment for their critical infrastructure.

Friends in both Europe and Asia have also joined the United States in taking coordinated action to address China's unfair trade practices and manufacturing overcapacity. This year, the Biden administration raised targeted tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum, semiconductors, and critical minerals—as opposed to sweeping tariffs across the board that raise costs for American families—and the European Union and Canada imposed tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. We learned hard lessons from the "China shock" of the first decade of this century, when Beijing unleashed a flood of subsidized goods that drowned American industries, wrecked Americans' livelihoods, and devastated American communities. To make sure history doesn't repeat itself and to compete with China's distortionary tactics, we are investing more in the productive capacity of the United States and its friends—and putting in place greater protections around those investments.

When it comes to emerging technologies, the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia are increasingly working together to maintain their collective edge. At our urging, Japan and the Netherlands joined the United States in taking measures to prevent China from gaining access to the most advanced semiconductors and the equipment used to produce them. Through the Quantum Development Group, we assembled nine leading European and Asian allies to strengthen supply chain resilience and deepen research and commercial partnerships in a technology with capabilities that exceed even the most powerful supercomputers.

From the moment Russia launched its war, some in the United States argued that U.S. support for Ukraine would divert resources from the challenge of China. Our actions have proved the opposite: standing up to Russia has been crucial to bringing about unprecedented convergence between Asia and Europe, which increasingly see their security as indivisible. This shift is a consequence not only of fateful decisions made by

Moscow and Beijing. It is also a product of fateful decisions made by U.S. allies and partners—choices that Washington encouraged but did not, would not, and could not dictate.

The global coalition supporting Ukraine is the most powerful example of burden sharing I've seen in my career. While the United States has provided $94 billion in support for Ukraine since Putin's full-scale invasion, European, Asian, and other partners have contributed nearly $148 billion. Significant work remains to boost the capabilities of U.S. allies in Europe and Asia through a combination of greater coordination, investment, and industrial base integration. The American people expect and U.S. security demands that allies and partners shoulder more of the burden for their own defense over time. But the United States is in a demonstrably stronger position in both consequential regions today because of the bridge of allies we have built. And so, for that matter, are America's friends.

REVISIONISM ACROSS REGIONS

The destabilizing effects of the revisionists' growing assertiveness and alignment go well beyond Europe and Asia. In Africa, Russia has unleashed its agents and mercenaries to extract gold and critical minerals, spread disinformation, and aid those trying to overthrow democratically elected governments. Rather than support diplomatic efforts to end the war in Sudan—the world's worst humanitarian crisis—Moscow is fueling the conflict by arming both sides. Iran and its proxies have taken advantage of the chaos to revive illicit arms trafficking routes in the region and exacerbate unrest. Beijing, meanwhile, has averted its gaze from Moscow's belligerence in Africa while fostering new dependencies and saddling more countries with unsustainable debt. In South America, China, Russia, and Iran are providing military, economic, and diplomatic support to Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian government in Venezuela, reinforcing his conviction that his regime is impervious to pressure.

The revisionist alignment is playing out even more intensely in the Middle East. Russia once supported UN Security Council efforts to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions; now, it is enabling Iran's nuclear program and facilitating its destabilizing activities. Russia has also gone from being a close partner of Israel to—after the October 7 attack—strengthening its ties with Hamas. The Biden administration, for its part, has been working tirelessly with partners in the Middle East and beyond to end the conflict and suffering in Gaza, find a diplomatic solution that enables

Israelis and Lebanese to live in safety on both sides of the border, manage the risk of a wider regional war, and work toward greater integration and normalization in the region, including between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

These efforts are interdependent. Without an end to the war in Gaza and a time-bound, credible path to statehood that addresses the Palestinians' legitimate aspirations and Israel's security needs, normalization cannot move forward. But if these efforts succeed, normalization would join Israel to a regional security architecture, unlock economic opportunities across the region, and isolate Iran and its proxies. Glimmers of such integration were on display in the coalition of countries, including Arab states, that helped Israel defend itself against an unprecedented direct attack from Iran in April. My visits to the region since October 7 have affirmed that there is a path toward greater peace and integration—if leaders there are willing to take hard decisions.

Relentless as our efforts are, the human consequences of the war in Gaza continue to be devastating. Tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians have been killed in a conflict they did not start and cannot stop. Virtually the entire population of Gaza has been displaced, and the vast majority is suffering from malnutrition. Around 100 hostages remain in Gaza, either already killed or still being held in brutal conditions by Hamas. All this suffering adds even greater urgency to our efforts to end the conflict, prevent it from being repeated, and lay the foundation for lasting peace and security in the region.

MAKING A STRONGER OFFER

For many developing and emerging-market countries, great-power competition in the past meant being told to pick a side in a contest that felt far removed from their daily struggles. Many have expressed concern that today's rivalry is no different. And some worry that the United States' focus on domestic renewal and strategic competition will come at the expense of the issues that matter most to them. Washington must demonstrate that the opposite is true.

The Biden administration's work to fund infrastructure across the world is an attempt to do just that. No country wants infrastructure projects that are poorly built and environmentally destructive, that import or abuse workers, or that foster corruption and burden the government with unsustainable debt. Yet too often, that has been the only option. To offer a better choice, the United States and other G-7 countries launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment in

2022. The initiative will eventually unlock $600 billion in private capital to fund projects that are high quality and environmentally sound and empower the communities where they are built. Already, the United States is coordinating investments in railroads and ports to connect the Philippines' economic hubs and turbocharge investment in the country. And it is making a series of infrastructure investments in a band of development that crosses Africa—connecting Angola's port of Lobito to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia and ultimately linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans—which will create opportunities for communities throughout the region while shoring up the supply of critical minerals crucial to leading the clean energy transition.

The United States is teaming up with partners to build and broaden digital infrastructure so that countries don't have to give up their security and privacy to gain high-speed, affordable Internet connections. Working with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and Taiwan, Washington has invested in cables that will extend digital access to 100,000 people across the Pacific Islands. And it has spearheaded similar efforts elsewhere in Asia, as well as Africa and South America.

The administration has also sought to make international institutions more inclusive. Imperfect as the United Nations and other such bodies may be, there is no substitute for their legitimacy and capabilities. Participating in and reforming them is one of the best ways to buttress the international order against efforts to tear it down. That is why under the Biden administration, the United States rejoined the World Health Organization, the UN Human Rights Council, and UNESCO. It's also why the administration has proposed expanding the UN Security Council by adding two permanent members from Africa, one permanent member from Latin America and the Caribbean, and an elected seat for small island developing countries. This is in addition to the permanent seats we have long proposed for Germany, India, and Japan. And it's why we pressed for the G-20 to add the African Union as a permanent member, which it did in 2023. In 2021, we supported the International Monetary Fund's allocation of $650 billion in Special Drawing Rights to help poor countries struggling under the weight of global health, climate, and debt crises. We also pushed for reforms at the World Bank that will allow governments to defer debt payments after natural disasters and climate shocks and will expand the affordable financing available to middle-income countries. Under President Biden, the United States has quadrupled climate financing to developing nations to help them

meet their climate targets and helped more than half a billion people manage the effects of climate change.

Time and again, the Biden administration has demonstrated that the United States is the country others can rely on to help solve their biggest problems. When the war in Ukraine exacerbated the global food security crisis, for example, the United States invested $17.5 billion to tackle food insecurity and rallied more than 100 countries to take concrete steps to address the challenge and its root causes. It did all this while continuing to be the largest donor, by far, of lifesaving humanitarian aid around the world.

THE HOME FRONT

Although some Americans favor greater unilateralism and isolationism, there is in fact broad support for the pillars of the Biden administration's strategy. The CHIPS and Science Act and multiple rounds of funding for Ukraine and Taiwan passed in Congress with bipartisan support. Democrats and Republicans in both houses are committed to strengthening U.S. alliances. And in poll after poll, most Americans see principled and disciplined U.S. leadership in the world as vital.

Cementing this alignment is crucial to convincing allies and rivals alike that although the party in power in Washington can change, the pillars of U.S. foreign policy will not. That will give allies the confidence that the United States can be trusted to stay by their side, which in turn will make them more reliable allies for the United States. And it will allow Washington to continue to meet its rivals from a position of strength, since they will know that American power is rooted not only in the firm commitments of the U.S. government but also in the unshakable convictions of the American people.

As secretary of state, I don't do politics; I do policy. And policy is about choices. From day one, President Biden and Vice President Harris made a foundational choice that in a more competitive and combustible world, the United States cannot go it alone. If America wants to protect its security and create opportunities for its people, it must stand with those who have a stake in a free, open, secure, and prosperous world and stand up to those who threaten that world. The choices the United States makes in the second half of this decisive decade will determine whether this moment of testing remains a time of renewal or returns to a time of regression—whether Washington and its allies can continue to outcompete the forces of revisionism or allow their vision to define the twenty-first century.

The New Battle for the Middle East

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Clash of Visions

KARIM SADJADPOUR

There are many Middle Eastern conflicts that could reshape the global political order. But the one most likely to do so is the battle between the region's two dominant powers: the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although this rivalry was once primarily viewed as an ethnic and sectarian conflict between the predominantly Sunni Arab Saudis and the Shiite Persian Iranians, the key dividing line today is ideological. The clash centers on their respective strategic visions—Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Iran's Vision 1979. Each vision dictates the internal policies of its respective country, as well as how it deals with others.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are both autocratic energy titans, collectively controlling nearly a third of the world's oil reserves and a fifth of its natural gas. Yet they are led by starkly different men with profoundly different plans. The de facto leader of Saudi Arabia, 39-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, wants to rapidly modernize

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a state long steeped in Islamist orthodoxy and move it away from its dependence on fossil fuel production. He created Vision 2030 to achieve those ends. The longtime leader of Iran, 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, remains dedicated to the ideological principles of Iran's Islamist revolution. Khamenei does not call his plan Vision 1979. But the name can still aptly be applied, since his vision is all about preserving the Iranian Revolution's ruthless commitment to theocracy.

These two countries are historic rivals with irreconcilable goals. Vision 2030 appeals to national aspirations, whereas Vision 1979 taps into national grievances. Vision 2030 seeks a security alliance with the United States and normalization with Israel; Vision 1979 is premised on resisting the former and eradicating the latter. Vision 2030 is propelled by social liberalization; Vision 1979 is anchored in social repression.

Although they harbor enormous mutual mistrust, Iran and Saudi Arabia are unlikely to fight each other directly. Tehran and Riyadh struck a 2023 agreement to normalize relations, lowering bilateral tensions. Their greatest challenge thus lies not in confronting each other but in addressing their internal struggles. And here, both have plenty to grapple with.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's problems are obvious. The country resembles the late-stage Soviet Union, economically and ideologically bankrupt and reliant on brutality for its survival. Beyond its borders, however, Tehran is more powerful than ever before in its modern history. Iranian-backed proxies and militias dominate four failing Arab states—Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen—as well as Gaza. Tehran also has an outsize effect on numerous global security issues, including nuclear proliferation, Russia's war in Ukraine, cybersecurity, disinformation campaigns, and the weaponization of energy resources.

Saudi Arabia's struggles are not as immediately apparent. Right now, MBS appears to enjoy widespread support for having lifted social restrictions and for his country's strong economy. Yet the success of Vision 2030 will invariably depend on the economic viability of its gigantic projects, and it will be challenged by lofty public expectations, oil price volatility, corruption, and repression. It will also be tested by disgruntled reactionary forces. The country still has a large population of deeply conservative Islamists who are unhappy with MBS's choices, and they could create major problems for his government. Vision 2030, then, is a high-risk, high-reward endeavor.

Whether either state will succeed in sustaining its vision is not clear. What is clear is that the fate of the two visions—one driven by change,

the other defined by resistance—will have consequences that extend far beyond either country. These visions will shape not only whether the Middle East becomes more prosperous and stable but whether the whole world does, as well.

THE LEGACY OF 1979

Saudi officials like to tell a story about their country and Iran. In the late 1960s, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran's modernizing ruler, wrote to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Faisal, the shah wrote, had to liberalize Saudi Arabia. Otherwise, he might be overthrown.

The king strenuously disagreed. In his response, Faisal suggested that it was Pahlavi—with his secular, more European vision for society—who was actually at risk of being deposed. "Your majesty, may I remind you, you are not the shah of France," he wrote back, adding: "Your population is 90 percent Muslim. Please don't forget that."

The king proved to be right. In Iran's 1979 revolution, protesters deposed Pahlavi and transformed the country from a U.S.-allied monarchy into an anti-American theocracy. Although a diverse coalition of forces opposed the shah, the man who emerged as the leader of the revolution, the 76-year-old Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, believed that Western political and cultural influence posed an existential threat to Iran and Islamic civilization. "All the things they used to pervert our youth were gifts from the West," the cleric said. "Their plan was to devise the means to pervert both our men and our women, to corrupt them and thus prevent them from their human development." Khomeini died a decade later, but his successor, Khamenei, has kept his vision alive.

As it happened, 1979 was also a pivotal year for Saudi Arabia. Islamist radicals, believing the Saudi royal family had strayed from the path of true Islam, seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, helping to plunge the monarchy into an existential crisis. Fearing that they would suffer the same fate as the shah, the Saudi government abandoned modernization efforts and redirected vast resources to reactionary forces at home and abroad. The country empowered fundamentalist clerics to exercise control over education and the judiciary, expanded the morality police, shut down movie theaters, and enforced strict gender segregation in schools and public spaces. In exporting these policies, in part with U.S. encouragement to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia spent tens of billions of dollars to fund thousands of mosques as well as jihadi groups that became the antecedents of the Taliban and al Qaeda.

These policies endured for 20 years. But the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001—15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals—and the deadly al Qaeda bombings in Riyadh in 2003 forced a course correction. Both attacks exposed a harsh reality: Islamic fundamentalism, once perceived as an asset, had evolved into a profound threat to the kingdom's stability. The Saudi government thus attempted to turn off its financial support for external radicalism as well as embark on a costly domestic counter-radicalization campaign. "We try to transform each detainee from a young man who wants to die into a young man who wants to live," said Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, then one of the key architects of the Saudi counterterrorism strategy, in 2007.

But it was not until more than a decade later, when MBS began his ascent to power, that Saudi Arabia commenced its broader, international transformation. One of more than a dozen children born to King Salman, MBS saw an aging Saudi leadership that was overly reliant on oil and disconnected from its young society. He worried his country was falling behind Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which were working to become transportation and trade hubs with outsize influence in business, entertainment, sports, and media. In response, MBS had the kingdom launch its own agenda, Vision 2030, aimed at opening the country economically, jettisoning Islamist restrictions, diversifying away from oil, and building a national identity.

MATT MURPHY

The vision's foundational document is centered on three themes—"a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation"—and has led to real policy shifts. Beginning in 2018, Saudi women gained the right to drive and travel without a male guardian's permission. Their presence in the country's labor force increased significantly, including in senior government positions. The government began investing tens of billions of dollars in plans for data centers and in artificial intelligence and other types of technology. It dramatically boosted youth entertainment—nearly two-thirds of Saudis are under 30—with Formula 1 races, wrestling tournaments, and the recruitment of soccer stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo. New tourist rules were introduced to encourage foreign visitors to explore the country and bring in revenue.

So far, these efforts have had mixed results. Saudi Arabia has been among the world's fastest-growing major economies in the last several years, with significant growth in non-oil sectors. Yet growth figures are still often tied to the price of oil. Similarly, the Saudi Ministry of Investment has estimated that foreign direct investment increased by over 150 percent from 2017 to 2023. One Saudi businessman, however, told me that "non-oil FDI has gone nowhere."

TWO MEN, TWO VISIONS

Vision 1979 and Vision 2030 reflect the personalities of Khamenei and MBS. The two men are arguably the most powerful individuals in today's Middle East, but they have vastly different visions and leadership styles—the former's based on historic grievances, and the latter's on modern ambitions. These differences are clear in their animosity toward each other. MBS has called Khamenei the "new Hitler of the Middle East," and Khamenei has derided MBS as a "criminal" whose "inexperience" will lead to Saudi Arabia's downfall.

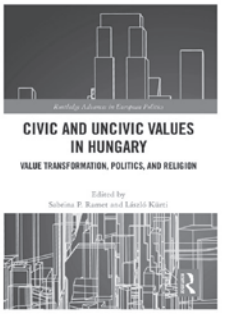
Both have unique backstories. Khamenei was born into a clerical family of modest means, was educated in a Shiite seminary, and spent his formative years as a revolutionary agitator (including several as a political prisoner). Had the Iranian Revolution never happened, he would have been destined for the life of a humble cleric. Instead, he was catapulted to power, becoming Iran's president in 1981 and supreme leader in 1989. His hypervigilance, born of profound insecurity, has been one of the keys to his longevity. Despite widespread popular discontent and a state of near-permanent external crisis, Khamenei has not deviated from the revolutionary ideals of his mentor, Khomeini.

The ideological pillars of Iran's Vision 1979 remain as they were then: "Death to America, Death to Israel," as Khamenei's supporters often chant, and the mandatory veiling of women, which Khomeini once referred to as "the flag of the Islamic Revolution."

In stark contrast, MBS was born into immense wealth as a son of one of the world's richest men, King Salman bin Abdulaziz. Although MBS was born after 1979, he said that the radicalism spawned that year "hijacked" Islam as a religion. He aspires for his people to achieve modernity rather than martyrdom. "We will not waste 30 years of our lives dealing with extremist ideas," he once declared. "We will destroy them today." This decisiveness has sometimes led to grave misjudgments, including the brutal 2018 murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the devasting war in Yemen. Yet the crown prince has retained the confidence of much of young Saudi society and the momentum of Vision 2030.

One of the most important differences between the Saudi vision and the Iranian one relates to social freedoms. Iranians had long looked down on their Gulf Arab neighbors. Khomeini once referred to the House of Saud as "the followers of the camel grazers of Riyadh and the barbarians of Najd, the most infamous and the wildest members of the human family," and he denounced them in his last will and testament. No matter how reactionary their regime was, Iranians may have taken some comfort in having more social freedoms than Saudis. But this is no longer the case. The world's most famous musicians regularly perform in Saudi Arabia, including top Iranian singers whose music is banned in their homeland. Tens of millions of Iranians get their news from Iran International, a Saudi-backed Persian-language satellite news channel. After a 35-year ban, Saudi Arabia reopened movie theaters in 2018. Social media apps are widely available. The country has welcomed more tourists than ever before, while Iran has doubled down on the practice of taking foreigners (often Iranian dual nationals) as hostages.

The difference between the two plans is particularly stark when it comes to the treatment of women. Although Saudi women, once hidden from public life, continue to lag on indices of equality, the advances they have made under MBS are real and significant. Iranian women are better educated than their male counterparts and have often risen to the top of their professions. Yet they are among the few in the world who face more restrictions today than their grandmothers did five decades ago, before the Islamic Revolution. This imbalance erupted during Iran's



Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary:

Value transformation, politics, and religion

Edited by
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2022 to 2023 "Women, Life, Freedom" protests, which were triggered by the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman. She had been arrested for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly.

CRUDE POWER

The most dramatic difference in outcomes between Vision 2030 and Vision 1979, however, is in the effect on each state's economy. Saudi Arabia has used its energy production to fuel its strategic vision. As a result, the Saudis are far richer than their Iranian counterparts by virtually every metric. Saudi Arabia has more than twice the GDP of Iran despite having less than half its population. Iran's annual inflation rate is consistently among the world's highest, and Saudi Arabia's is around two percent. Riyadh has over $450 billion in foreign currency reserves, around 20 times what Tehran possesses.

There are many reasons for Iran's terrible economic performance. But they all relate to Vision 1979. Thanks to its hostility toward the West, Iran has come under heavy sanctions that have crippled its foreign currency holdings and made it hard to sell its main two commodities, oil and gas. In 1978, the year before the revolution, Iran was producing almost six million barrels of oil per day, roughly five million of which were exported. Since the revolution, Iranian production and exports have averaged less than half these amounts. Although Iran has the world's second-largest reserves of natural gas, after Russia, it does not rank among the world's top 15 exporters. And Tehran has sought to use the energy resources it does have as a weapon. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iranian officials repeatedly reminded an energy-strapped Europe that "winter is coming" to try to threaten the continent's leaders into acceding to Tehran's nuclear demands.

Yet the greatest tragedy of Vision 1979 for Iran has been the waste not of its natural resources but of its human resources. In 2014, Iran's minister of science and technology claimed that the country's annual brain drain—estimated at 150,000 people leaving annually—cost the economy a staggering $150 billion every year, more than four times its oil revenue from 2023. In contrast, most of the estimated 70,000 Saudi students studying abroad return home when their studies are finished. Vision 1979 often sees its country's educated minds as a threat, but Vision 2030 treats them as an asset.

Saudi Arabia has spent heavily on ambitious plans to modernize its economy, such as on the introduction of smart cities. That includes its

Neom project, focused on creating a large urban area in the desert that could transform the kingdom into a global technology hub and drive economic diversification. Although both governments have built strong surveillance states, Tehran's technology innovations and investments have been employed mostly to repress its people, arm its proxies, and attack its enemies.

ORDER VS. DISORDER

Saudi Vision 2030 has clearly outperformed Iran's Vision 1979 in advancing the economic well-being and satisfaction of citizens. But when it comes to international influence, the story is very different. The Middle East's regional power vacuums and chronic instability are threats to Vision 2030, yet they have been boons to Vision 1979.

This difference makes sense. Vision 2030 is contingent on building, whereas Vision 1979 is content with destroying. The power vacuums and instability caused by the Lebanese civil war, the Iraq war, and the 2011 Arab Spring have thus all furthered Iranian ambitions, and Iranian influence has in turn deepened the disorder and chaos across the Arab world. Although opinion polls have suggested that Saudi Arabia enjoys significantly more popular support than Iran in the Arab world, including in countries where Iran wields the most influence, Riyadh's efforts to counter Tehran's ambitions—using hard power, soft power, or financial co-optation—have largely failed.

Over the last two decades, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been on opposing sides of the deadliest conflicts in the Middle East. The two have backed rival groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. In each of these arenas, Iranian-backed hard power prevailed. Saudi Arabia has largely opted out or been defeated. The most humiliating of these defeats was in Yemen. Between 2015 and 2019, Riyadh spent over $200 billion on a military intervention to counter the power grab of the Iranian-backed Houthis. That intervention contributed to tens of thousands of civilian deaths. Yet it failed to weaken the group. Today, the Houthis, whose slogans wish death to America and Israel, not only remain entrenched in power but have also bottlenecked the global economy, diverting an estimated $200 billion in trade by harassing ships in the Red Sea (ostensibly to protest Israel's war in Gaza).

As the Middle East's lone theocracy, Iran uses Islamist radicalism as an asset. Virtually all Shiite radicals, from Lebanon to Pakistan, are willing to fight for Iran. Meanwhile, most Sunni radicals, including al Qaeda and

the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS, seek to overthrow the government of Saudi Arabia despite its Sunni lineage. In fact, Tehran has proved willing and able to work with Sunni radical groups that share its opposition to Israel and the United States. The current head of al Qaeda, Saif al-Adel, has resided mostly in Iran for two decades.

Israel is one of the biggest international points of contention between the two countries. Vision 2030 is open to normalization with Israel, whereas Vision 1979 is opposed to Israel's very existence. Iran was the lone country in the world that explicitly praised Hamas's invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023. Although it remains unclear to what extent Tehran was involved in the planning of the operation, Iran funds most of Hamas's military budget, so U.S. officials have said Tehran is "broadly complicit." The attack succeeded in delaying, and perhaps sabotaging, a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement.

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

The outside countries that will likely play the greatest role in determining the fate of these two visions are the United States and China. Vision 2030 needs Washington as an ally, but Vision 1979 wants it as an adversary. Vision 2030 is contingent on U.S. security support, while Vision 1979 cannot survive without Chinese economic support. An estimated 90 percent of Iranian oil exports are bound for China.

Given Iran's economic and strategic dependence on China, any U.S. strategy to counter Tehran's nuclear and regional ambitions will probably require some collaboration with Beijing. There is reason to believe that such cooperation is possible despite Beijing and Washington's global competition. China and the United States ultimately have common interests in the region: namely, political stability and the free flow of trade and energy. (Russia, by contrast, benefits from regional instability and tumult in the oil markets.)

Yet the United States ultimately has even more in common with Saudi Arabia. American liberals may historically be deeply ambivalent about the country, but the United States' great-power competition with China and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine changed Washington's perceptions. Once seen as a problematic partner, Saudi Arabia is now viewed as a coveted ally. The possibility of a historic Israeli-Saudi normalization agreement under the umbrella of a U.S.-Saudi defense treaty ratified by the Senate will likely remain a signature aspiration of any future American administration, Democratic or Republican.

In the current environment, however, the domestic political costs to Saudi Arabia of a normalization deal with Israel could outweigh the benefits of a U.S. security umbrella. A public opinion poll conducted in November and December 2023 showed that 95 percent of Saudis believed that Hamas did not kill Israeli civilians on October 7; 96 percent of Saudis agreed that "Arab countries should immediately break all diplomatic, political, economic, and any other contacts with Israel." These sentiments have forced MBS to increase his negotiating demands. He recently declared that Riyadh would not establish diplomatic relations with Israel before the "establishment of a Palestinian state." MBS may be an autocrat, but he cannot afford to be insensitive to public opinion. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, after all, was an autocrat. That did not prevent him from being assassinated after normalizing relations with Israel.

Still, there is reason to think that the Saudis will eventually strike a bargain with the Americans and the Israelis. Despite Saudi Arabia's vast commercial ties to China and its friendship with Russia, it can count only on the United States to protect it from external adversaries, and it needs such protection. The September 2019 Iranian attacks on Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national oil company, exposed just how vulnerable the country and its vision are. In the absence of U.S. security guarantees, Saudi Arabia could spend half a trillion dollars over a decade to build Neom, intended to be 33 times the size of New York City, and Iran and its proxies could destroy it in days with cheap missiles and drones.

THE DANGER OF EXPECTATIONS

Numerous civil unrest indices have ranked Iran among the least stable governments in the world. In the past 15 years alone, Iran has experienced three major national uprisings—in 2009, 2019, and 2022—that brought millions of citizens into the streets. Yet Khamenei is one of the world's longest-serving autocrats, having ruled since 1989, and the regime has consistently defied predictions of its imminent demise. History suggests, perhaps counterintuitively, that revolutionary dictatorships are often more enduring than rapidly modernizing monarchies. As the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have written, revolutionary regimes born from "sustained, ideological, and violent struggle" tend to endure because they destroy independent power centers, produce cohesive ruling parties, and establish tight control over formidable security forces. In Iran, all these factors apply, helping to

shield the Islamic Republic from elite defections and from military coups. Up to now, the regime has consistently crushed mass protests.

The past also suggests that successful popular uprisings tend to happen not in states suffering from constant deprivation, as Iran is, but in countries where improved living standards create elevated expectations. As the social theorist Eric Hoffer has written, "It is not actual suffering, but the taste of better things which excites people to revolt." Political reforms can also open the door to sudden change, something Iran has studiously avoided. Machiavelli observed that there is nothing "more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." For this reason, Khamenei, a student of the fall of the Soviet Union, has been firmly committed to the ideological principles of the 1979 revolution, believing that diluting them would precipitate the Islamic Republic's downfall.

For MBS, meanwhile, the most applicable cautionary tale from history may be the experience of the shah of Iran, a fellow modernizing leader who alienated key constituencies, including the clergy, the bazaar, and intellectuals, that would conspire to unseat him. Yet the lessons learned from the shah's downfall are mixed. As the historian Abbas Milani argued in his biography of the shah, Pahlavi was too authoritarian when he didn't need to be and not authoritarian enough when he needed to be.

For many Saudi elites, the greatest fear is not a mass popular uprising like Iran's 1979 revolution, but a targeted internal plot against the crown prince—a scenario with historical precedent in the kingdom. In March 1975, King Faisal, another modernizing monarch, was shot and killed by his nephew. This act of revenge was motivated by the death of the assassin's brother, an Islamist who had been killed roughly a decade earlier while protesting Faisal's introduction of television in Saudi Arabia.

MBS has put his stamp on the country's leadership. He has faced down Saudi political and business elites more than any leader in his country's history. He downsized the royal family, and his 2017 detention of hundreds of prominent Saudi businessmen at the Ritz-Carlton hotel—called a "sheikhdown" in Western tabloids—reportedly yielded over $100 billion in recovered assets.

But MBS may be unaware of the hazards awaiting him. To avoid internal challenges, autocrats often prioritize loyalty over competence when appointing advisers, creating an echo chamber that results in dangerous blind spots. The shah, for example, was bewildered by the anger against him and later lamented that he had been misled by sycophantic

aides who shielded him from the truth. MBS may already be falling into this trap. One consigliere to the crown prince—a former European head of state—privately told me that the longer MBS rules, the more confident he becomes in his own judgment and the less need he feels to heed constructive criticism.

MBS faces other risks, as well. Ongoing judicial reforms in Saudi Arabia still lag behind economic and social reforms (and international standards). Training a new generation of secular Saudi lawyers and judges is a much more laborious process than hiring foreign consultants to transform the economy and build cities of the future. Many Saudi men feel resentment about losing power over women. This uneven progress—rapid economic and social reform without concurrent political reform—can also be a source of unrest. As Samuel Huntington warned in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, political instability is commonly triggered by "rapid social change and the rapid mobilization of new groups into politics coupled with the slow development of political institutions."

Vision 2030 is a high-risk, high-reward endeavor.

For now, MBS is strong and seemingly popular. Although credible public opinion polling in Saudi Arabia is rare, one November 2023 survey suggested that a solid majority of Saudis have trust in their government. In contrast, a recent government poll in Iran reported that more than 90 percent of the country's citizens feel dissatisfied or hopeless. Targeting prominent Saudi businessmen for corruption, shrinking the entitlements of the royal family, imprisoning fundamentalist clerics, and diminishing the religious police have all earned the crown prince some support. Yet MBS has also cracked down on members of what should be his natural constituency: Saudi liberals, including Khashoggi and the women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul. This could backfire. "A social and economic reformation on overdrive is at too high a risk of failure without the parallel legal and procedural transformation occurring at the same pace and intensity," warned Mohammed al-Yahya, a senior Saudi Foreign Ministry official and friend of Khashoggi, after Khashoggi's killing.

The murder of the journalist no longer looms large inside Saudi Arabia. But it continues to taint MBS's reputation in the West. Externally, his most vociferous critics, much like those of the shah, are Western liberals, many of whom liken him to the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

In 2020, U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent, even said that Saudi Arabia's leaders were "murderous thugs" and that the regime was "one of the very most dangerous countries on the face of this earth." Inside Saudi Arabia, however, the group more likely to eventually challenge MBS's authority is not liberals who believe he is undemocratic, but Islamists who believe he is far too liberal. As the author David Rundell wrote, "If a successor government came to power by the ballot, it would almost certainly be an Islamist populist regime. . . . If a new government came to power through violence, it would most likely be a jihadist organization such as ISIS or al-Qaeda."

Although the crown prince is trying to turn the page on Islamic fundamentalism, he has not been able to eliminate it wholesale. MBS "put the Wahhabis in a cage," said the Saudi author Ali Shihabi, referring to the country's ultra-orthodox school of Islam. Yet just as the Taliban bided their time for two decades in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia's Islamists are dormant but not dead. In an interview with *The Economist*, one Saudi religious commentator likened Islamist opponents of MBS to ants building an underground kingdom. "The prince has closed their mouths," he said, "but he hasn't ended their kingdom."

WHITE ELEPHANTS AND BLACK SWANS

Over the last half century, the Middle East has consistently defied the predictions of forecasters. The whims of individual autocrats and the volatile mix of oil wealth, religion, and great-power politics have made the region uniquely vulnerable to black swan events with global ramifications. Those events include Iran's 1979 revolution, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the October 7 attacks in Israel.

In this context, the future of both Vision 2030 and Vision 1979 will hinge on the fate of Saudi Arabia's and Iran's leaders and the global energy demands that sustain their ambitions. Should MBS's grand projects become white elephants—costly, unproductive endeavors—or should oil prices experience a prolonged decline, rising public dissatisfaction may compel the Saudi crown prince to prioritize regime stability over transformational reforms. Although MBS is young, he is acutely aware of the occupational hazards that come with absolute rule, including the unforeseen pressures that have brought down autocrats in the past. The shah's political downfall stemmed from myriad forces, but also

partly from a terminal cancer diagnosis that he concealed even from his family, which undoubtedly impaired his decision-making during crises.

In Iran, meanwhile, the future of the Islamic Republic and Vision 1979 remains uncertain beyond the lifespan of the 85-year-old Khamenei. Although there is a possibility that power may transfer smoothly to loyal clerics and military leaders committed to revolutionary ideals, there is also a chance of a shift toward a leadership that prioritizes Iran's national and economic interests over its revolutionary doctrine. Efforts by some supporters of Mojtaba Khamenei, Khamenei's 55-year-old son and potential successor, to compare him to Iran's MBS are risible. But they suggest that even Tehran's younger-generation revolutionaries recognize that a forward-looking vision is more appealing than a backward-looking one.

The success or failure of these competing visions will have broad global ramifications. A world in which Vision 2030 fails dramatically, leaving the vast energy resources of both Saudi Arabia and Iran under the control of Sunni and Shiite extremists, would make the Middle East and the global economy less prosperous and stable. Conversely, if Iran's post-Khamenei leadership prioritizes the economic welfare and security of its people, Iran has the potential to one day become a G-20 nation and a pillar of global stability.

The failed American experiments in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the failures of the Arab Spring, have largely dispelled illusions among U.S. officials that Washington has the capacity to meaningfully shape, at least in a positive way, the politics of the Middle East. It will be local actors who determine which visions prevail. But given that Vision 2030 seeks to uphold the U.S.-led liberal world order and Vision 1979 seeks to defeat it, the United States has a vested interest in the success of the former and the failure of the latter. It is also in the global economic interest to see stable, prosperous governments in Saudi Arabia and Iran that are at peace with one another and themselves. This means the world should help the people of Iran move beyond an oppressive ideological regime that has caused internal stagnation and regional unrest, and help Saudi Arabia navigate political reforms that will help sustain its social and economic transformation.

The best outcome for the United States, the Middle East, and the world is two sustainable, representative, forward-looking visions in both countries. The worst outcome is two backward-looking regimes clinging to past grievances. The former may be difficult to achieve. But the consequences of the latter would be nothing short of catastrophic.

The Fight for a New Israel

To End the War and Build a Lasting Peace, the Country Must Reinvent Its Own Democracy

DAHLIA SCHEINDLIN

In late July 2024, Israel experienced one of the biggest shocks to law and order in its history. For several hours, dozens of Israeli protesters were able to infiltrate two military compounds largely unimpeded, starting with Sde Teiman, a recently established base in the Negev desert where thousands of Palestinian detainees have been held since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack. For months, journalists and nongovernmental organizations had reported systematic abuses at the base, and on July 29, Israel's military police detained ten Israeli reservists on suspicion of raping one of the prisoners. But the protesters, among them several far-right elected officials who are members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition, were not decrying the mistreatment of Palestinians. They were furious that the military was taking such a step against its own, and were trying to block the arrests.

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Illustration by Ricardo Tomás

Although the riots at Sde Teiman and Beit Lid, the base where the suspects were taken, were unusual in their extremity, they were not isolated events. Since the war in Gaza began, there have been proliferating signs that Israel's institutions of state are under severe stress. Netanyahu has ignored repeated warnings from Israel's attorney general that his government's actions have violated the law; in response, government ministers have called for the attorney general's dismissal. Israel's legal system is in disarray. For over a year, the government held up dozens of judicial appointments, including on Israel's Supreme Court; and in September, Netanyahu's justice minister escalated his efforts to stymie the appointment of a chief justice to the Supreme Court, even defying a court order requiring that the position be filled. Israeli law enforcement has become highly erratic. The murder rate among Israel's Arab community has more than doubled under the current government, largely because of organized crime, yet in 2023, only 17 percent of such murders were solved. Even worse is the situation in the West Bank: despite soaring attacks by settlers against Palestinians, the state is now detaining only a quarter of the number of Jewish suspects it did in 2022. The Israeli military—which is responsible for enforcing the law in occupied territories—has ignored or even participated in the violence.

Ever since its founding, Israel has lacked core components of democratic statehood.

At first glance, this accelerating lawlessness, including from Israel's own government, may appear to reflect the extraordinary pressures of a country mired in the longest and most challenging war since the war of independence. As of late September, Israel was not only continuing its year-old, devastating war against Hamas in Gaza amid dimming prospects for more than one hundred Israeli hostages still held there. It was also embarking on a precipitous escalation with Hezbollah in Lebanon, even as it confronted growing threats from the Houthis in Yemen, militants in the West Bank, Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, and from Iran itself. But the assault on Israel's institutions began long before October 7, 2023. At the time of Hamas's attack, Israel had been racked for months by a huge protest movement that aimed to stop the Netanyahu government's sweeping effort to weaken judicial independence. This plan was crafted to allow the ruling coalition to fill

the courts and other key civil offices with ideologically aligned justices and political loyalists. Along with consolidating its own power, the government was seeking to institutionalize higher status for Jewish citizens and strengthen the influence of Jewish religion in public and private life. But perhaps above all, the reforms were designed to give the government unfettered power to extend sovereignty—a euphemism for annexation—over the West Bank, a longtime goal of Israel's far right.

When Israelis began protesting the judicial overhaul in January 2023, they were stunned by the government's extreme plans and blatant power grab. But they were at least as shocked to realize that Israel's institutional checks and balances were so vulnerable, or even absent, a problem that stems directly from the country's incomplete democratic foundations. Foremost is the lack of a constitution. Despite repeated attempts since the country's founding, Israel has consistently failed to adopt a formal constitution that defines the balance of powers and a complete bill of rights that guarantees fundamental human rights, civil liberties, and the equality of all citizens. Instead, it has relied on piecemeal legislation, court rulings, and ad hoc arrangements that have evolved through custom or committee. The country has only the most tenuous human rights legislation, anchored in hotly contested laws passed in the early 1990s. As recently as 2018, a controversial law gave Jews alone the right to self-determination in Israel. Unlike with almost any other democracy in the world, many of the country's borders are not concretely defined. Israel also maintains control over millions of Palestinians who have few basic rights.

For decades, various Israeli lawmakers—along with generations of legal scholars—have recognized the core defects in Israel's democratic foundations and have sought to address them through a constitutional process. It has also long been acknowledged that Israel faces a growing crisis of legitimacy as a result of its occupation of Palestinian lands and control of a large population of noncitizens, policies that the International Court of Justice has ruled illegal. Today, the problem is intensified by the devastating human cost of Israel's war in Gaza. Yet even now, Israelis tend to treat these two issues—the country's lack of constitutional order and its ongoing military occupation of Palestinian people and territories—as wholly separate phenomena. In reality, they are inseparable: it is Israel's weak or missing democratic foundations that have enabled successive Israeli administrations to pursue and continually expand the occupation.

Throughout a terrible year of war, many observers have urged Israel to make clear its endpoint for the conflict and how Palestinians will be able to govern themselves in the future. If Israel wants to avoid a long-term reoccupation of Gaza and perpetual violence in the West Bank, it will need a comprehensive strategy for unified Palestinian self-governance in both territories, ideally statehood. But lost in this discussion is what will be required of Israel's own political culture and institutions to ensure lasting peace. Israel must work toward its own "day after," and that day will never arrive unless the country addresses the constitutional vacuum at its core.

ABSENT AT THE CREATION

Israel's founders did not originally intend for the country to have no constitution. In November 1947, UN General Assembly Resolution 181, known as the partition plan, required the future Jewish and Arab states to adopt strong democratic constitutions, and Zionist leaders began crafting one. Early drafts show that the founders were intimately aware of the elements necessary to make the country a full democracy, including establishing the equality of all citizens, formulating a bill of rights, and setting down a clear constitutional order defining the powers of the branches of government.

But following the declaration of independence, in May 1948, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, came to oppose the idea. Among various considerations, he worried about limiting his party's powers in government and alienating religious parties who rejected secular civic principles. He also may have been concerned about offering equal rights to all Arabs who remained after independence, since he viewed them as a potential threat to Israeli security and an obstacle to building a state for the Jewish population, including through the dispossession of Arab land and property. Whatever the reason, the failure to adopt a constitution meant that Israel lacked binding legal foundations for core components of democratic statehood.

For one thing, apart from its border with Egypt, established in the 1978 Camp David accords, Israel has never defined the limits of its sovereign territory. (Although Israel established borders with Jordan in 1994, they do not determine the status of the West Bank.) As a result, it is often unclear where Israeli laws do or do not apply. During the war of independence, the new state conquered territories that extended well beyond those allotted to it in the UN partition plan; Israel's sovereignty

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in these areas was eventually recognized by internationally brokered armistice agreements in 1949. But any division of the former British mandate of Palestine was complicated by Palestinian and Arab opposition to a Jewish state at all, as well as the Zionist vision of a Jewish state that would cover the entire land. The 1949 armistice lines, also known as the Green Line, were never formalized into Israeli law. Following Israel's sweeping victory in the 1967 war—the Israeli army defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and occupied the West Bank along with East Jerusalem, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights—the lack of a finite eastern border provided fuel to those who hoped to incorporate these conquests. In the wake of that war, Israel also showed a proclivity for expansionism, annexing East Jerusalem and eventually the Golan Heights, and allowing the settlement movement to spread throughout all occupied lands. (Israel eventually returned the Sinai to Egypt and dismantled settlements there, as it did later in Gaza.)

Israel was also slow to define its body politic. At the time of Israeli independence, some 750,000 indigenous Arab Palestinians had been expelled or had fled from areas that became part of the new state. But about 150,000 remained, making up some 15 percent of Israel's population. In the absence of a constitution, a bill of rights, or even a formal citizenship law, this group had ambiguous status, and the Israeli government developed contradictory approaches to it. For example, the new state adopted a then progressive policy of universal suffrage, including for Palestinians in Israel. But it also placed most of their communities under direct military rule, which was enforced through colonial emergency regulations rather than through Israeli law. That approach lasted virtually until the 1967 war, after which Arab Israelis fell under civilian law. But at that point, the state once again established a military regime over nearly a million Palestinians in newly conquered territories, creating, under the pretext of temporary occupation, a huge category of noncitizen subjects. Over time, Israeli control over this population became increasingly entrenched, mitigated only marginally by the limited local autonomy established in the 1993 Oslo accords.

From the outset, Israel's leaders sought to ensure that the country maintained a clear Jewish majority. Thus, the government declined to enact a citizenship law until it had safeguarded unlimited Jewish immigration to the new state. Israel passed the Law of Return in 1950, granting any Jew in the world the right to immigrate to Israel and facilitating a massive growth of the Jewish population. Israel's

parliament, the Knesset, didn't proceed with a citizenship law until two years later; even then, citizenship rights for those not covered by the Law of Return—that is, non-Jews—were still limited, and many Palestinians in Israel could become citizens only by waging a legal battle.

Yet another missing element in Israel's democratic foundations was a formal guarantee of equality. To this day, there is no explicit guarantee of equality for all citizens in Israeli law. Although Israel's declaration of independence calls for such equality, the legal status of that document has long been disputed. Moreover, because of Israel's identity as a Jewish state, the usual democratic separation of religion and state is a nonstarter: the state will not commit to secular sources of law or authority, because with few and highly limited exceptions, Israeli leaders have rejected the possibility of Arab parties joining a government. This has created a dependence on small Jewish religious political parties to reach coalition majorities. These parties have always demanded an expansive role for religion in state institutions; they have also blocked attempts to impose equal duties, such as universal military service, on all citizens.

An overarching goal of Netanyahu's judicial overhaul is to advance annexation.

To some degree, Israel has sought to compensate for a missing constitution with its Basic Laws, a system that was introduced in 1950. But these laws, which have been adopted incrementally over time, are not formally defined, and most of them can be amended or annulled by a plurality of votes in the Knesset, just like any other law. At present, out of 13 Basic Laws, four are "entrenched"—meaning that they require an absolute majority in the Knesset to change them; two more require a two-thirds supermajority to change certain articles.

As a result of this history, Israeli democracy rests on legal and constitutional foundations that are surprisingly weak and readily subject to modification. In the late twentieth century, the risks posed to the state by these vulnerabilities were less apparent. Despite the government's expansion of a fundamentally undemocratic occupation regime after 1967, democracy for Israeli citizens improved for several decades. But starting in the early years of this century, as the Oslo peace process unraveled and violence flared again, democratic progress stagnated, then declined. Since the 2010s, successive Israeli governments have actively chipped away at the country's tenuous

institutional framework in order to advance an exclusivist, expansionist, and increasingly antidemocratic Zionist state.

THE WAR ON THE JUDICIARY

At the center of the current struggle for control over Israel's institutions is its judiciary. For most of the decade and a half since Netanyahu's second election as prime minister, in 2009 (he first served in the late 1990s), lawmakers and ministers from his Likud Party and allied parties on the right have been arguing that the courts have too much power and that the executive and the Knesset need more authority. This campaign was inspired in part by the emergence in the 1990s of a more activist Supreme Court, which many conservatives argued would, in promoting a liberal democratic vision of the state, threaten Jewish identity and the will of the majority.

For example, the Knesset passed two Basic Laws in 1992 that guaranteed partial individual rights. The Supreme Court interpreted these rules as conferring on it the right to judicial review of future legislation, although lawmakers themselves were divided on the matter. As a result, citizens demanding greater protections, progress on gender equality, rights for sexual minorities, and revocation of the ultra-Orthodox draft exemption—as well as those seeking to challenge Israel's harsh occupation policies in the West Bank—increasingly turned to the Supreme Court. In the years that followed, the court issued numerous rulings that established greater protections from religious coercion, increased gender parity and media freedoms, and upheld other liberal values. It also made a few decisions restricting individual settlements or occupation practices that violated individual Palestinian rights, although it hardly ever intervened against the government's overall occupation regime. Nonetheless, right-wing factions began to view the court as an obstacle to their Jewish religious agenda and to settlement expansion. They were particularly infuriated when the court declined to block the government's decision to dismantle Israeli settlements in Gaza in 2005.

And so in the decade after Netanyahu's return to power, an increasingly right-wing majority in the Knesset began advancing a slew of illiberal laws aimed at eroding civil liberties and human rights and entrenching the occupation. In 2011, the Knesset passed a law against political boycotts; in 2014, it added a Basic Law requiring a referendum for Israel to withdraw from any territory—including areas Israel had annexed in violation of international law, such as East Jerusalem or

the Golan Heights. The Knesset also extended a 2002 law imposing bureaucratic hurdles on Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens, effectively threatening them with family separations that most Jews would never encounter. It also passed laws targeting the foreign funding of human rights groups documenting occupation-related violations of Palestinian rights—seeking to tarnish them as foreign agents—and other legislation aimed at encroaching on civil rights.

Knowing that citizens would challenge these laws before the Supreme Court, right-wing leaders and influential allies in the public sphere began to make direct rhetorical assaults on the court itself. They accused it of advancing elite interests; spreading secular, universalist values; and trampling the will of the people by tying the hands of the elected right-wing government. The court was regularly accused of privileging the rights of Palestinians over the interests of Israeli security, even though its decisions upholding Palestinian rights were extremely limited and it allowed the settlements and other occupation policies to go forward. After becoming justice minister in 2015, Ayelet Shaked, a member of the right-wing Jewish Home party, advocated a series of policies and legislative efforts to weaken the judiciary, including giving the Knesset the power to override Supreme Court rulings. The leader of her Jewish Home party was Naftali Bennett, who, in the 2013 Knesset elections, campaigned on annexing a large portion of the West Bank. Having served as prime minister briefly in 2021–22, Bennett is currently seen as one of the leading contenders to succeed Netanyahu.

As Netanyahu continued to win elections—in 2009, 2013, and 2015—Israel's religious right began to call more openly for annexation of the West Bank. In 2017, the Knesset passed legislation legalizing unofficial West Bank outposts that even Israeli law did not recognize. (All settlements are illegal under international law.) The following year, the Knesset passed the "nation-state law," a new Basic Law defining Israel as a state in which Jews alone have the right to self-determination and supporting Jewish settlements. The legislation created a formal legal basis for discriminating against non-Jews and demoted the status of the Arabic language, which until then had been an official language in Israel. Finally, in the course of 2019 and 2020, Netanyahu made public his plans to gradually annex the West Bank, beginning with specific parts. The prime minister and his political allies did not reveal what they intend to do about the tens or even hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in those lands. If Israel prevents Palestinians in annexed areas from

gaining citizenship and forces them to remain merely subjects without rights, it would be openly embracing the status of an apartheid state.

The Supreme Court struck down some of these efforts, including the law to legalize settlement outposts, as well as several government attempts to formalize the military exemption long claimed by large numbers of ultra-Orthodox Jews, a step aimed at buying the Orthodox parties' loyalty. The court rejected challenges to the 2018 nation-state law; nonetheless, leaders of Israel's right wing were incensed by the court's willingness to even entertain such challenges, and they continued their attack on the judiciary.

By late 2019, Netanyahu's political allies were also seeking to fight his indictment on corruption charges, which led to the opening of a trial against him in a Jerusalem district court the following year. To do so, they needed to further delegitimize the proceedings and the courts overall. They sought, furthermore, to weaken the powers of the attorney general and appoint amenable Supreme Court justices, likely hoping they would strike down relevant legal challenges to Netanyahu's government—such as his ability to serve under indictment—or rule favorably on future appeals in the corruption case. (As of late September 2024, the trial was ongoing, and defense testimonies, including by Netanyahu, are scheduled to begin in December.) By June 2021, Netanyahu was out of power, having failed to secure a coalition majority in repeated elections. Finally, in late 2022, Netanyahu was able to engineer a return to power by allying with two ultra-Orthodox parties and two ultranationalist, messianic right-wing parties that openly supported the full annexation of the West Bank. Now, Netanyahu saw an opportunity to push through some of the larger plans of the Israeli right and strengthen his grip on the country.

LESS LAW, MORE LAND

Launched in January 2023, the Netanyahu government's plan to overhaul the judiciary was the culmination of the Israeli right's long attempts to remove democratic constraints on its power. Among other changes, it aimed to gouge out judicial review, engineer the selection of judges to ensure that courts would be friendly to the ruling coalition's ideology, and turn professional legal ministerial advisers into political loyalists. The overarching goal was to make sure that the government had as little institutional resistance as possible to its efforts to crack down on Palestinian citizens, civil society, media freedom, and the

opposition; stifle left-wing, anti-occupation activism; and advance annexation. Most courts would assess these deeply illiberal policies as violating basic democratic principles.

The plan immediately set off mass protests that quickly evolved into a titanic clash between the government and a large segment of the Israeli population. The ruling coalition insisted that it could not implement the voters' will because of the decisions of an unelected judiciary. But for the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who took to the streets, Israel's independent courts were the only things protecting them from the government's efforts to advance theocratic and Jewish supremacist values, slash individual rights and freedoms, annex occupied territories, and institutionalize corruption. The protests drew a very large cross-section of society, including community and business leaders, doctors and mental health professionals, workers in high-tech industries, scholars, and teachers.

More critically, groups of military reservists, on which the Israel Defense Forces relies to a great extent, threatened that they would refuse to report for duty, sparking deep concerns within the Israeli security establishment. Yoav Gallant, Netanyahu's own defense minister, called on the government to pause the legislation out of security concerns, and Netanyahu nearly dismissed him. But the government pressed ahead, pushing through one key part of the reform in July 2023, as massive protests continued. By this point, Israelis had begun to recognize how weak their country's democracy was and were demanding stronger foundations. Yet the vast majority of those taking part declined to protest the government's plan to expand the occupation and advance annexation of the West Bank; save for small clusters of anti-occupation activists, protesters insisted that this was a separate issue from the judicial takeover. They failed to see that Israel's ambiguous relationship with democratic values and rules, going back decades, had enabled the occupation and the conflict all along, or that it was setting the stage for a disastrous new war.

In the months after Hamas's October 7 attack, Netanyahu was given an opportunity. At first, the war stopped the protest movement in its tracks, allowing the government to pursue many of its antidemocratic plans with far less scrutiny. Overnight, groups that had helped organize the democracy protests in 2023 shifted from criticizing the government to distributing basic supplies—including cooked meals, clothing, and toiletries—to those in need. The government, for its part, lagged badly in providing these emergency services but wasted

no time pushing through its broader program of consolidating power by eroding civil liberties and installing political loyalists in less-visible professional and technical levels of government. Meanwhile, it ramped up its plans to annex occupied territories, accelerating settlement expansion and virtually ceasing to enforce the law against Israelis living in the occupied territories. Given free rein, settlers in the West Bank became increasingly violent toward Palestinians, culminating in several pogrom-like attacks on Palestinian villages.

A constitutional process could provide crucial anchors for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

For most Israelis, the growing lawlessness in occupied areas is a secondary concern. Yet as the war has ground on, many have become disillusioned by the government's inability to address their core concerns or even to ensure national security, and a large majority now fear that the conflict in Gaza could spread to the West Bank. At present, the sources of public discontent include the security and intelligence failures that allowed the Hamas attack to happen, the failure to return Israeli hostages from Gaza, and the failure to make clear how the war in Gaza will end—although most Israeli Jews believe the war was eminently justified. Many also blame the government for not securing Israel's northern border with Lebanon so that tens of thousands of displaced civilians can return, a situation that has become all the more volatile since Israel's dramatic confrontation with Hezbollah began in September.

Moreover, a clear majority of Israelis now believe the government's behavior to be driven primarily by Netanyahu's personal stake in remaining in power. In a June 2024 survey by Israel's N12 news channel, for example, 56 percent of respondents agreed that Netanyahu's reluctance to reach a hostage-release deal was driven by political interests. A July poll by the same organization found that 54 percent of Israelis thought Netanyahu's political considerations were behind the continued fighting in Gaza; and a September N12 poll found that 63 percent believed Netanyahu's threat to replace his defense minister was driven by political considerations rather than for the good of the state. Through much of the first nine months of 2024, a majority of Israelis said they wanted the government to accept a hostage deal, knowing this would entail a cease-fire—steps that the government continually refused to take.

Anger at the government has pushed Israelis back onto the streets for huge demonstrations. Surveys regularly indicate that approximately 70 percent of Israelis want Netanyahu to resign; his current coalition has failed to draw majority support in any survey since early 2023, shortly after its inauguration. Many Israelis are demanding new elections. In a poll in May, the Israeli Democracy Institute found that just 29 percent of Israelis were optimistic about the future of democratic rule in Israel, its lowest such finding ever; in August, the figure inched up but remained at a still dismal 36 percent.

Israel's democracy crisis cannot be solved by elections alone. The war was ignited from Gaza, a territory that is central to Israel's strategy of occupation and its division and control of Palestinians. For the sake of continuing and expanding that control, the current government is willing to dismantle Israel's independent judiciary and further undermine the country's institutions. By setting out to claim full and exclusive Jewish sovereignty over all the land—including what Netanyahu euphemistically refers to as an ongoing security presence in Gaza—the government is seeking to impose a messianic, theocratic vision of territorial expansion and to formally codify Jewish supremacy. Permanent military occupation has become an inseparable part of the state itself.

ISRAEL REINVENTED

Amid one of the worst regional crises in decades, prospects for democratic renewal in Israel may seem more remote than ever. After all, for more than three-quarters of a century, Israel has been unable to formally commit itself to key democratic principles, even when it wasn't involved in a dangerous multifront war. But the country's democratic institutions are under greater threat than at any previous moment in history, and a growing number of Israelis seem to recognize this. Picking up from the extraordinary 2023 protest movement, Israelis have an opportunity to lay down fresh, and genuinely democratic, foundations when the war ends.

To start with, the country needs fixed borders, a government that is committed to full democracy, and a legal system that reflects both Jewish self-determination and true commitment to equality for all citizens. And Israelis must finally adopt a full bill of rights. Such a step is not a fantasy: the writers of a future constitution can draw on numerous drafts of such a concept, painstakingly developed by Israeli lawmakers and civil society figures over many decades but never

enacted. Most urgent are crucial rights that are still missing from Israel's Basic Laws, such as freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, and due process. These universal rights must be formally legislated for all Israeli citizens.

An Israeli constitution must also face the sensitive task of addressing the collective identity of Palestinian citizens, who constitute the country's largest non-Jewish minority. Numerous democratic nation-states, including North Macedonia, Slovakia, and Spain, have constitutions that recognize ethnic or national minorities within their citizenries and acknowledge their equality. Israel can adopt collective minority rights—by way of cultural, linguistic, or even national recognition—without forgoing the Jewish character of the state. Indeed, the Jewish state must be compatible with universal democratic standards so as to ensure civic equality between Jews and non-Jews—and to establish equality between religious and secular Jews, as well.

Of course, building these pillars in the immediate wake of a violent and prolonged conflict will be extremely difficult. But as the examples of other war-riven societies have shown, a constitutional process can itself provide crucial anchors for a more durable peace. Indeed, for Israel, any serious constitutional effort must include Palestinians—both those who are its own citizens and those who are now under Israeli occupation. Effectively conceived, such a constitution-building effort could thus spur a broader peace process based on Palestinians' self-determination in a state of their own. Ultimately, the two states would then define the border between them, ideally along the Green Line, and preferably in a confederated arrangement that allows for freedom of movement and residency, and in which residents remain citizens only of their nation-state.

For now, any large-scale constitutional process, let alone a two-state solution, may appear far-fetched. But once a cease-fire is finally reached in Gaza or Lebanon, and new Israeli elections are held, the horizon for change might look different, even to Israel's own leaders. After all, in 2023, hundreds of thousands of Israelis recognized that the ills of the Netanyahu government could not be addressed simply by toppling that government. Instead, they looked deeper, to Israel's roots. At demonstrations, they broadcast the recording of Ben-Gurion reading the declaration of independence in 1948. Protesters chanted, "We won't stop until there's a constitution." Legal scholars offered public lectures and circulated short, readable explanations of

such concepts as judicial review, the evolution and merits of Israel's judicial-appointment system, and the obscure "reasonability" grounds that the Supreme Court has used to review executive action, particularly the political appointments of figures suspected of corruption. The law passed in July 2023 would have limited the court's ability to do so, but the court struck down the law in January.

Another group of scholars tried to revive long-defunct efforts to build a constituent assembly, in order to establish a citizen-led process for adopting a constitution. At times during the nine months of protests that lasted from January 2023 to the October 7 attack, Israelis were asking themselves bigger questions about the foundations of their country than at any time in recent memory—and they felt an urgency to find answers.

The consequences of not doing so could be dire. If Israel chooses to remain on its current path of conquest and annexation and commits itself to opposing Palestinian statehood, as Netanyahu has repeatedly done, it will consummate the destruction of Israel as a democratic state. It will face the de facto incorporation of millions of noncitizen Palestinians under Israeli rule; and in such a scenario, it would never be able to recognize this huge population, because it would pose a threat to Israel's Jewish identity. (At present, an approximately equal number of Jews and Palestinians—seven million each—live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.)

Such an outcome will affect every Israeli citizen and subject. To avoid international isolation, Israel will increasingly rely on authoritarian and nondemocratic states, and on nondemocratic forces within the United States. Israel will find it difficult to retain the support of longtime democratic allies. Already, numerous key Western partners have constrained weapons exports to Israel over the past year, including Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Italy—Israel's third-largest arms supplier. The United States itself has delayed shipments. If Israel no longer manifests the "shared values" that have notionally bound it to the liberal democratic order, pressure on Western governments to limit their aid to Israel will intensify.

After a decade in which populism has surged all over the world, it has become clear how easy it is for political leaders to undermine democratic norms in service of their own pursuits of power, especially during large-scale wars. Democracy must always be defensive, but first it must be built. Israel must end the war and start building.

The Populist Phantom

Threats to Democracy Start at the Top

LARRY M. BARTELS

Many countries have been roiled in recent years by what is often called a "populist wave." In the Anglophone world, this new era began in 2016 with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Media and political elites shocked by these events tied themselves in knots trying to figure out what had happened and why. According to the most popular strand of this thinking, the Brexit vote and Trump's victory were the reverberations of a profound economic and social transformation. Globalization and technological change had shattered the livelihoods of working-class people and eviscerated their communities, provoking a groundswell of anger and resentment, a populist rejection of the status quo and the political establishment. Since then, observers have been quick to find further evidence of the

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Illustration by Lincoln Agnew

surging force of populism in an ever-lengthening list of countries, including Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, and Sweden. An electoral surge for a supposedly populist party anywhere in the world renews the drumbeat of alarm that populism is submerging established party systems and, ominously, democracy itself.

And yet for all the alarm that populism has generated, its nature and political significance are widely misunderstood. The metaphor of a "populist wave" reflects this error. It exaggerates the electoral success of populism around the world, which has been rather more modest than it sometimes appears. It also exaggerates the coherence of populism as a political tendency, overlooking the extent to which ostensibly populist entrepreneurs in different times and places have appealed to distinct grievances. Even more important, the metaphor overstates the implications of populist parties' electoral successes for policymaking and for democratic stability.

The triumphs of populists do not augur democracy's demise.

Those panicking about the rise of populism tend to imagine that shifts in public opinion fuel the success of populist parties and figures; the public's broadening antipathy to globalization, immigration, integration (in the European context), and the political class threatens to empower extremists and undermine democracy. But that is demonstrably not the case. Public opinion in the West on most typically "populist" issues has remained relatively stable for decades, belying the notion that a new surge of popular discontent is remaking the political landscape. Both in the United States and in many parts of Europe, the gains of populist and far-right forces have less to do with a genuine shift in political beliefs among the public than they do with changing elite politics. In other words, top-down developments, not bottom-up ones, drive populism: an expanded menu of political alternatives for voters, more effective mobilization of long-standing discontents, and the tendency of mainstream political leaders to concede in the face of challenges that are sometimes more illusory than real.

Liberal democracies do face genuine threats, including the potential erosion of important democratic norms and institutions. And citizens of democracies have long prized their own well-being and values over the defense of democratic procedures. But their passivity is to be expected, not understood as a sign of rebellion against the status

quo. The political successes of populist groups and leaders do not in themselves augur democracy's demise. Misconstruing the nature and appeal of populism muddles a clearer understanding of the contemporary political landscape and distracts attention from the chronic vulnerabilities of democracy—notably, the perennial temptation for political leaders to entrench themselves in power.

THE MYTHICAL SURGE

The emergence of populist parties as significant electoral players in many parts of the world has been a shock to the unusually stable party systems of the post–World War II era, but in the longer arc of democratic politics, it should hardly be surprising. Across Europe, for example, the average vote share for right-wing populist parties has increased by less than half a percentage point per year since the turn of the century. The rise of social democratic parties in many of these same countries in the early twentieth century was far more dramatic by comparison.

The impression of a relentless surge in support for populist parties is partly a product of media hype. The international press is fascinated and alarmed by their successes but mostly tends to ignore their struggles and downturns. The *New York Times*' coverage of the 2023 election in Spain provides a striking illustration of this habit. Two weeks before the election, the *Times* rolled out a long front-page story portraying the rise of Vox, a far-right party, as "part of an increasing trend of hard-right parties surging in popularity." The morning of the election, the *Times* ran another long front-page story whose headline touted a "Far Right Poised to Rise." But the next day, after Vox fared poorly in the vote, the election result itself was reported only in a brief article on page 8.

The media's fascination with populism doesn't just warp conventional wisdom; it can have real consequences at the polls. British political scientists studying media coverage of the United Kingdom's pro-Brexit UK Independence Party found that its electoral successes received "disproportionate attention" in the press, which in turn helped generate additional popular support. Insurgent parties thrive on the perception that they are viable alternatives to the status quo, and journalists unwittingly stoke that perception.

The press also routinely misinterprets shifts in electoral support for populist parties as evidence of momentous changes in public opinion.

In fact, there is remarkably little relationship between support for these parties at the polls and underlying populist sentiment—the specific attitudes, such as antipathy toward immigrants, distrust of politicians, and nationalism (and in Europe, opposition to further European integration) that generally predict individual support for contemporary populist parties. That incongruity is paradoxical. How can the factors that account for populist support at the individual level not do so in the aggregate?

That is because support for populist parties depends on factors beyond the predispositions of voters. In particular times and places, populist parties succeed or fail mostly as a result of the quality of their leadership, the alternatives voters have to choose from, and the strategic incentives provided by electoral systems. These parties have long flourished in a variety of places where populist sentiment is relatively scarce. The Swiss People's Party, for instance, has garnered 25 to 30 percent of the vote in each of the past six elections—more than any other populist party in western Europe—despite Switzerland's unusually high levels of trust in politicians and satisfaction with the economy, the government, and democracy. Populist parties in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are among the most successful in western Europe despite those countries having the continent's most favorable attitudes toward immigrants. Conversely, populist parties were slow to emerge in Belgium, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain—all places where public opinion exhibited more widespread populist sentiment.

In majoritarian democracies, winning parties are generally broad coalitions of diverse interests, and it is hard to gauge how much of a party's support can be ascribed to "populist" rhetoric or policy positions. In the United States, for example, the Republican nominee for president won 46 percent of the popular vote in 2016 and 47 percent in 2020, but that is a testament to the strength of partisan loyalties in the current, highly polarized political environment, not to the specific appeal of populism or of Trump. Trump won the 2016 Republican nomination with intense factional support in a crowded field, then mostly relied on the backing of traditional Republicans to defeat an unpopular Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, in the general election. Although the Republican Party has indeed reflected an increasingly populist cast in recent years, that is probably more a product than a cause of Trump's success; loyal partisans are notoriously susceptible to cues from party leaders.

Republicans' shifting views regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin during Trump's presidency provide a remarkable example. A 2014 survey by YouGov and *The Economist* found just ten percent of Republicans expressed favorable views of Putin. But in December 2016, after over a year of Trump's pro-Putin campaign rhetoric, that number was up to 37 percent. It seems far-fetched to imagine that the party of Ronald Reagan was transformed by an autonomous groundswell of enthusiasm for the Russian dictator; rather, Trump supporters were swayed by the president's peculiar fondness for Putin. Effects of this sort are not limited to the domain of foreign policy. In the early days of Trump's presidency, the political scientists Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope tested the reactions of rank-and-file Republicans to information about his positions on a variety of major issues, including immigration, health care, guns, and abortion. They found substantial shifts in preferences, especially among the most committed and least informed partisans, in the direction of positions ascribed to Trump, regardless of whether those positions were conservative or liberal. "Many people's expressed issue positions," they concluded, "are malleable to the point of issue innocence."

THE MYTH OF ECONOMIC DISAFFECTION

The common invocation in Western media of a "populist wave" encourages observers to imagine that there is some single driving force propelling the various manifestations of populism seen around the globe in recent years. In fact, populism is a political language and style adaptable to a wide array of circumstances. In most democracies most of the time, there is a substantial reservoir of potential support for challenges to the status quo, and populists draw on that reservoir opportunistically to build their brands and jostle for power.

The most frequent explanation for the so-called populist wave is widespread economic disaffection stemming from deindustrialization, globalization, and technological change. This explanation appeals to observers for a number of reasons: it gratifies nostalgia for an orderly postwar era in which economic issues shaped the party systems of affluent democracies; it invites leftists to chastise so-called neoliberals for the policy errors of the late twentieth century; and it submerges the ugly significance of racial and ethnic animosities in contemporary democratic politics. But it doesn't really fit the facts.

In conventional accounts, the global economic crisis triggered by the financial meltdown of 2008 was the key factor in what the author John Judis called "the populist explosion." As the journalist Matt O'Brien wrote in *The Washington Post* a few months after Trump's inauguration, "It shouldn't be too surprising that the worst economic crisis since the 1930s has led to the worst political crisis within liberal democracies since the 1930s." But it hasn't. Although populist parties in some places made electoral gains in the wake of the economic calamity, they were mostly small and scattered. Moreover, careful survey research showed that the supporters of populist parties were mostly distinguished by traditional conservative ideology, as measured by where respondents placed themselves on a left-to-right spectrum of political belief, and by opposition to immigration and European integration; economic disaffection played little discernible role.

Economic disaffection did not drive populist successes.

In Spain, for example, GDP fell by almost five percent during the euro crisis that lasted from 2009 into the early 2010s and unemployment soared to 26 percent, yet no viable right-wing populist party emerged. Vox made substantial inroads only several years later, in 2019, after economic disaffection had ebbed and the relatively favorable attitudes toward immigration and globalization that had been cited as explanations for Spain's quiescence had become even more favorable. Statistical analyses of survey data showed that the most important factor driving support for Vox was the same conservative self-identification that had long predicted support for the mainstream People's Party; nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment played lesser roles, while economic disaffection, opposition to European integration, and dissatisfaction with democracy had little or no effect.

In *Foreign Affairs* after the election, an essay by the journalist Sam Edwards was subtitled "Far-Right Populism Has Finally Conquered Spain, but the Real Shift Lies Elsewhere." The use of "conquered" is a typical example of exaggerating populist strength—Vox's vote share peaked at 15 percent. But Edwards's real point was that even that success had less to do with the intrinsic appeal of right-wing populism than with the "implosion" of the People's Party, triggered by the failure of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to head off a chaotic referendum on Catalan independence and the convictions of several

prominent party officials for their role in what the High Court called an "authentic and efficient system of institutional corruption." In most of the places where populist parties have made significant electoral gains, the explanations have been similarly prosaic; the scandals and failures of mainstream parties were often paramount.

Economic disaffection is similarly overblown as an explanation for the rise of Trump in the United States. Pundits surmised that Trump's rise was a testament to the crash of the American middle class and the high debts and consequent frustration of millions of Americans. But in their book-length analysis of the 2016 election, the political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck found that the biggest shifts in voting patterns were related to education, not income, and that those shifts primarily reflected "attitudes about race and ethnicity," not "economic anxiety." They concluded that "the dividing line between Clinton and Trump voters was not the widespread belief that average Americans are being left behind" economically. The real key was "how people explained economic outcomes in the first place—and especially whether they believed that hard-working white Americans were losing ground to less deserving minorities." A separate analysis by the political scientist Diana Mutz likewise showed that perceived loss of status, not tangible economic deprivation, explained the 2016 presidential vote. Even so-called deaths of despair—such as suicides and deaths caused by addiction and overdose—in economically devastated white working-class communities seem not to have had the populist resonance that many pundits imagined. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck found that whites who voted for Clinton were more likely than those who voted for Trump to report knowing someone who had abused alcohol or been addicted to painkillers.

BUILD THE WALL

Support for populist parties and candidates in contemporary Western democracies is driven primarily not by economic grievances but by cultural concerns. In broad terms, these parties and candidates appeal to people distressed by the pace of social and cultural change in Western societies. Like William F. Buckley's conservatives in the 1950s, today's right-wing populists stand athwart history yelling, "Stop!" In the United States, changes stemming from the decades-long struggle for racial justice and the decline of organized religion are major sources of distress for this group. Fears about the erosion of local and

national identities loom large in many places. But the most concrete and common source of tension is immigration—especially that of people ethnically and culturally distinct from existing populations.

Many affluent societies have experienced significant inflows of immigrants in recent decades. The European refugee crisis that began in 2015 provided new opportunities for right-wing populist entrepreneurs to stoke and exploit long-simmering concerns about immigrants and immigration, inflaming public fears about "the great replacement" of a white majority by nonwhites. As with the supposed impact of the economic crisis, however, the causes and political implications of these developments are often misunderstood.

For one thing, there is remarkably little relationship between the scale of immigration in specific countries and the extent of anti-immigrant sentiment. In long-running cross-national surveys, Germany and Sweden, which have experienced substantial immigration, remain among the most welcoming countries in Europe; the refugee crisis barely dented favorable opinions there toward immigrants and immigration. Hungary and Poland, which have not received many immigrants (although Poland has taken in many refugees from Ukraine), are among the most hostile—largely because their governments have energetically scapegoated immigrants, another instance of leaders manufacturing rather than responding to public opinion.

The ubiquitous notion that the immigration crisis was tearing Europe apart represented an overreaction to the agitation of a xenophobic minority. Just as the press tends to exaggerate electoral gains by anti-immigrant parties, it tends to mistake outbursts by extremists for broad shifts in public opinion. Across Europe, attitudes toward immigrants and immigration have become substantially more favorable since the turn of the century, even in places where there have been significant inflows of immigrants. This shift is largely due to generational replacement, as younger, better-educated people are less concerned about immigration than their parents and grandparents have been. In surveys conducted in the past few years, the difference in attitudes toward immigrants and immigration between young Europeans (born in the late 1990s) and some of the oldest ones (born in the early 1930s) is comparable to the difference between the countries that have the most favorable perceptions of immigration, such as Norway and Sweden, and those that have the least favorable,

such as Poland or Slovenia. Although immigration is not about to disappear as a political issue, it is swimming upstream against a strong generational current.

A similar generational divide appears in the United States. Indeed, in recent years, the long-standing gap in immigration attitudes between older and younger Americans has widened. A 2023 Gallup poll found that 55 percent of people 55 and older wanted the level of immigration reduced, but only 16 percent of 18-to-34-year-olds agreed.

For some older Americans, especially, concerns about immigration have been supercharged by the deeper fear of becoming strangers in their own country. A decade ago, the psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson showed that reminding white Americans of a projected demographic future in which whites are outnumbered by nonwhites significantly altered their political attitudes. Now, such reminders are constant, as politicians and pundits on the right incessantly hawk the conspiratorial notion that radical elites are using nonwhite migration to hasten that future and cement their own hold on power. For people who view demographic diversity as a significant threat to the traditional American way of life, the political stakes could hardly be higher.

The frictions stemming from immigration are real. But they reflect the increasing intensity of feeling among a minority, not the massive, irresistible tide of popular conviction that many observers imagine. Moreover, their political implications are often overblown; much of the opposition to immigration is more symbolic than concrete. For example, a June 2024 Gallup poll found 47 percent of Americans saying they favored "deporting all immigrants who are living in the United States illegally back to their home country." But anyone tempted to take that dire finding at face value would do well to note that 70 percent of the same survey respondents said they favored "allowing immigrants living in the United States illegally the chance to become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements over a period of time." As with many issues, there may be less to the public's immigration policy preferences than meets the eye. Exaggerating the breadth and solidity of anti-immigrant sentiment merely encourages mainstream political leaders to cave to pressure from extremists, abdicating their responsibility to craft policies and rhetoric that address the issue soberly and sensibly.

BARKING DOGS

The electoral successes of populist parties invariably raise alarms about their potential impact on public policy. But that impact, too, is often exaggerated and, even more often, difficult to assess. Regardless of the specific institutional structure in which they operate, populists generally need political allies to shape policy. In majoritarian systems, that requires bargaining within parties and governments. In multiparty systems, it usually requires populist parties to partner with mainstream parties in governing coalitions. The more extreme a populist party is, the less attractive it tends to be as a coalition partner and the more likely it is to have to moderate its policy ambitions to participate in government. Thus, as the political scientist Cas Mudde once put it, even when western Europe's right-wing populists reach parliament, they are "dogs that bark loud, but hardly ever bite."

The accession of the right-wing populist Giorgia Meloni to the post of prime minister of Italy in 2022 is a case in point. Meloni's rise was portrayed as the vanguard of yet another "new wave of populism," but in truth, she benefited from the crash of Matteo Salvini, an earlier far-right leader who lost support after he overplayed his hand in a coalition government. As prime minister, Meloni has been less zealous and ideological than many analysts anticipated, constrained by Italy's reliance on the European Union for economic support and by her coalition partners.

In some countries, mainstream political leaders have long shunned populist parties as political allies. In Sweden, for example, the electoral rise of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats was counterbalanced for many years by mainstream parties across the political spectrum refusing to partner with it in governing coalitions, even at the cost of ceding power to their rivals. In 2018, the Sweden Democrats' 62 seats in parliament represented a clear balance of power between the Red-Green coalition's 144 seats and the center-right Alliance's 143 seats. Nonetheless, the mainstream parties negotiated for more than four months, eventually settling on a precarious but functional center-left coalition. In 2022, the Sweden Democrats won 73 seats, making it the largest party in a prospective center-right coalition. But the reluctance of the other parties in the coalition to partner with it resulted in a minority government with carefully negotiated external support from the Sweden Democrats. Although the norm of "cordoning" the Sweden

Democrats from power has clearly eroded in recent years, it hasn't disappeared. Whatever one may think about the legitimacy of nullifying the influence on government of a substantial minority of voters, political leaders in multiparty systems retain considerable leeway to do just that.

The efforts of mainstream political elites to contain the policy influence of right-wing populists is similarly evident in the Netherlands, where the issue of immigration fueled a major political crisis, leading to the collapse of the longtime prime minister Mark Rutte's center-right coalition in 2023. The big winner in the resulting snap election, more than doubling its previous vote share and parliamentary representation, was the Party for Freedom, helmed by the anti-immigrant firebrand Geert Wilders. Although some media declared the outcome "a tectonic change in the Dutch political landscape," Wilders's potential coalition partners blocked him from becoming prime minister, eventually settling on a new leader with no party ties or political experience. As in Sweden, the policy impact of Wilders's election victory remains to be seen.

Leaders panicked by the overblown threat of a populist wave concede more than they should.

For mainstream politicians, attempting to suppress populist parties and the grievances they exploit may often be good politics. Yet it sometimes risks further alienating their supporters. A survey conducted in the six months following Sweden's 2018 election showed satisfaction with Swedish democracy declining substantially among people who had reported voting for the Sweden Democrats, as the drawn-out post-election maneuvering made it increasingly clear that the party would once again be shut out of government. Managing the currents of populism sometimes requires concessions and compromise. More often, however, political leaders panicked by the overblown threat of a populist wave probably concede more than they must or should. Perhaps the most consequential instance of such overreaction was British Prime Minister David Cameron's promise in 2013 to stage a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union, a reckless gamble intended to blunt the exaggerated threat of the UK Independence Party and a move that even many who supported it soon came to regret.

THROW THE RASCALS OUT

While observers have overstated the electoral successes and political clout of populist parties, they have also exaggerated what is at stake in those successes by conflating populism with democratic backsliding. According to the political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, "Far-right populist parties . . . have risen from obscurity to transform the party system of virtually every Western European country. Meanwhile, parts of Central and Eastern Europe bear witness to the institutional and ideological transformations that might be afoot: In Poland and Hungary, populist strongmen have begun to put pressure on critical media, to violate minority rights, and to undermine key institutions such as independent courts." The word "meanwhile" is doing a lot of work here. In fact, the parties that eroded democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland bore little resemblance to the populist parties of western Europe, and the forces fueling their rise were largely unrelated to the conventional understanding of right-wing populism.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Fidesz party came to power in 2010 as the only viable alternative to an incumbent party fatally discredited by years of scandal and mismanagement. Contrary to many observers' assumptions, Fidesz's support at that point was unrelated to anti-immigrant sentiment, resistance to European integration, political distrust, and other common bases of support for right-wing populist parties. Only after winning did Orban turn to scapegoating refugees and the European Union, adapting and extending the populist playbook and pulling the views of his supporters closer to those of right-wing populists elsewhere. But the vote that brought Orban to power in 2010 was a surprisingly routine instance of "throwing the rascals out," not a welling up of xenophobic or antidemocratic passions.

Having won 53 percent of the popular vote—hardly a ringing mandate under the circumstances—Orban exploited what one Hungarian writer aptly called an "accidental" two-thirds majority in the National Assembly to retrospectively declare a transparently bogus "voting booth revolution," engineering changes to the electoral system and constraints on civil servants and the media intended to entrench Fidesz in power. This assault on Hungarian democracy was not a reflection of Hungarians' yearning for populism, much less for authoritarianism. Orban took advantage—as incumbent politicians in many times and places have—of an opportunity to rewrite the rules of the game in his own favor.

Orban's changes to the Hungarian electoral system and attacks on independent media gave Fidesz "an undue advantage" in subsequent elections, as an international monitor reported in 2014. An even more important basis for the party's continued hold on power, however, was a marked improvement in ordinary Hungarians' subjective quality of life. Surveys registered massive improvements after 2009 in public satisfaction with the economy, the national government, and—ironically—the working of Hungarian democracy. These improvements in subjective well-being continued for several years after Fidesz's rise to power.

Democratic backsliding in Poland followed a similar course after the center-right Law and Justice party's victory in 2015. "Law and Justice won big," a BBC News analyst explained at the time, "because they offered simple, concrete policies," including "higher child-care benefits and tax breaks for the less well-off." Scholars concurred that Law and Justice "softened its image," running on the anodyne slogan "Good Change." Only after taking power did the party turn to packing the judiciary with party loyalists, castigating the European Union, and tightening its control over state radio and television. "You have given an example," the party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski told Orban in 2016, "and we are learning from your example."

If the authoritarian turn in Poland was attributable to political elites rather than ordinary citizens, the same might be said of its end. The ouster of the Law and Justice party in an election in October 2023—just a month after its expected reelection had been touted in *The Economist* as part of "a fresh wave of hard-right populism"—led some observers to wonder whether Europe's populist wave had finally crested. But the election outcome was hardly a sea change in Polish public opinion. The Law and Justice party's 35 percent of the vote was only slightly lower than the 38 percent vote share that brought it to power in 2015. The key difference was not in voters' behavior but in the determination of the various opposition parties' leaders to subsume their differences in a coalition government led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

The tolerance of many citizens in Hungary and Poland for what scholars have characterized as "mildly authoritarian" regimes may strike democratic idealists as blameworthy, but it should not be surprising. Ordinary people in most times and places have cared more for their

security, their personal finances, and the validation of their social identities than they have for the upholding of democratic norms and procedures. Summarizing her detailed study of full-blown breakdowns of democracy in twentieth-century Europe and Latin America, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, the political scientist Nancy Bermeo wrote that "ordinary people generally were guilty of remaining passive when dictators actually attempted to seize power." Although they "generally did not polarize and mobilize in support of dictatorship, they did not immediately mobilize in defense of democracy either."

A study published in 2020 tested how survey respondents' willingness to support a hypothetical political candidate was affected by informing them that the candidate had violated some democratic norm (for example, advocating the prosecution of unfriendly journalists or ignoring unfavorable court rulings). The authors concluded that "only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices," making public opinion a "strikingly limited" check on undemocratic behavior by elected officials. Turks and Venezuelans were similarly "reluctant to punish politicians for disregarding democratic principles when doing so requires abandoning one's favored party or policies."

Americans' commitment to democratic principles was put to a more concrete test in 2022, when scores of Republican members of Congress who had supported or condoned Trump's "stop the steal" effort following the 2020 election stood for reelection. In contested general elections, they did not fare significantly worse or better than their counterparts who had bucked Trump—the electoral cost of "disregarding democratic principles" was essentially zero. Moreover, in other respects they were advantaged; for example, they were much less likely to lose Republican primary elections or to retire from politics and more likely to seek higher office.

It might be tempting to interpret public indifference to violations of democratic norms as itself a product of the "populist wave." In fact, it is a long-standing feature of democratic politics and not only in the cases of breakdown studied by Bermeo. Six decades ago, the political scientist Herbert McClosky's classic study of "consensus and ideology in American politics" documented the shallow allegiance of many ordinary Americans to the "rules of the game." McClosky concluded that members of "the active political minority" were "the major repositories of the public conscience" and "the carriers of the [democratic] Creed."

In McClosky's postwar era, elite support for democratic norms was bipartisan. That consensus was facilitated by the fact that policy differences between the two parties were modest by historical standards. (In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a public report titled *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System* that advocated for stronger, more distinct party platforms and greater power to implement them.) In recent years, however, the rise of hot-button issues such as civil rights, abortion, immigration, and national identity have polarized the parties, raising the stakes of political contestation. In response, political elites—especially Republicans—have demonstrated a troubling willingness to violate democratic norms in pursuit of partisan advantage. The increasingly unrestrained struggle for power among elites, not populism, represents the greatest threat to democracy in the United States and elsewhere.

The threat Trump poses to American democracy has little to do with populism.

Case studies of democratic breakdowns around the world suggest that the most important bulwark against autocratic backsliding from the top is uncompromising opposition from prominent political allies. Orban's constitutional coup in Hungary required absolute party discipline, facilitated by his ironclad control over the Fidesz party apparatus and candidate selection. Although Trump's control of the Republican Party has been less complete, it has increased considerably since 2016. When he floated the possibility of postponing the 2020 election, Republican leaders in Congress promptly and publicly rejected the idea, and it was quickly dropped. But after the election, when Trump's allies hatched a plan to derail the certification of electoral votes, Republican congressional leaders were divided in their response. Two-thirds of House Republicans ended up voting to decertify electoral votes, while only seven of 51 Senate Republicans did so.

Since 2021, Trump has bolstered his standing among the Republican rank and file, as demonstrated by his cakewalk through the 2024 primaries. He has also significantly tightened his grip on the party organization—for example, by installing allies and in-laws in the leadership of the Republican National Committee. Many of the Republican leaders who resisted his extremist tendencies have voluntarily or involuntarily retired from politics and been replaced by newcomers who seem willing to give Trump a freer hand. Even if he wins

reelection, the institutional fragmentation of power in the U.S. system will leave him well short of the ironclad control that Orban enjoys in Hungary. Nonetheless, with an increasingly united Republican Party and an increasingly compliant Supreme Court supporting him, there is good reason to fear a further erosion of democratic norms.

Trump's movement to "Make America Great Again" appeals to a deep fear of diversity and social change. That sort of fear is commonplace in all societies, and it has often roiled democratic politics. Yet the threat Trump poses to American democracy has little to do with "populism." It doesn't come from ordinary citizens immersed in "culture wars"—even from those who stormed the Capitol on January 6. They were and are a sideshow. The real threat is from the Republican officeholders who, hours later, supported Trump's effort to decertify the election outcome. It was not some rush of antidemocratic feeling that threatened American democracy in those months; it was the machinations of political elites determined to entrench themselves in power.

At its heart, widespread misunderstanding of the contemporary populist threat rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of democracy itself. An idealized "folk theory of democracy," as the political scientist Christopher Achen and I have called it, encourages journalists, scholars, and ordinary citizens to imagine that the moving force behind major shifts in party systems and governing coalitions must be correspondingly major shifts in public opinion. If populist parties are gaining strength in parliaments, it must be because people are turning against immigration, European integration, and established political institutions. (They are not.) If democratic norms and institutions are eroding, it must be because public support for democracy as a system of government has weakened. (It hasn't.)

As the eminent political scientist E. E. Schattschneider observed several decades ago, this sort of understanding of democratic politics is "essentially simplistic, based on a tremendously exaggerated notion of the immediacy and urgency of the connection of public opinion and events." The fate of democracy lies in the hands of politicians. It is they who choose to manage, mollify, ignore, or inflame populist sentiment. It is a dangerous blunder to gullibly accept their show of bowing to the ostensible will of the people. And when popular grievances are used as a pretext for bad policy—or, even worse, as a pretext for democratic backsliding—it is politicians, not the citizenry, who are culpable.

How to End the Democratic Recession

The Fight Against Autocracy Needs a New Playbook

LARRY DIAMOND

On August 5, following weeks of mass student protests, a dictator fell in the world's eighth most populous country. Amid wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the escalating danger of a wider conflict in the Middle East, and the twists and turns of the U.S. presidential race, the sudden resignation and flight into exile of Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, drew slight global attention. But the significance of her ouster could prove substantial. Hasina, the daughter of the independence leader and first president of Bangladesh, first served as prime minister from 1996 to 2001 and was elected to the office again in 2008. In three successive terms over the next 15 years, she ruled with mounting ruthlessness and resolution. She asserted personal control over the courts, prosecutors, government agencies, and the police, using them to silence the media, persecute her opponents,

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Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

cow private business, and subvert the institutions and traditions that previously allowed for reasonably free and fair elections. By the time Bangladeshis voted again, in 2014, Hasina had so trampled on constitutional norms that most opposition parties chose to boycott the election, accelerating the country's descent into autocracy and misrule.

Yet Bangladesh's civil society refused to remain silent in the face of a rising tide of arrests and disappearances. In January 2024, as Hasina prepared to glide into a fourth consecutive term in another unfair election (which also was boycotted by the opposition), popular protest intensified. In June, the dam burst. The trigger was a seemingly modest issue: the reinstatement of a quota system for government jobs that was seen to favor Hasina's political base. Bangladeshi university students took to the streets, angered by the prospect of a spoils system. Hasina responded with repression: her party's shock troops joined the fray, and she sent in the police and the military. Over the next two months, hundreds of civilians were killed, more than 20,000 injured, and more than 10,000 arrested. The government's brutality turned a limited protest movement into a nationwide civil disobedience campaign against tyranny and corruption. In the end, after losing the support of the military, Hasina fled to India.

Today's autocrats are not invincible.

One could argue that bringing down a dictator was an easier job in Bangladesh than it would be elsewhere. No Bangladeshi party or movement had institutionalized ideological and political control over the state, security apparatus, and economy the way revolutionary communist parties had in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, the ayatollahs had in Iran, or, to a lesser extent, Hugo Chávez's "Bolivarian socialist" movement had in Venezuela. But many of the autocratic regimes that have emerged in the past decade have followed a path similar to Bangladesh's. Corrupt leaders have hollowed out democratic institutions and established authoritarian rule behind the façade of multiparty elections. Following a common playbook, they wholly dismantled democracy in El Salvador, Hungary, Nicaragua, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Venezuela. Elsewhere, similar tools have been used to degrade democracy, although whether those countries crossed the line into autocracy is debatable: recent examples include Georgia, Honduras, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Illiberal practices have also eroded the quality of democracy and the public's support for it in Botswana

and Mauritius, Africa's oldest multiparty systems. Corrupt and domineering ruling parties in Mongolia and South Africa have overseen democratic declines, although recent elections dealt severe setbacks to both. In Mexico, by contrast, a move by Andrés Manuel López Obrador as outgoing president could further erode the country's precarious rule of law. A new constitutional amendment requires all judges to be popularly elected, undermining the independence of the judiciary and putting the future of the country's democracy at risk.

Most of these countries are not full-blown dictatorships. Rather, they have joined (or gravitated toward) the ranks of what the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way term "competitive authoritarian" regimes. The description encompasses a core contradiction. The ruling elites will not commit to the constitutional norms that allow for free elections and government accountability, but the people will not tolerate the complete elimination of individual freedoms, civic pluralism, multiparty elections, and at least the possibility of parties' alternating in power. Many countries, such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania, have lingered in this halfway house for some time. Others, such as Pakistan and Thailand, do so with the added complication of militaries that hold political veto power.

The global outlook for democracy is clouded, if not downright disheartening. Political extremism, polarization, and distrust have been on the rise even in long-established liberal democracies, and doubt about the democratic commitment of one of the two major-party candidates is a major issue in the U.S. presidential race this year. But there are glimpses of sun behind the clouds. Bangladesh is not the only example. The struggle for freedom escalated in Venezuela after a stolen election in July, with the opposition presenting overwhelming evidence of its landslide victory. Thailand's military-backed regime has faced a deepening crisis of legitimacy since courts blocked the winner of the May 2023 parliamentary elections from taking power. Turkey's electoral autocracy looks increasingly worn and fragile, with the country's long-ruling strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, barely eking out a victory over a colorless opponent in the May 2023 presidential vote. Last year as well, stunning opposition victories in national elections brought a restoration of democratic practices in Poland and a historic opportunity in Guatemala to move past the country's troubled history of autocracy and corruption. And the past two election cycles in Malaysia suggest a shift toward democracy after six decades of what

seemed a stable competitive authoritarian regime: a makeshift coalition ended the six-decade rule of the Barisan Nasional coalition in 2018, and voters then made the principal opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, prime minister in 2022.

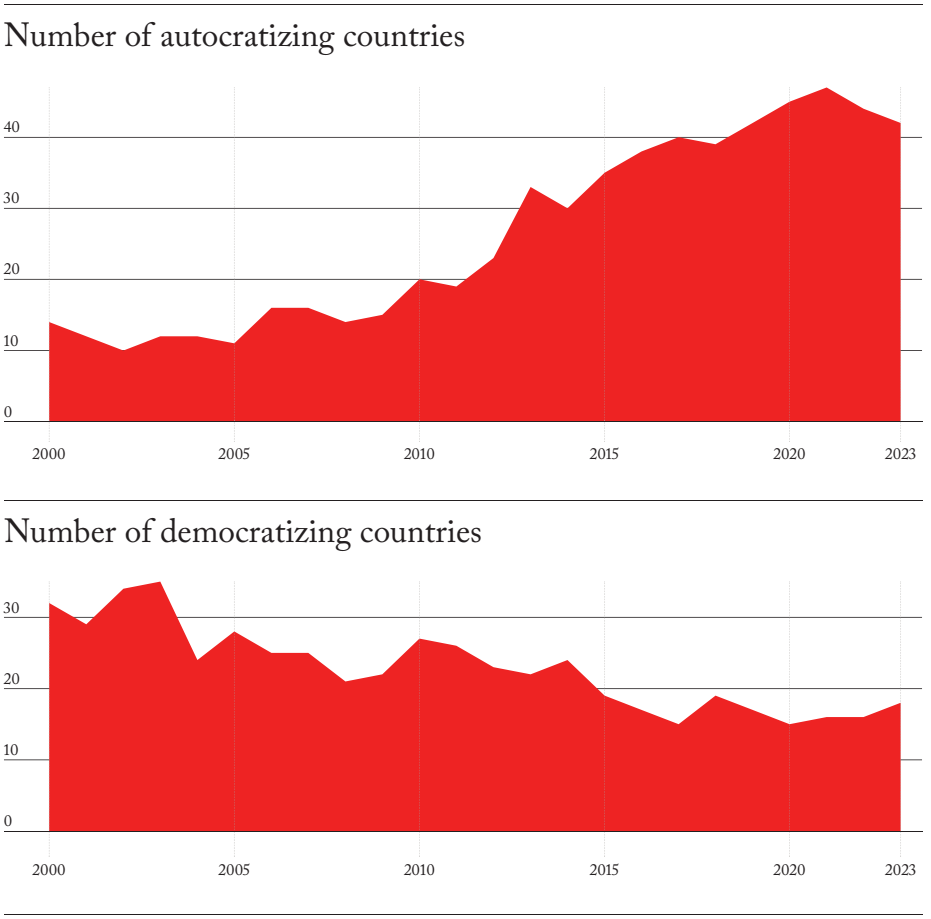
In other words, today's autocrats are not invincible. Many rely on elections, albeit deeply flawed ones, to maintain an air of legitimacy. But this means they can be defeated. Determined domestic opposition fronts, backed by the larger community of liberal democracies, can reverse the trend of global democratic backsliding. To be successful, they will need to grapple with the drivers of the antidemocratic trend, weaken the pillars that prop up the fake democracy of authoritarian populism, and apply the lessons of previous successful campaigns against authoritarian rulers. Just as autocrats employ a common set of tools to acquire and maintain power, their opponents must start following the playbook for democratic change.

DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT

Democracy's global momentum peaked soon after the end of the Cold War. For the first time in history, systems in which people could choose and replace their leaders in free and fair elections became the predominant form of government. By 2006, about three-fifths of all countries met this standard. Since then, democracy and freedom have been in steady retreat. For 18 consecutive years, the nonprofit group Freedom House—which tracks changes in political rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law and assigns countries and territories an annual "freedom score" on a scale of zero to 100—has counted more countries losing freedom than gaining it. Often, the difference is a two-to-one ratio or worse. The Swedish-based project V-Dem has identified a similar but somewhat more recent unfavorable trend.

The decline has been global. Average levels of democracy, as measured by Freedom House, V-Dem, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, have dropped in every region of the world since 2006. The changes have not always been disastrous, but they have been remarkably broad and persistent. Of the 22 sub-Saharan countries that shifted significantly on democracy scales during this period, 18 underwent declines, and of the four that improved, three—Angola, Gambia, and Zimbabwe—simply became less abusive autocracies. Globally, those three are outliers; most autocracies, including Cambodia, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Myanmar, and Russia, have become significantly more repressive.

THE CRESTING ILLIBERAL WAVE



Source: Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). Note: Countries that were neither autocratizing nor democratizing are not included in the chart.

The euphoria that attended the heady expansion of democracy from the mid-1970s to the first few years of the twenty-first century—the "third wave" of democratization—now seems a distant memory. A few places, such as Armenia, Bhutan, Colombia, Malaysia, Moldova, and Taiwan, have seen notable gains in recent years, but genuine democratic breakthroughs have been few and far between. Iran's government crushed one popular rising, the Green Movement, in 2009 and another, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, in 2022. All the Arab Spring uprisings were ultimately suppressed save for the one in Tunisia, where a fledgling democracy stumbled on until the president moved to dismiss parliament and the prime minister in 2021. The same year, Myanmar's military ended an experiment in semi-democracy when it overturned the

results of the country's 2020 elections, closed parliament, and arrested senior civilian officials, plunging Myanmar into a bloody conflict.

AUTOCRATIC ENABLERS

What sent the world spinning toward autocracy? The answer varies from country to country, but certain factors stand out. To some extent, a course correction may have been inevitable as democracy spread to many countries that lacked the economic base and rule-of-law institutions to control corruption and deliver sustained progress. Yet this does not explain every case of backsliding; some very poor countries, such as Liberia and Malawi, have largely managed to keep their democratic gains.

Another driver is the series of reputational blows that liberal democracy suffered in the first decade of the twenty-first century. First, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq tarnished the idea of promoting democracy by linking it to the use of military power to force regime change—to disastrous effect. Then, only a few years later, a global financial crisis destabilized many governments, including democratic ones. It had originated in the United States, a supposed model democracy, when the country's mortgage industry came crashing down after a decade of government failure to rein in predatory practices.

It was not just democracies that sullied their own image; illiberal actors helped them along. China used its growing wealth, propaganda, technology, and mechanisms of covert influence to promote its authoritarian governance model and dim the attractions of open societies. The Russian government worked in similar ways to denigrate democracy and destabilize democratic institutions, such as by intervening in elections. After taking office in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban crafted a deeply illiberal pseudo-democracy that appealed to far-right anti-immigrant and nationalistic forces around the world.

At first, social media enabled citizens to circumvent autocratic states' control of information and organize for democratic change. Although online platforms are still used for these purposes, their positive role has been overshadowed by the advance of authoritarian means of digital surveillance and repression and by the polarizing effects of social media algorithms, which autocracies can exploit to divide and demoralize democratic societies. Artificial intelligence is now beginning to supercharge these efforts.

The digital technology boom joined a snowballing set of global trends that undermined popular support for democracy and created fertile

ground for the rise of illiberal populist parties. Dramatic increases in income inequality in both advanced and emerging economies meant soaring wealth for a small fraction of top income earners and economic stress for much of the middle and lower classes, which became pessimistic about the future and cynical about the parties and politicians who had failed them. Inequality then fed into political polarization, which was further intensified by the accelerating movement of diverse people, ideas, and cultures across borders and by campaigns for gender and racial equality that upset long-settled hierarchies of social status. To exploit the public backlash, politicians in many advanced democracies, particularly in Europe and the United States, framed large waves of immigration as a threat to economic health, social stability, and national character. Their rhetoric severely distorted reality, but it played to people's fears.

Authoritarian populism is not a defense of the people but a fraud upon the people.

These trends coincided with a historic shift in global power. From 1960 to 1990, the U.S. share of global economic output declined from two-fifths to around one-quarter, where it remains, and Europe's share has shrunk since 1960 by roughly half. At its peak in the early 1990s, Japan accounted for nearly one-fifth of global GDP; now its share is just three percent. Meanwhile, China has risen to become the world's second-largest economy, ranking behind only the United States, and India's economy is now closing in on Germany's and Japan's. China and Russia have used corruption, coercion, and propaganda to sway and subvert open societies, and their militaries have cast long, alarming shadows in their respective neighborhoods. In sum, while Beijing and Moscow (and Tehran) bully their way into reshaping world politics, the advanced democracies, with their diminished economic and geopolitical standing, have a weakened hand and are playing it cautiously. The "unipolar moment" immediately after the Cold War, when autocrats made political decisions under the shadow of American power, is long past.

Then there is the human factor. Restraint in the exercise of power is not a natural tendency. This is why the framers of the first constitutional democracy, the United States, understood the need to check and balance power, following the Madisonian principle that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." "If you want to test a man's character," goes one aphorism, "give him power." Unencumbered by strong constitutional guardrails, most men—and, like Sheikh Hasina and Indian

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi before her, some women—who get the opportunity fail the test.

Over the past two decades, critical constraints on human behavior have lifted. Ambitious politicians have observed the rhetoric and methods their peers abroad have used to dismantle democracy, piece by piece. These aspiring autocrats have learned from examples of success and acted on those lessons, emboldened by the inability of domestic and international actors to restrain them. Once, the diffusion of political ideas helped foster democratic transitions. Today, it facilitates democratic backsliding.

Furthermore, constitutions restrain rulers only if they are enforced. When these documents are embedded in norms, incentives, and expectations, violations are rare and tend to fail because powerful actors rise to reaffirm the constitutional order out of both conviction and self-interest in sustaining the rules of the game. But when severe political polarization generates a sense of existential risk—a fear that losing an election could mean the permanent loss of political power and even one's livelihood and freedom—these dynamics change. A politician with sufficient skill and will to override constitutional norms can embark on the road to autocracy.

EXPOSING THE FRAUD

Today's autocrats mainly come to power at the ballot box, and they remain in power while maintaining a façade of competitive elections. Of the roughly 30 countries that have lost their democracies since 2006, all but three (the Sahelian coup countries—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) have followed this pattern. Holding votes gives autocrats a claim to legitimacy, but it also makes them vulnerable. The elections they stage may be deeply unfair, but the incumbent autocrat can still lose and be compelled to leave office. To restore democracy through elections, however, domestic defenders of democracy and their supporters abroad must be able to identify authoritarian populism and understand how it works.

First, authoritarian populists purport to defend "the people"—the true, virtuous majority—against a corrupt establishment that has hijacked power and exploited them. In this narrative, there are not just good and bad policies; there are good and evil people. The ruling elites and their allies are morally bankrupt and must be vanquished, even as some of those allies, especially in the business community, opportunistically throw in their lot with the populists. Drawing so stark

a divide enables the populist contender to claim a mandate to persecute opponents and purge the civil service on coming to power. Resorting to that tactic explains another key feature: populists are anti-institutional. They disparage the existing economic and political institutions, even the constitution itself, as the rotten structures of a rotten elite. Then they dismantle institutional safeguards and weaponize state power.

On a societal level, populists reject pluralism. They see no need to make space for multiple ways of thinking and believing. The country has one identity, and people who are different—by faith or ideology or national origin or sexual identity—are deviant and dangerous. They must be watched, controlled, or removed. Finally, populism is personalistic and hegemonic. Since leaders are the saviors of their countries against evil forces, they must be granted extraordinary unfettered power. Elections are no longer instruments of political accountability and constraint but rather plebiscites to revalidate leaders and their political monopolies.

Inevitably, an authoritarian populist regime becomes intolerant, xenophobic, and corrupt. More than its bigotry—perhaps even more than its violation of democratic norms—this corruption, drawn from a sense of moral entitlement to gorge on public resources, is its Achilles' heel.

The key to defeating authoritarian populism is to expose its vanity, duplicity, and venality, to show it to be not a defense of the people but a fraud upon the people. This requires independent reporting to reveal corruption. It requires using, whenever possible, countervailing institutions—regulatory bodies, auditing agencies, the judiciary, the police, the civil service, and, if there is a significant opposition presence, the legislature—to disclose and curtail abuses of the public trust. Elements of civil society, such as bar associations, trade unions, student groups, and other professional and civic organizations, can be important allies in this cause. Resistance is more effective when mobilized early; the longer populist authoritarians hold on to power, the more they chip away at institutional constraints. One reason illiberal parties did not fully subvert democracy in Poland or, at first, in Mexico, unlike in Hungary, Turkey, or Venezuela, is that they did not win sufficient majorities in parliament or through a direct vote to amend the constitution. Enough judicial and other institutional independence remained to limit the authoritarian slide. That constraint was lifted in Mexico with the June election, when López Obrador's party won enough seats in Congress to push through constitutional change.

TURNING THE TIDE

Once the authoritarian project conquers the country's institutions, resistance from within the state is no longer possible. Mass mobilization is required to defeat it. Success is much more likely if the democratic movement is peaceful and operates within legitimate institutional boundaries. Demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of nonviolent civil resistance may slow or halt the descent into authoritarianism—or even force an autocrat to flee, as seen in Bangladesh this year and in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests of 2014. But the most promising route is still through the ballot box. Repeatedly over the past decade, in countries as diverse as Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Poland, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Zambia, and—yes—the United States, democratic elections and the enforcement of term limits have curtailed an authoritarian drift. In India in May, they eroded the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's iron grip on the parliament, which might diminish the party's readiness to abuse power to stifle dissent. In Belarus, Hungary, Turkey, and Zimbabwe, opposition campaigns fell short, unable to overcome the obstacles posed by entrenched authoritarian regimes to free and fair elections. But the progress they made is notable. In Belarus's case, the opposition candidate for president likely won the 2020 election, but the dictator Alexander Lukashenko declared patently false results.

Opposition mobilization has worked in earlier eras, too. Globally, the third wave of democratization was driven in part by opposition movements that overcame repression and fraud by documenting their electoral victories through independent vote tabulation at polling stations and by rallying mass protests. The first successful "color revolution" to bring about a democratic transition after a disputed election unfolded in the Philippines in 1986, followed by Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004–5, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. In a few other cases, ruling autocrats were stunned by their electoral defeats but accepted the outcome and ceded power without the need for mass protests.

Both the earlier and more recent electoral victories for democracy share other important features. Opposition forces united behind a single electoral platform or, as in Poland last year, coordinated their parliamentary campaigns to avoid dividing the vote. In each case, the authoritarian ruling party was deeply unpopular, internally divided, or both. In some cases, external pressure from liberal democracies raised the costs of repression and encouraged defections by the elite. And the incumbents' ability to cling to power by using blatant falsehoods and blunt force was

constrained by independent media, divisions within the security forces, or the latter's unwillingness to fire on their own people.

Successful campaigns against authoritarian populists have shared some basic messaging strategies. They craft broad political appeals to mobilize the largest possible electoral base, even courting voters who supported the autocrat in the past. They seek to unify the country, not divide it. Authoritarian populists thrive on and excel at polarization; their democratic opponents must undercut that cynical strategy. They must show empathy and humility, welcoming culturally, ethnically, and ideologically diverse segments of society to join the democratic cause. In Turkey, for example, the opposition's astonishingly successful municipal election campaigns in 2019 and 2024 pursued a strategy of "radical love"—an explicit rejection of the ruling Justice and Development Party's rhetoric of hate and division. Democratic aspirants, moreover, must call out the incumbent's failures and must foreground issues that matter to ordinary voters, such as improving the country's economic performance, ending corruption, and delivering services that will improve people's lives. Their campaigns should recapture patriotism, emphasizing pride in the nation as a democracy. They should not be dour but rather present a confident vision of a better future. They should not be boring, either. A successful campaign is one infused with creativity, energy, passion, and even joy. Finally, as the political scientist Steven Fish has urged, those seeking to unseat an autocrat cannot be weak. They must project conviction, with forceful appeals to voters' interests and values. They must show that strongman rule is not the only form of strong leadership.

> Once democracy regains its momentum, even entrenched dictatorships will be under pressure.

External support is also critical. Lately, however, liberal democracies have been sitting on the sidelines as China and Russia stand behind autocrats who rig and terrorize their way to electoral victory, such as Lukashenko in Belarus in 2020, Emmerson Mnangagwa in Zimbabwe last year, and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela in July, or, in the case of Pakistan, as the military barred former Prime Minister Imran Kahn from running for parliament in the February election. Amid heightened strategic competition with an emerging axis of autocracies that includes China, Russia, and Iran, powerful democracies, particularly the United States and major European countries, are hesitant to use all the diplomatic, informational, and economic tools at their disposal to support democratic change.

To reverse the global democratic slide, the liberal democracies must get back in the game. A test of their resolve is already underway in Venezuela, where the opposition has compiled official tallies from over 80 percent of polling stations to demonstrate that its candidate, Edmundo González, defeated Maduro in a landslide in the July presidential election. With the backing of China, Russia, and Cuba, as well as the loyalty of the country's military and security establishment, Maduro has brutally repressed protests demanding that he acknowledge the results and peacefully transfer power. Ending Venezuela's authoritarian nightmare, which has already prompted more than a fifth of the population, some eight million people, to flee the country over the past decade, now requires an intense diplomatic effort. Brazil, the United States, and democracies in Latin America and Europe need to coordinate their efforts to persuade Maduro and his allies to accept the opposition's offer of immunity from prosecution in exchange for a transfer of power. Negotiations require carrots and sticks. An international coalition must not only prepare to make painful concessions on amnesty (including shielding members of the Venezuelan regime from prosecution in the United States and assuring them safe passage abroad) but also threaten the elite with punishing sanctions on their foreign assets and with blocking family visas if they continue to resist the will of the Venezuelan people.

It is rare to encounter such a glaring and well-documented example of an autocrat facing electoral defeat and a broad, passionate societal aspiration for change. Venezuela is ripe for a democratic transition, and the world's liberal democracies must do all they can to help it along.

FREEDOM REBORN

The challenges confronting democracy today are formidable. Authoritarian regimes have gone on the offensive to discredit and destabilize free societies. That they do so out of fear and concern for their own legitimacy does not make their actions any less dangerous. Making matters worse, hostile autocracies are increasingly acting in concert in a malevolent axis that features China, Russia, and Iran at the center, joined by Cuba, North Korea, and others. Protecting democracy against such forces will take strength, agility, and tenacity. The world's liberal democracies must enhance their external defenses and cooperate more closely to maintain an economic, military, and technological edge that denies antidemocratic adversaries the power to dominate global politics and undercut their rivals.

At the same time, as underscored by the recent electoral gains of extremist populist forces on both the right and the left in France and Germany, democratic leaders cannot neglect their internal defenses. Emerging and mature democracies alike need strategies to counter the siren song of illiberal populism. Even a long-standing liberal democracy can turn toward autocracy if its government does not deliver effective policies to combat crime and terrorism, manage national borders, soothe societal divisions, and ensure broad access to economic opportunity and security.

In their global outreach, liberal democracies must push back against authoritarian campaigns of disinformation and covert influence. They must make bigger and better coordinated investments in development assistance to foster the economic growth and rule of law that make countries partners for democracy rather than captives of autocracy or failed states. And to win the war of ideas, they need to disseminate democratic values, lessons of success and failure, and sources of true information.

The possibility of a democratic transition cannot be written off in any country. Autocracies live in fear that what happened to seemingly impregnable one-party communist regimes in the late twentieth century will happen to them. At any time, a leader's death or a sudden crisis can open an opportunity to sweep away an entrenched autocracy. But proponents of democracy can do more than simply wait. Competitive elections, even when they are not free and fair, are mobilizing events charged with opportunity for change. When those moments come, they must be seized not only by voters but also by other democratic countries.

Ahead of an election, democracies can provide opposition groups with the funding and training they need to conduct parallel vote tabulations. They can help political parties mount more substantive and effective campaigns. They can provide technical and financial assistance to election management bodies. They can help civil society organizations identify and counter disinformation and foreign interference on social media. They can send in independent observers during the campaign, the vote, and the vote count to fortify domestic monitoring efforts. If the opposition wins and the incumbent is reluctant to step down, democracies may need to offer concessions to the defeated autocrat in exchange for accepting the results—and potentially bring withering pressure down on the regime if it refuses.

When promising opportunities for democratization arise, as witnessed this summer in Bangladesh and Venezuela, they should command focused international attention. But the agencies and networks

that support democratic transitions should also keep an eye trained on elections in the years ahead. In many countries that have edged away from democracy or have not yet fully secured it, voters will continue to face critical choices at the ballot box. Elections will provide opportunities to advance democratic progress in countries such as Armenia and Malaysia; to reverse democratic backsliding in Botswana, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Mauritius, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Serbia; to achieve meaningful democracy in Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Thailand; to dislodge autocracy in countries where the possibility is often dismissed, such as Zimbabwe; and to someday put countries torn apart by conflict, such as Ethiopia and Sudan, on a path to peace and political accountability.

Scholars and policymakers understand what the political scientist Terry Karl once called "the fallacy of electoralism." A democratic election is only a beginning. Without honest and effective governance, a capable state, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and a vigilant civil society, democracy will not deliver the economic growth, physical infrastructure, social services, public health, human rights, and safety and security that its voters expect. Helping democratically elected governments gain access to the financing, investment, training, and direct assistance they need to serve their people effectively remains a vital task of official aid agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, and of private foundations.

After a two-decade democratic retreat, the tide must now turn. Competitive elections are not the end of the story, but they provide the most promising and abundant opportunities to move in a positive direction politically. A concerted strategy of international engagement to support free elections could blunt the march of illiberal populism, strengthen civil societies, help restore democratic vitality in pivotal countries, and yield the largest harvest of democratic transitions since the global democratic recession began. Once democracy regains its momentum, even entrenched dictatorships will be under pressure. The alternative is a continued authoritarian drift toward a world of increasing polarization, repression, conflict, and violence. A world dominated by China, Russia, Iran, and lesser autocracies unburdened by concerns for human rights and the rule of law. A world hostile to the interests and values not just of the United States but of freedom-loving people everywhere.

Elections are opportunities to defend and renew democracy. They must not be squandered.

Our Own Worst Enemies

The Violent Style in American Politics

ROBERT A. PAPE

In under a decade, violence has become a shockingly regular feature of American political life. In 2017, a left-wing extremist shot and nearly killed Republican House Majority Leader Steve Scalise and four other people. In 2021, a mass of right-wing insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to stop the Democratic president-elect, Joe Biden, from taking office. And in this year's presidential campaign, there have, as of this writing, been two thwarted assassination attempts against Republican nominee Donald Trump, along with a torrent of threats directed at political figures of all stripes. Indeed, the election in November could well be not only the most consequential in modern U.S. history but also the most dangerous.

But for all the warranted dismay, the mounting frequency of such events should not have come as a surprise, for Americans or for observers around the world. As analysts have pointed out, there are many possible

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reasons for the surge in violence. Some experts have cited the steady weakening of critical democratic institutions and, relatedly, the antidemocratic tendencies of destitute and isolated white conservatives. Others have pointed to the radicalizing effects of partisan gerrymandering and polarization. Still more have highlighted social media and militias. Many analysts have blamed Trump.

Each of these factors is indeed helping foster contentious U.S. politics. But all this commentary overlooks the predominant structural dynamic driving the new era of violence. The principal danger to the United States is not any out-of-control technology or fringe militia group. It is not economic grievances run amok. It is not even Trump, who is as much a symptom of what ails the United States as he is a cause. Instead, the greatest source of danger comes from a cultural clash over the nature of the United States' identity—one with profound implications for who gets to be a citizen. Its key actors are not isolated radicals but large numbers of ordinary Americans. According to new research carried out by my team at the University of Chicago, tens of millions of Democrats, Republicans, and independents believe that political violence is acceptable. Many of them hail from the middle and upper class, with nice homes and college educations.

The country's fight over its national identity has multiple dimensions. But the most serious is demographic change. In 1990, 76 percent of the U.S. population identified as white. In 2023, the U.S. Census Bureau put that figure at a little over 58 percent. By 2035, the share is set to fall to 54 percent; a decade later, it will dip below 50 percent. These changes have led to rising anger among conservatives, many of whom see increased ethnic diversity as an existential threat to their way of life. These voters have embraced Trump and his nationalist movement, which promise to stop such change in its tracks. Trump's exclusionary policies and rhetoric have, in turn, prompted a ferocious backlash from liberals, who embrace demographic change—or who at least fear that conservative success will cost Americans hard-won freedoms.

The anger on both sides is in keeping with historical precedents. Scholars have long understood that social change and demographic shifts are a potent catalyst for violence. And as elsewhere, the turn toward force in the United States is fundamentally populist in nature. The millions of Americans who support political violence have concluded that their country's elites are so thoroughly corrupt and that their democracy is so completely broken that riots, political assassinations, and coercive attacks are acceptable and even necessary to bring about the supposedly genuine

democracy that people deserve. This kind of thinking is endemic to all kinds of populist movements, in which people angrily latch on to a political leader, party, or movement to overcome the so-called establishment.

Unfortunately, violent populism is likely to grow more pronounced in the years ahead. Throughout history, societies in which large numbers of people support political violence are much more likely to experience unrest. There is no way to stop the United States' demographic shift, and even if there were, doing so would be a mistake: the country's diversity makes it stronger. The United States may not be on the precipice of a full-scale civil war, as some have predicted. But the country is entering an era of intense deadly conflict—one replete with politically motivated riots, attacks against minorities, and even assassinations.

DANGER ZONE

Throughout U.S. history, Americans have experienced several waves of violent populism. In the early 1920s, following a massive wave of Catholic immigration to the United States, millions of people signed up to join the nativist and white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. The KKK and its allies then carried out repeated attacks against Black people, Jews, and Catholics. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States had to contend with major political assassinations and large urban riots, many of them conducted by right-wing extremists and left-wing terrorist groups such as the Weather Underground. The violence of this era was also spurred on by social issues, including the fight to offer Black Americans equal rights, and by growing dissatisfaction with the war in Vietnam.

Still, these eras were exceptions, not the rule. For most of the country's history, political violence has been relegated to the fringes of society. During the 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of this century, the country experienced a smattering of domestic terrorist incidents—most famously the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City. People affiliated with the far-left Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front also hit farms and car dealerships. But strikes were few and far between. Aside from the Oklahoma City attack, they rarely dealt substantial damage. The real threat was foreign terrorism, as September 11 made painfully clear.

Today, however, domestic political violence is much more frequent. Statistics collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security show that domestic terrorism incidents increased by 357 percent between 2013 and 2021. According to a

The new normal: pro-Trump rioters outside the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021

study by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats, which I direct, more than 250 people have been prosecuted for threatening nearly 200 of the country's approximately 1,600 federal legislative, executive, and judicial officials from 2001 to 2023. The average number of these threats increased by 400 percent from 2017 to 2023, from four threats a year to just over 20 threats a year.

Domestic terrorism has occurred on both the left and the right. Although antigovernment and white supremacist extremists conducted 49 percent of all attacks and plots in 2021, anarchists, antifascists, and all kinds of left-wing extremists carried out 40 percent of FBI-registered incidents that year (up from 23 percent in 2020). Democratic and Republican members of Congress have been attacked almost equally since 2017.

Violent populism's bipartisan nature is even more apparent when one examines instances of collective political violence. After the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in 2020, over 15 million people took to the streets to protest racism and police brutality. Between seven and ten percent of these protests devolved into large-scale riots against police and businesses in the downtown areas of Chicago, Minneapolis, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, and over 100 other American cities—the most protracted series of political riots since the 1960s. Six months later came the January 6 ransacking

MUKUL RANJAN / HANDOUT / REUTERS

of the Capitol. As part of it, pro-Trump supporters brought a noose to the surrounding grounds and chanted "Hang Mike Pence" (then vice president) and hunted for U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. And in late 2023 through June 2024, protesters bent on ending Israel's war in Gaza stormed and seized campus buildings and physically assaulted students. The country also witnessed over 1,000 separate incidents of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in just nine months.

These numbers are, by themselves, alarming. But what is even more concerning is the broad backing violent actors appear to have. According to a January 2024 survey conducted by my team along with NORC, a prominent polling organization at the University of Chicago, over 15 percent of Americans—12 percent of Democrats, 15 percent of independents, and 19 percent of Republicans—agree that the "use of force is justified to ensure members of Congress and other government officials do the right thing." In our more recent June survey, ten percent of respondents (a number that extrapolates to 26 million American adults) agreed that "the use of force is justified to prevent Donald Trump from being president." Over 30 percent of these people own guns. Twenty percent think that when police are violently attacked, it is because they deserve it. Meanwhile, seven percent of respondents (equating to 18 million American adults) support the use of force to restore Trump to the presidency. This group has even more dangerous capabilities: 50 percent own guns, 40 percent think "people who stormed the U.S. Capitol are patriots," and 25 percent either belong to a militia or know a militia member.

These numbers alone make it clear that public support for political violence is not limited to the fringe. But to test just how mainstream support for violence runs, my team collected data on respondents' backgrounds. It found that over 80 percent of the people who back using force to either prevent or facilitate Trump's election live in metropolitan areas. Thirty-nine percent have had at least some kind of college education. Even on the political right, over 80 percent live in metropolitan areas and 38 percent have at least some college experience. In other words, they are broadly representative of the U.S. population. They cannot be derided as a bunch of yokels.

FEAR AND LOATHING

It is, of course, one thing for people to support political violence and quite another for them to carry out an attack. But they do not need to become

violent themselves in order to foster strife. As scholars have long known, public support for political violence encourages volatile people—those who may actually use force—to act on their worst impulses. The political climate may prompt such people to think their attacks are serving some greater good, or even that they will be glorified as warriors.

In fact, popular support for violence is one of the best predictors of bloodshed. Before The Troubles, in the second half of the twentieth century, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland both grew much more supportive of using force to change the region's political arrangement. In Spain, support for violence went up before the Basque nationalist Euskadi Ta Askatasuna movement began an assassination campaign against the country's authoritarian government during the same era. And West Germans were increasingly supportive of attacks before the Baader-Meinhof Gang (also known as the Red Army Faction) conducted a series of bombings and assassinations in the 1970s.

Unfortunately, the U.S. population may well become even more tolerant of political violence in the years ahead. According to our June survey, the Americans most opposed to violent populism are those over the age of 59. They are three times less likely to support violence to restore Trump to the presidency than those between the ages of 30 and 59. Their pacifying effect will therefore wane with time, especially if the next generations of young people remain as supportive of violence as their predecessors are. Although it is possible that today's youth will grow more opposed to violence as they age, it is far from guaranteed. Time does not inherently deradicalize. About ten percent of those who assaulted the Capitol, after all, were 60 years old or older.

But perhaps the main reason to expect more political violence has to do with a different type of demography: race. The United States is set to transition from a white-majority to a white-minority society by 2045. That transition will take place in all 50 states, and it will be especially pronounced in the younger portion of the population. It will also be visible in politics. Indeed, it already is. Today, a quarter of House and Senate members identify as nonwhite, making them the most diverse group of representatives in American history.

The United States' historic transition from a white-majority to a genuinely multiracial democracy is producing social changes with profound political implications. This power shift in politics, media, and major business and community organizations is the taproot of rising cultural backlash among conservatives—epitomized by Trump and his movement.

The shift is, therefore, also the basis for counterreactions among liberals both hopeful for change and fearful that conservative success will obstruct progress, reverse economic and social gains, and establish a political system that does not represent everyone. Both sides' fears do not have to accord with reality to fuel attacks. Among conservatives and liberals alike, the consequences of political change need only exist in peoples' minds.

The fact that abstract demographic shifts can lead to panic may be jarring, but it should not come as a surprise. Throughout history, social and demographic change have produced grievances (real and imagined), tensions, and political unrest. As the comparative political scientist Donald Horowitz wrote, when "majorities within a country become minorities . . . anxiety flows from a diffuse danger of exaggerated dimensions." People begin to fear they will come under siege in their own homes and be dominated by strangers. Such concerns drove violence in Brazil, Lebanon, the Balkans, and parts of the former Soviet Union, among numerous other states.

Americans, particularly liberal ones, may fancy themselves as tolerant enough to avoid acting on ethnic biases. But this pattern of thinking afflicts them just as much as it does their peers elsewhere. In separate experimental studies among Americans and Canadians, the psychologists Robert Outten, Jennifer Richeson, and Maureen Craig reported that exposure to information about white demographic decline increased white sympathy for other whites and increased feelings of fear and anger toward minorities. These sentiments were most pronounced among white conservatives, yet they were evident to a small degree among whites who identify as liberal, as well. Research has also shown that the United States' demographic shift accounts for the rapid rise of Trump in 2015 and 2016. (During the 2016 presidential campaign, both Trump and the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, clashed over issues tied to race, gender, and cultural identity far more than did previous presidential candidates.) Similarly, studies have illustrated that nationalist and multicultural media such as Fox News, Newsmax, and MSNBC have become far more popular as U.S. demographics change. And according to multiple scholars, white American racial prejudice and solidarity have gone up as the share of Americans who are white has gone down.

My team's research shows that anger about diversity also directly predicts support for violence. According to the January 2024 study, Americans who believe that "the Democratic Party is trying to replace the current electorate with new people, more obedient voters from the Third

World"—the so-called great replacement theory—are six times more likely to support using force to restore Trump to the presidency. Americans who believe in the great replacement are also five times more likely to think that "people who stormed the Capitol on January 6 were patriots." They are three times more likely to either belong to a right-wing militia or know someone who does.

There is no perfect parallel to the great replacement on the left. But the January study did ask respondents whether they believe "America is a systemically racist country against nonwhite people and has always been." People who answered in the affirmative were roughly two times more likely to support using force to stop Trump than were those who did not. These respondents were also four times more likely to believe that "when the police are attacked, it is because they deserve it." They were one and a half times more likely to think "the use of force is justified to restore the federal right to abortion."

ROUGH RIDE

These findings do not mean the United States is headed for a classic ethnic conflict, as happened in Northern Ireland and Bosnia. After all, many white people believe the United States suffers from systemic racism and want to end it. There are Asian, Black, and Hispanic Trump supporters. American political violence is unlikely to manifest in the form of civil war, at least understood as two rival armies standing toe to toe on battlefields or as hundreds of thousands of armed insurgents roaming the country. Such wars are more likely when a state's political, social, economic, and geographic cleavages generally converge so that political parties, economic classes, and geographic areas all broadly align. And although the overlap between them is increasing, the United States' racial, economic, social, and geographic factors remain largely divergent. There are Democrats and Republicans in pockets throughout the country, in different economic classes, and in different ethnic groups.

To see why convergence matters, compare the circumstances in the United States today with those in Bosnia in the 1990s. The collapse and fragmentation of the Yugoslav state coincided with growing social, economic, and ultimately political cleavages between Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, as well as with major economic problems. Together, these forces led to a surge in nationalist tensions that produced warfare and mass ethnic violence against civilians. The United States, by contrast, is not on the verge of government collapse. Its economy remains strong.

Although the most fantastical forms of violence may not come to pass, Americans must be prepared for an extraordinary period of unrest. Their country will probably experience years of serious political assassination attempts, political riots, and other instances of collective, group, and individual violence. There could be new militia groups, violence over numerous issues in cities and on college campuses, and outbursts related to elections. Such attacks could even break elements of the American political system, or at least yield institutional changes. Political violence, for example, may lead to serious delays in counting and certifying votes in future elections. It could push U.S. politics in an increasingly autocratic direction as Americans become less confident that elections truly reflect the will of the people and become more open to strongman alternatives. It could also pressure Washington to grant states more autonomy over social and cultural matters. The Supreme Court has already devolved questions of abortion rights to states.

The main point of contestation will, naturally, be who gets to be an American and what rights U.S. citizenship confers. The 2024 election has been a stark illustration of this fact—a battle between the strongly nativist Trump and the Democrat Kamala Harris, a progressive, biracial woman. It has featured radical, determined minorities who support violence to get Trump into office and those who support violence to stop it.

Unlike Trump, Democratic Party leaders have shown little willingness to mobilize progressives to embrace violence in response to electoral losses. But the left is still capable of responding virulently to outcomes it dislikes. If Washington undertakes a high-profile effort to arrest, detain, and deport massive numbers of illegal immigrants, radicals could rally to their defense, including by staging mass protests that may turn violent, and then not back down. They may be especially likely to act if the government sends federal or federally deputized armed agents into so-called sanctuary cities—cities that limit cooperation with federal immigration officers. After the Department of Homeland Security sent agents to arrest, detain, and prosecute protesters in Portland, Oregon, in July 2020, demonstrators confronted agents with wooden shields and other objects, breaking through barricades and assaulting police stations.

OUT OF MANY

To avert an era of politically motivated riots and attacks, Americans will need to find some common ground on race and immigration. This will be extremely difficult. Race and ethnicity are social constructs, so

activists and leaders can try to help immigrants quickly integrate into U.S. society and to persuade white Americans that they have much in common with their nonwhite counterparts. But this process is unlikely to work fast enough to avoid an era of violent populism. Group boundaries and social identities may not be set in stone, but they are hardly putty. It typically requires generations for new immigrant groups to integrate and for white people to see them as no different from themselves. It took more than a century after Irish immigrants began flooding the United States for the country to elect its first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy.

Americans must be prepared for an extraordinary period of unrest.

Perhaps the United States can paper over these divisions with strong economic growth. Americans, after all, routinely rank the economy as the most important issue. But if history is any guide, expanding gross national product is also unlikely to be a panacea. The 1920s—when the Ku Klux Klan exploded in membership—is also known as the Roaring Twenties, as the United States economy grew at an average of over four percent each year. Total wealth in the United States more than doubled from 1920 to 1929. Similarly, the violence and instability of the 1960s occurred when U.S. economic growth averaged five percent annually. In both eras, the violence did not stop until questions of identity were decisively resolved. In the 1920s, that meant victory for the nationalists: Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively closed the United States' borders. Even then, anti-Black violence continued. That did not plummet until federal legislation in the 1960s put a stop to legal segregation and discrimination, handing victory to progressives. The government also repressed organized violent groups, which lost much of their popular support and crumbled rather than resurged. Unrest still proceeded, on and off, until the United States stopped conscripting men to fight in Vietnam.

Today, a hard end to immigration would not resolve America's challenges. Even closing the U.S. borders entirely would merely slow the process of whites becoming a minority by roughly a decade. Such a solution would also be unacceptable: liberals are right that a truly multiracial democracy would be good for the country. It will most obviously be good for minority groups, who deserve equal treatment. But white Americans have as much to gain as others from a future in which everyone is judged by their character and not their skin color. There is plenty to celebrate about the country becoming a more perfect union.

Still, less draconian immigration policies could reduce tensions. Policymakers should find bipartisan ways to decrease illegal immigration, aiming to at least return to the levels under the Obama administration. That means dedicating considerable resources to enforcing current laws and keeping the nation's borders secure. It also means maintaining sensible pathways to citizenship for the vast majority of immigrants. Adopting such policies would put the White House and Congress on better footing by showing that it is possible to effectively balance the country's economic needs, social responsibilities, safety, and political concerns. Better immigration rules would also build good faith and illustrate that politicians can pursue long-term solutions to the United States' problems.

Ultimately, Americans should stay hopeful. Most of them, after all, continue to abhor political violence—even if a significant minority now support it. According to the June survey, 70 percent of Republicans oppose political violence and want leaders to condemn its use. So do over 80 percent of Democrats. Elected officials at all levels of government should listen to their constituents and curtail incendiary rhetoric. Trump, of course, shows few signs of doing so. But the broad condemnation of political violence by both Democrats and Republicans in the aftermath of the attempts on his life has set an important precedent that all other leaders can and should emulate.

There are other reasons to believe that the Republican Party's leaders might, eventually, embrace a less hostile line. The nature of the U.S. political system can sometimes encourage candidates in primaries to take radical positions in order to appeal to the base, but because the United States has just two viable parties, their candidates perform best in general elections when they reach out to multiple groups. In recent years, the Republican Party has been able to win some elections without moderating. Its candidates would surely have more success, however, if they decided to be more inclusive—a lesson that, eventually, its leaders could accept. Ultimately, the two-party system is one of the United States' great shock absorbers for social change. It may lead to a soft landing as the country transitions to a multiracial democracy.

Yet for now, the country's fever is unlikely to break. Support for political violence has gone mainstream. The chief reason—demographic change—is not going away. And there is no easy or just way to reconcile conservatives' and liberals' visions. Political trends do not move in straight lines, and predicting the future can be a fool's errand. But it is safe to say that the United States has a rough road ahead.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Upside to Uncertainty on Taiwan

How to Avert Catastrophe at the World's Most Dangerous Flash Point

JAMES B. STEINBERG

The Struggle for Taiwan: A History of America, China, and the Island Caught Between
BY SULMAAN WASIF KHAN. Basic Books, 2024, 336 pp.

By almost universal agreement, the Taiwan Strait has emerged as the most combustible flash point in the world. In recent years, China has dramatically increased the scale and intensity of its military operations around Taiwan, responding to what it claims are provocations by the island's government and the United States. Taiwan, in turn, has increased its defense budget and enhanced its military preparedness, while the United States has upped the pace of its military activity in the region. Pundits, scholars, and even government officials spin out a dizzying array of apocalyptic scenarios involving Taiwan, from economic blockades that crash the global economy to a superpower nuclear war, whether triggered by an intentional invasion of Taiwan or an accidental collision of ships or aircraft. In a 2022 phone call with U.S. President Joe Biden, Chinese leader Xi Jinping issued a stark warning about the island: "Those who play with fire will perish by it."

Not surprisingly, this sense of impending doom has spawned a flurry of policy prescriptions to avoid calamity. Some have called on the United States to make an unequivocal commitment to defend Taiwan (including with nuclear weapons, if need be) and declare that the island is not part of China. Others have focused on enhancing Taiwan's defenses, offering vivid metaphors such as turning the island into a hard-to-swallow "porcupine" or creating an impassable "boiling moat" around it. A much smaller number of analysts have advocated cutting a deal with Beijing in which Washington ends its commitment to defending Taiwan and the island is left to fend for itself.

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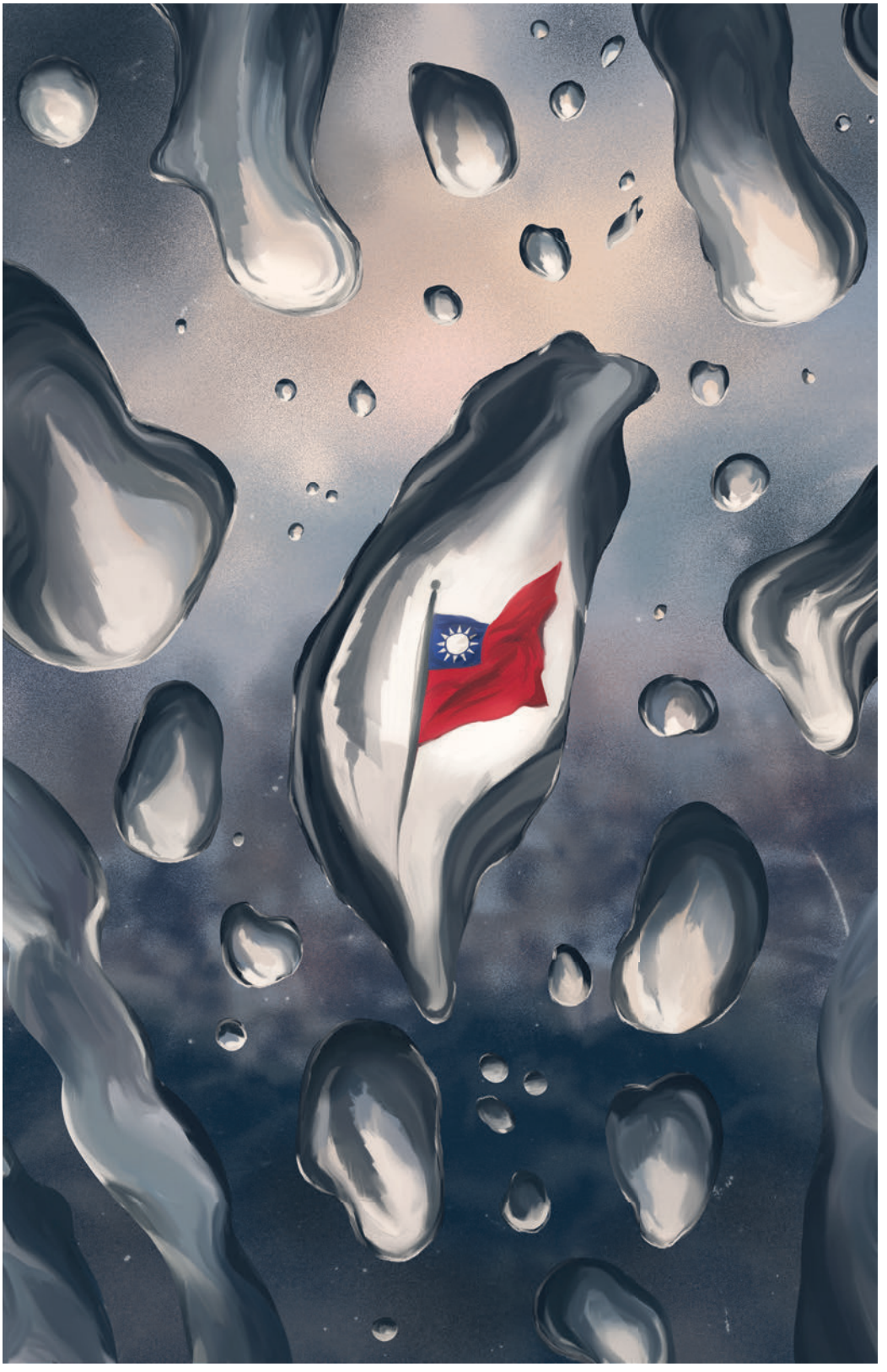

Illustration by John Lee

Although the proponents of each boldly assert the superiority of their approach, the reality is that all these proposals are fraught with risk and uncertainty. All present difficult tradeoffs between competing U.S. interests and values.

How did the United States find itself in this predicament, and would a better understanding of the past help it chart a future course through the minefield? This is the motivating question behind Sulmaan Wasif Khan's thought-provoking new book, *The Struggle for Taiwan*. Khan, a historian, makes his answer clear at the outset, arguing that "a full understanding of the triangular relationship between America, China, and Taiwan is needed if we are to avoid catastrophe."

In providing his account of that relationship, Khan argues that "confusion has played the starring role in this tale so far." U.S. and Chinese policies toward Taiwan, he elaborates, have hardly been informed by "grand strategy or even planning." In his view, the real story is one of repeated missed opportunities by all sides. He criticizes presidents of both parties for failing to act boldly to definitively resolve Taiwan's status, an outcome that he believes would have permanently eased the tensions that have dogged U.S.-Chinese relations. That prescription looks appealing in hindsight. But Khan underappreciates how the creative use of ambiguity and compromise allowed Washington to manage its fraught relationship with Beijing. Far from fueling conflict, uncertainty created the conditions for decades of peace and prosperity in East Asia.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Khan's tale of American blunders begins with the 1943 Cairo conference. It was there that, as Allied leaders planned the postwar world, President Franklin Roosevelt decided to promise Taiwan, then still occupied by Japan, to Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader of China. Roosevelt could instead have pushed for a UN or U.S. trusteeship, which according to Khan would have prevented Taiwan from becoming a political football in the civil war between Chiang's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists. From there, Khan sees a series of further missteps. President Harry Truman decided on neutrality between the competing claims of Chiang and Mao, satisfying neither side during the Korean War and setting the stage for the prolonged tensions between the United States and China. The "divided, confused" administration of President Dwight Eisenhower settled on a Taiwan policy that was "a mess of indecision and militarism," leading it to miss an opportunity for a compromise on Taiwan in which the United States would have recognized Communist control of mainland China.

Even President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, normally heralded for their genius in orchestrating the U.S. opening to China, are faulted for a lack of strategic clarity. Khan criticizes the Shanghai Communiqué, a joint statement issued at the end of Nixon's 1972 trip to China, for "fudging the Taiwan question." By failing to publicly state what Kissinger had privately assured the Chinese—that the United States would not stand in the way of the likely political evolution of Taiwan toward unification with the mainland—Washington, Khan contends, missed its "best chance to return the island" to Beijing and settle the matter once and for all. Only President

Jimmy Carter is singled out for praise, for his "decisiveness" in scrapping the U.S. defense pact with Taiwan in favor of recognizing Communist China. But Congress pulled him back when it passed the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which asserted that any threat to Taiwan would be "a grave concern to the United States" and provided for continued arms sales to the island. For Khan, the act left Washington "hopelessly confused about how committed to Taiwan's defense it really was."

In Khan's view, the fatal flaw in U.S. policy has been its failure to go either all in for or all out against Taiwanese independence. There were opportunities to pick a side, but they were passed up. In a July 1949 memo, the American diplomat George Kennan argued that the United States (by itself or with others) should forcibly evict the Nationalists from Taiwan and establish an international regime that would hold a plebiscite to determine its future—an idea that had been mooted two years earlier by Truman's envoy to China, General Albert Wedemeyer. The plan never came to fruition, but Khan argues that the Communists might well have gone along with it. It "seemed extreme at the time," he writes, but "would certainly have been easier than dealing with what followed."

Khan also faults China's leaders for repeated missteps. He cites their continued insistence that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, even though they long ago acquiesced to the independence of Mongolia, which was also once an imperial outpost of the Qing dynasty. He also points to the tone-deaf threats to the Taiwanese people made by Zhu Rongji, China's premier from 1998 to 2003, which only strengthened the arguments of Taiwanese who opposed unification with China. "Had Beijing steered clear of threats and bluster," Khan writes, "it might conceivably have achieved peaceful unification."

Khan sketches a series of counterfactuals that could have led to a more clear-cut—and, in his opinion, more stable—outcome. He doesn't seem to care much which way things had gone, as long as Washington had picked one decisively. For him, had the United States fully embraced Taiwanese independence (at Cairo or during the Chinese Civil War) or fully acquiesced to Beijing's claim (at the time of the Communists' 1949 victory or during the rapprochement of the 1970s), it would have been spared the conundrum it faces today: opposing China's efforts to coerce reunification yet skittish about committing to Taiwan's defense and risking a war with Beijing. Khan is particularly critical of the many times U.S. administrations have failed to speak with one voice on Taiwan policy, not to mention the further muddles made when Congress has also gotten involved.

Of course, for those who defend U.S. policy, uncertainty is a virtue, not a vice. Often derided as "strategic ambiguity," Washington's approach is in fact a nuanced strategy that has promoted prudence on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, by declining to specify under what circumstances it might intervene militarily in a conflict between Taipei and Beijing. Accordingly, U.S. policy toward Taiwan lacks categorical obligations. There is no collective defense commitment, à la NATO's Article 5 or the U.S.-Japanese security treaty. Rather, in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States commits to treat "any

effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means" as "a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." The act also commits the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive military equipment.

The Taiwan Relations Act is at the core of the United States' long-standing "one China" policy. Under this policy, Washington provides Taiwan no official diplomatic recognition, but U.S. officials work closely with their Taiwanese counterparts on a variety of issues, from public health and economics to, increasingly, military and security matters. It offers no support for Taiwan's membership in the UN or international organizations for which "statehood" is a criterion, but it does advocate for the island to play an active role in many multilateral arrangements and encourages other countries to have full diplomatic ties with Taiwan even if the United States doesn't. Perhaps most important, the policy is built on the principle that Taiwan's ultimate status must be resolved through peaceful means and enjoy the support of its people.

IN DEFENSE OF AMBIGUITY

Khan isn't the only one bothered by strategic ambiguity; a growing number of pundits and former officials have also called for a shift to a more categorical policy of military and diplomatic support. On a number of occasions, Biden himself has explicitly stated that the United States would be willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan, although other officials subsequently qualified those statements, insisting that there had been no change in U.S. policy.

Khan has a point in questioning the U.S. approach. Ambiguity has its costs. As the Texas political activist and pundit Jim Hightower once observed, "There's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos." Muddling through, kicking the can down the road, splitting the difference—all can easily be seen as evidence of a lack of strategic clarity, tactics for getting by in the short term that ignore the long-term consequences of indecision. Ambiguity can embolden adversaries and unsettle friends.

But to say that ambiguity is often wrong does not mean that it is always so. There is something to the essayist H. L. Mencken's aphorism "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong." Particularly when the United States has multiple interests at stake, it is simply not possible to craft a policy that maximizes all of them. Washington has a compelling interest in supporting those who fight for human rights and democracy, as the courageous citizens of Taiwan have done for decades, first against the authoritarian Nationalist governments and now in the face of pressure from Beijing. It has a strong interest in the peaceful settlement of disputes and the rejection of political, economic, and military coercion. And it is rightly concerned about China's potential control of the strategic waters around Taiwan and of Taiwan itself. But the United States also has a compelling interest in avoiding a war, or even merely the profound economic disruption that would result from an escalating dispute with China. And many global challenges, from climate change to public health to the risks of AI, require U.S. cooperation with China.

Khan reaches back into history to argue that Taiwan never really was part

of China, contrary to official Chinese statements today that assert that it "has been China's territory since ancient times." Rather, he contends, the island was merely a colonial possession of the Qing dynasty and, as such, should have been allowed to benefit from the United States' Wilsonian commitment to national self-determination and the broader post–World War II push for decolonization. It's a nice debating point, one with considerable resonance in a country that was born by casting off colonial rule. But the United States has always wavered in its support for separatist movements. Compare, for example, its formal recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 with its continuing refusal to support a similar claim by Iraqi Kurds. Often, U.S. leaders have favored political autonomy rather than de jure independence as a more prudent course.

When one looks at what has transpired in Taiwan over the past 80 years that Khan chronicles, it is rather mystifying why he and other critics consider U.S. Taiwan policy such a failure. Over that period, Taiwan was liberated from Japanese occupation, overcame authoritarian rule, and experienced breakneck economic growth. The island now features a vibrant democracy, ranks 14th globally in per capita income, and leads the world in one of its most crucial sectors, semiconductor manufacturing. Granted, the situation today is perilous, but seen from the perspective of 1943, where Khan begins his saga, it's hard to argue that the outcome wasn't a pretty good one for Taiwan—and the United States.

A powerful case in point demonstrating the value of the United States' calibrated approach to Taiwan came in 1995 and 1996, when China fired missiles close to Taiwan to intimidate its leaders. To deter Beijing without provoking it, President Bill Clinton dispatched U.S. aircraft carrier groups near Taiwan but not into the Taiwan Strait. Khan acknowledges that this response successfully defused the crisis. "Had the United States put the carriers in the Taiwan Strait during the crisis (as is commonly misremembered), Beijing might well have found itself unable to back down," he writes, adding that the situation could have "escalated all the way to general warfare." Through this measured reaction, as well as a subsequent reaffirmation of the "one China" policy, the Clinton administration was able to create the context for a reengagement with China. That, in turn, led not only to more stable U.S.-Chinese relations but also facilitated Taiwan's admission to the World Trade Organization and its continued pursuit of democratic reforms.

Given strategic ambiguity's track record, it shouldn't be surprising that the policy was pursued by presidents of both parties, including Ronald Reagan, who on taking office abandoned his earlier support for restoring the security guarantee for Taiwan, and George W. Bush, who made a similar course correction during his presidency. Although Khan is right to force readers to think critically about past choices, judged overall, U.S. policy toward Taiwan surely warrants a high passing grade, despite all the blemishes.

RUNNING OUT OF TIME?

But past performance is no guarantee of future results. U.S. policy has succeeded in part because all sides were content to push off a definitive resolution to

the future, believing that time was on their side. For decades, China's leaders hoped that its growing economic dynamism and prosperity would make unification increasingly attractive to the people of Taiwan and more acceptable to the United States. This belief was reinforced by an observation Kissinger made to the Chinese during a 1971 meeting in Beijing: "As a student of history, one's prediction would have to be that the political evolution is likely to be in the direction which Prime Minister Zhou Enlai indicated to me. . . . We will not stand in the way of basic evolution." From the U.S. perspective, the passage of time was thought likely to narrow the differences between Taiwan and the mainland, so that the two sides could come to an understanding in which Taiwan could preserve its democracy and respect for human rights, perhaps under the rubric of "one country, two systems."

Today, many argue, the situation is far different, with none of the three parties believing that time is on its side. From the perspective of some in the United States and in Taiwan, China's growing military and economic might means that Beijing will soon have the capability to prevail in a military conflict; even today, many argue, a successful defense of the island would be problematic. According to this camp, only by dramatically enhancing deterrence through an unambiguous commitment to Taiwan's defense, including both military and political support, can a takeover be forestalled. From the perspective of China, political trends in Taipei and Washington are moving in the wrong direction. In January, Taiwan's voters elected Lai Ching-te as president, a leader whom Beijing considers much more pro-independence than his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen. That, coupled with Congress's increasingly militant support for Taiwan, means that the island is at risk of slipping from Beijing's grasp. In a mirror image of the U.S. debate, hawks in China advocate accelerating their country's military capability to subdue Taiwan.

It is this very mirror imaging that contributes to the current sense of crisis, a familiar pattern in which anxiety and insecurity lead one side to take preemptive measures that induce even more fear on the other side—what international relations theorists call the "security dilemma" or the "spiral model." The more China flexes its muscles toward Taiwan, the more the United States promotes arms sales and Congressional visits to Taiwan to bolster deterrence. And the more it does that, the more China feels the need to escalate its threats to forestall future actions.

It's easy to assert that strengthening deterrence by granting Taiwan a firm military guarantee would offer the best of all worlds, protecting Taiwan's democracy while avoiding war by convincing China that any military venture would fail. Maybe—like all counterfactuals, it is impossible to disprove—but maybe not. This theory implies that China will use force only if it can be sure it will prevail, but who is to say that faced with an increasingly remote possibility of peaceful unification, China's leaders won't simply roll the dice? Even if the United States and Taiwan concluded that their combined forces were sufficient to repulse an attack, it is hardly certain that China's generals would share that bleak assessment and convey it to their civilian overseers.

Equally important, if Taiwan became more confident in the efficacy of deterrence, its leaders might feel more freedom to push the bounds of sovereignty and independence.

KEEPING THE PEACE

For all these reasons, there are risks to clearing up ambiguity about how the United States might respond to Chinese provocations. Instead, the United States is right to continue its long-standing policy of effectively making a "threat that leaves something to chance," in the memorable phrase of the economist and game theorist Thomas Schelling, generating uncertainty on one side about how the other will respond. Despite its ambiguity, then, there is much to commend in Taiwanese leaders' focus on preserving "the status quo," a term used by Lai both during the campaign and in his inaugural address. This approach is the very opposite of the lesson Khan draws from history. But not surprisingly, it is the one that most of Taiwan's people prefer. In a February 2024 poll, more than 80 percent of respondents favored maintaining the status quo, whether temporarily or permanently.

Given the suspicions on all sides, maintaining the status quo is no easy feat. China has been reluctant to embrace such an approach, reflecting its growing unwillingness to accept indefinitely postponing unification. Nonetheless, each side can take concrete steps to shore up the status quo. China could withdraw its objections to the participation of Taiwan in international organizations in which statehood is not required and accept it as an informal participant in organizations in which statehood is required. (Beijing has taken that approach in the past; it accepted Taipei as an observer in the World Health Assembly from 2009 to 2016 and as a guest at the International Civil Aviation Organization Assembly in 2013.) Taiwan, in turn, could suspend its flagging efforts to gain formal diplomatic recognition from other countries. Each side could agree to respect tacit, if not formal, limits on military activities, such as staying on its side of the midline in the Taiwan Strait when conducting air operations. Most important, China could agree to resume dialogue with Taiwan's government—which was halted after the election of Lai's predecessor in 2016—in light of Lai's stated commitment to the status quo.

Perhaps the most powerful lesson of Khan's book concerns agency. Repeatedly, Khan reminds readers that the path to the present was not inevitable but was rather the product of choices made by leaders in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington. That history should serve as both a cautionary tale and motivation for leaders in all three capitals. Conflict in the Taiwan Strait is neither inevitable nor unlikely, but avoiding it depends on prudent policy choices by each of the three governments. As Khan and other critics of U.S. policy toward Taiwan are fond of pointing out, decades of ambiguity and compromise have left neither Taiwan nor China nor the United States fully satisfied. But almost by definition, any outcome that fully satisfied one party would be unacceptable to another, so Washington's goal should be to find a status quo that all sides can live with. It's a fine balancing act, but that is what diplomacy is all about.

REVIEW ESSAY

Whose Ronald Reagan?

Fighting Over the Legacy of a Conservative Hero in the Era of Trump

SUSAN B. GLASSER

Reagan: His Life and Legend
BY MAX BOOT. Liveright, 2024, 880 pp.

When the party of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and two George Bushes met in Milwaukee this summer to renominate former President Donald Trump, it was the first time Republicans had chosen the same candidate in three elections since Richard Nixon and the first time since the GOP's founding in the nineteenth century that it had ever done so in three consecutive races. A large percentage of Republicans—around half of them, according to surveys conducted during Trump's presidency—now consider themselves more supporters of him personally than of the party generally. They have followed Trump to places once unthinkable in American politics, from going along with his assault on the legitimacy of the 2020 election to the abandonment of what were until recently core GOP principles, such as support for free trade. The current Republican Party is in essence the Trump Party, a takeover made all the more remarkable considering Trump's past as a party-switching political chameleon, with little discernible ideology beyond a relentless focus on self-promotion, and a lifelong suspicion that the United States has been a perpetual mark on the world stage, getting ripped off by grasping allies and adversaries alike.

Trump's current political dominance of his party, however, coexists with a somewhat more complicated reality. When the Pew Research Center asked Americans last year to name the best presidents of recent decades, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents were almost evenly divided, between the 37 percent who favored Trump and the 41 percent who continued to believe that

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the honor should remain with Ronald Reagan, whose conservative revolution at the end of the Cold War reshaped Washington and his own party for a generation. The Trump takeover, it turns out, is not entirely complete.

If anything, Trump's rise over these last contentious nine years has spurred a fight to claim—or rewrite—Reagan's legacy, becoming a revealing proxy for the broader and still very much unresolved debate over the future of the GOP: Is Trump's "America first" reboot a decisive break from the muscular internationalism of the Reaganesque past? Or has Trump, despite his embrace of market-distorting tariffs, fear-mongering about immigrants, and abiding skepticism of entangling overseas alliances, not genuinely altered the party's beliefs much at all? In this 2024 election year, it seems as if every day one faction or the other invokes Reagan's name in an effort to legitimize its view of Trump, whatever that may be. "Trump delivered on Reagan's promises—he's the true heir conservatives seek," gushed the headline on a column in the *New York Post* pitching for a hagiographic new biopic about Reagan starring Dennis Quaid.

For a certain faction of die-hard Reaganites, generally drawn from the party's most hawkish camp, the effort to define Trump as one of their own requires contortions of fact and argument to transform the ex-president, with his rants against free trade and cartoonish admiration for global strongmen including China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, into Reagan's second coming. Recently, in these pages, Trump's fourth and final national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, repeatedly invoked Reagan's mantra of "peace through strength" in outlining a foreign policy agenda for a prospective second Trump term. Many of the policies that O'Brien suggested, however, such as support for Ukraine's defending itself against Russia's invasion, are unlikely to be embraced by a politician who praised Putin's strategic "genius" in attacking Ukraine and who has opposed the billions of dollars in aid sent to Kyiv by the Biden administration. For O'Brien and many other conservatives, the Republican Party is and must always remain the party of Reagan. If the evidence suggests that this is no longer the case—well, then the evidence is just wrong.

Perhaps even more revealing, however, are those Republicans who openly reject Reagan as a model for the modern GOP. These are generally hard-line nationalist populists, such as Curt Mills, executive director of the magazine *The American Conservative*, who dismisses the 2024 wave of Reagan nostalgia as "boomer porn." In a conversation with the author Jacob Heilbrunn, Mills argued that "Reagan got the big issues of the future wrong—foreign policy, trade, and immigration." (Trump himself, it should be noted, is likely a subscriber to this point of view, once bragging to a team of pro-Trump authors that he ought to get credit for accomplishments that made him a president "far greater than Ronald Reagan.") Trump's MAGA movement, in this telling, is not the successor to Reaganism so much as it is a long-overdue repudiation of it.

Growing numbers of Democrats and Trump-critical Republicans now agree, which has led to some head-spinning scrambling of the ideological order. "Listen to President Reagan," Leon Panetta, who served as CIA director and secretary of defense under President Barack

Obama, told the Democratic National Convention in August in Chicago, invoking a 1984 speech delivered by Reagan at a D-Day commemoration in France: "Isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments." The audience cheered the Reagan reference. Between that and all the American flag waving and spontaneous chants of "USA! USA!," observers might have had a hard time figuring out which party's convention they were watching.

When the former House Republican leader Liz Cheney endorsed the Democratic presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, she made the case that she was doing so, not despite, but because she remains an old-style Reagan conservative. "There is absolutely no chance that Ronald Reagan would be supporting Donald Trump," she said. John Lehman, who served as secretary of the U.S. Navy under Reagan, made the same point in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed this spring. He argued that Trump was an "insult" to Reagan's legacy rather than the heir of it, pointing in particular to Trump's "naked admiration" for U.S. enemies such as Putin, his undermining of the NATO alliance, and his penchant for trash-talking the United States—a habit that would have been anathema to Reagan, whose stock-in-trade of gauzy patriotism and sunny optimism was captured in "Morning in America," the 1984 campaign slogan with which he will always be associated.

So whose Reagan is the real Reagan? Enter Max Boot's timely, authoritative, and admirably evenhanded new biography, *Reagan: His Life and Legend.* The decade that Boot, a national security expert who holds a fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations named for Reagan's UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, spent writing this book coincided with Trump's ascent, during which the GOP rejected many of the tenets of Reagan's Republicanism. In reaction, Boot quit the party, renouncing it in a 2018 jeremiad, *The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right.* He hardly mentions his evolution in the new book, but one has to wonder whether the project was at least in part a personal exercise aimed at examining his own hero worship of Reagan—which began in the 1980s, when Boot was a young and recent Soviet immigrant to the United States cheering the president's confrontation with the "evil empire"—and whether it is still justified today.

Boot's conclusion may anger all sides in the debate. Reagan, he acknowledges, was a pragmatic chief executive whose two terms at the twilight of the Cold War were notably successful. But he was also a far-right ideologue whose rise prefigured the Republican Party's disastrous turn toward demagoguery and dishonesty in the Trump years. In a recent essay in *The Washington Post* drawn from his book, Boot wrote: "The real Reagan, I realized, was both much more ideological *and* much more pragmatic than most people understand. The former quality made possible his rapid political rise; the latter made possible his lasting success in office."

AN UNPLEASANT FORESHADOWING

A decade ago, Boot would likely have spent more time admiring Reagan's traditional Republican hawkishness; today, however, he is far more interested in the qualities that enabled Reagan to work

Here's Ronnie! Reagan giving a radio address in Washington, D.C., November 1985

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

across Cold War–era divisions in both domestic and international politics to get things done. This record is "a lesson," Boot wrote in *The Washington Post*, "for modern-day politicians in both parties—and in particular for so many Republicans who regard 'compromise' as a synonym for 'betrayal.'" This view of Reagan, of course, is not the reason for the continuing hero-worship of him in the GOP; many Republicans embrace a more simplified portrait of their idol as an unyielding Cold Warrior who hated communism abroad and government spending at home with equal fervor and almost singlehandedly brought down the Soviet Union with his Washington-establishment-defying willingness to confront Moscow. (See just about every op-ed written by a Republican senator about China in the last decade.)

But Boot's conclusion is a fair reading of the evidence about Reagan's decision-making in office. In interviews I conducted with James Baker, who served as Reagan's treasury secretary and influential White House chief of staff, Baker repeatedly recalled the advice that he would receive from Reagan when faced with a tough choice: "I'd rather get 80 percent of what I want than go over the cliff with my flag flying." Baker told Boot something similar. "He was a true conservative," Baker said of Reagan, "but, boy, was he pragmatic when it came to governing."

Yet it's also fair to remain skeptical on this point. As Boot makes clear, Reagan's pragmatism coexisted with an almost Trumpian disregard for the facts, a disengaged management style that encouraged chronic infighting instead of careful decision-making, and a habit of embracing loony and impractical far-right ideas. Boot sees in these problematic aspects of Reagan an unpleasant foreshadowing of Trump—an "uncomfortable reality" for Reagan

fans to admit. Not surprisingly, these tendencies, such as Reagan's ill-founded conviction that left-wing rulers in Latin America constituted an imminent threat to the United States, led him into some terrible scrapes. At a lunch with Canada's conservative prime minister, Brian Mulroney, Reagan was going on about how dangerous a leftist takeover of El Salvador would be for Texas. "Ron," Mulroney said, "there's not a chance these guys can challenge you anywhere." If only Reagan had listened: the Iran-contra scandal, in which his administration secretly sold weapons to the Iranian government to free American hostages and fund rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist government, flowed directly from Reagan's delusional views, even if Boot finds it credible that the president was so detached from the details of the scheme that it would have been hard for Congress to impeach him over it.

Overall, Boot's book strikes a welcome tone of calm, fact-driven appraisal about a subject who continues to attract over-the-top partisan puffery. It is a nuanced portrait of Reagan for this very unnuanced age. As Boot reminds readers, despite Reagan's forays into extremism, he was also the president who appointed the centrist Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman on the Supreme Court, who took pride in cutting deals with congressional Democrats to reform the tax code and the immigration system, and who invested great power in his nonideological wife, Nancy, whose priority was wanting her Ronnie "to be a really good president," as Reagan's White House director of communications, David Gergen, told Boot.

Boot's narration of Reagan's political rise is particularly revealing, documenting the underappreciated extent to which the former Hollywood actor became radicalized by the conspiracy theories and anticommunist propaganda of the far-right John Birch Society, William F. Buckley's *National Review*, and the conservative weekly *Human Events*, a source of so many of his erroneous claims that his adviser Stuart Spencer would later try unsuccessfully to get Reagan to stop reading it. Boot portrays Reagan as living in a sort of pre–Fox News information bubble that over the course of a single postwar decade, helped transform a liberal supporter of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal into one of Barry Goldwater's most effective national surrogates. After Goldwater's conservative revolution was swamped by President Lyndon Johnson's victory in the election of 1964, Reagan became heir to the movement that would eventually sweep out the old Republican establishment and boost him to the White House in 1980.

Red-baiting and race-signaling were pillars of Reagan's revamped worldview. In a landmark speech backing Goldwater in 1964 dubbed "A Time for Choosing," Reagan told a national television audience that Democratic leaders were "taking the party of Jefferson, Jackson, and Cleveland down the road under the banners of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin." This was, Boot writes, "a grotesque slur" taken directly from the Bircher playbook. That did not matter to Reagan, who loved to scare audiences with fake quotes from Vladimir Lenin and other Soviet boogeymen and continued to use them regardless of how often he was told they were not accurate. One of his favorites: a supposed Lenin prediction that eventually a decadent and weakened United States would fall into

the Soviet Union's "outstretched hands like overripe fruit." (The true source of that phrase, Boot writes, was the 1958 "Blue Book of the John Birch Society.") Reagan kept repeating this fake Lenin line all the way up to and including in his 1990 memoir. The political tactics he adopted will feel painfully familiar to anyone watching Trump attempt to demonize his opponent in this year's campaign as "Comrade Kamala."

Like Trump, Reagan had a soft spot for even the crudest of right-wing dictators. As Boot documents, Reagan seemed to take personal offense at the way his predecessor Jimmy Carter criticized the human rights abuses of various U.S.-allied thugs and tyrants. In one episode, for example, Reagan promised the right-wing leader of Argentina's military junta that he would get "no public scoldings and lectures" from the Reagan administration and offered a virtual endorsement of the junta's so-called Dirty War against left-wing opponents, which led ultimately to the deaths of some 30,000 civilians and the torture of many more. In the minutes of an early National Security Council meeting cited by Boot, Reagan lamented the State Department's focus on such abuses. "We must change the attitude of our diplomatic corps so that we don't bring down governments in the name of human rights," he said, adding, "We can't throw out our friends just because they can't pass the 'saliva test' on human rights."

TO THE RIGHT, TO THE RIGHT

A staple of Reagan hagiography is praising the 40th president for a brilliant strategy to end the Cold War that he almost certainly did not possess. Boot takes a different tack, stating unequivocally that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, not Reagan, was the primary architect of the Soviet Union's demise. Still, Reagan's grappling with the challenge posed by the Soviet Union is central to the case for pragmatic political evolution that Boot wants to make about his presidency, and the book is at its most compelling when it shows Reagan struggling to reconcile his deeply held belief that the communist system was a global menace with his equally profound fear of provoking a catastrophic nuclear confrontation. It bears repeating again and again: the outcome was decidedly not preordained.

In recreating the uncertain environment in which the unlikely relationship between Gorbachev and Reagan developed in the 1980s, Boot does not stint in detailing the U.S. president's halting course—refusing to impose sanctions to impede construction of a Siberian gas pipeline, for example, only to abruptly go ahead with them soon after; scaring the world with escalatory rhetoric about the Soviets while privately approving Secretary of State George Shultz's efforts to open a back channel with the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin. As Boot notes, Reagan also cherry-picked intelligence to suit his views of fearsome Soviet military strength while disregarding internal U.S. government assessments that correctly warned of the implausibility of the "Star Wars" missile defense shield that he wished to build. Tragically, his dream of missile defense would eventually prove to be a deal-killer at the 1986 Reykjavik summit, where he and Gorbachev came closer than any U.S. and Russian leaders ever have to swearing off nuclear weapons.

It's impossible to read Boot's careful book and hold on to the seductive fallacy that Reagan possessed some sort of magic template for eradicating communist dictatorships or a playbook that could work again today if only applied with enough forceful resolve. And yet Reagan still manages here to come across as the hero that perhaps he was at first for Boot—an architect, if not the sole author, of the Soviet demise, who earned a place in history for helping "to peacefully end a 40-year struggle that could have resulted in nuclear Armageddon." Boot writes:

> That Reagan, who entered public life as a staunch anti-Communist in the 1940s and ran for the presidency in 1976 and 1980 as a critic of détente, was working so closely with a Communist leader was the ultimate tribute to his pragmatism.... And, unlike most ideologues of left or right, Reagan was willing to abandon the dogmas of a lifetime when it became evident they no longer applied to a changing world.... That transformation was all the more remarkable coming from a famously stubborn and ideological president who was approaching his [ninth] decade of life.

Of course, Reagan's pragmatism does not explain what happened next to Russia—or what later happened, tragically, to the Republican Party. But his era in U.S. politics was also arguably the laboratory in which the pathologies of the present era were cooked up, a time when a new Republican establishment was born featuring people such as Baker, who would steer the United States to a post–Cold War period of sole superpower dominance, even as ideological insurgents such as Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan began to take over the GOP itself. These internal battles were already raging inside Reagan's faction-ridden White House, though it is clear now that the shared imperative of standing firm against the Soviet threat was a constraint that, once lifted in recent decades, has allowed the party's turn toward extremism. Reagan's final speech to the nation was a love letter to immigrants as the source of U.S. greatness and the secret to why the United States is "unique among nations." He even warned, as if anticipating the direction that his own partisans might take in the future, that if the United States ever shut the door on new citizens, its "leadership in the world would soon be lost." Anyone who listens to that speech today would find it almost impossible to think of the contemporary Republican Party—whose leader spews hateful lies about dog-eating immigrants and vows to carry out mass deportations—as having any connection with its Reagan-era predecessor.

The debasement of the GOP is a story for another book, but there remains much in this one that speaks to the present challenges facing the United States. Russia's return as a U.S. adversary is a reminder that Reagan, and many others in the hubristic few decades after his presidency, mistook the defeat of Soviet-style communism for an ideological victory that could permanently reorder geopolitics. Whether the Democrats can figure out how to deal with a resurgent Russia remains to be seen. What is indisputable, however, is that the Trump-addled Republican Party no longer has either the credibility or the aspiration to pursue Reagan's vision for global leadership. Reagan the pragmatist might recognize the missed opportunities in such a moment; Reagan the ideologue might simply mourn a movement that has lost its way.

REVIEW ESSAY

Can the United Nations Be Saved?

The Case for Getting Back to Basics

THANT MYINT-U

Liberating the United Nations: Realism With Hope
BY RICHARD FALK AND HANS VON SPONECK.
Stanford University Press, 2024, 430 pp.

The quest to fix the United Nations is almost as old as the organization itself. Eighty years ago, Allied leaders imagined a postwar order in which the great powers would together safeguard a permanent peace. The Security Council, dominated by its five veto-wielding members—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China—reflected the world as it was. Other, less hierarchical parts of the new UN system were meant to foster international cooperation across a host of issues: the global economy, public health, agriculture, education. The seeds of a future planetary government were evident from the start.

The UN was initially conceived as a military alliance, but that objective became impossible with the onset of the Cold War. Many observers predicted an early death for the UN. But the organization survived and was soon reenergized, fashioning aims that its founders never imagined, such as peacekeeping. Its secretary-general became a figure on the global stage as the world's preeminent diplomat, jetting off to war zones to negotiate cease-fires. Specialized agencies under the UN, such as its Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a raft of new technical assistance programs spread their wings. For some officials, scholars, and activists both within and outside the UN, a hopeful vision of global government persisted.

THANT MYINT-U is a historian and the author of *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* and the forthcoming book *Peacemaker: U Thant and the Forgotten Quest for a Just World*. From 2000 until 2006, he served at the UN Secretariat in New York and, before that, on peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia.

The American legal scholar Richard Falk and the former German diplomat Hans von Sponeck are clearly in the camp of those who would like to see a far stronger UN. In *Liberating the United Nations*, they make the case for an organization that can deal effectively with the slew of challenges facing the world today, from climate change to nuclear proliferation. They see no alternative. At the same time, they bemoan the UN's current dysfunctional state and its increasing marginalization from the major issues of the day. The global body, they say, "is more needed than ever before and yet less relevant as a political actor than at any time since its establishment in 1945."

The authors provide a detailed overview of the UN's complex structures and multifaceted undertakings and make a spirited attempt to convince readers that a renewed investment in the organization is the best possible path to a better future. They offer a worthy vision of an ideal global body, imagining, for example, a reformed Security Council linked with civil society organizations from around the world. Their prescriptions, however, do not fully account for challenges to the UN's legitimacy and standing. Given today's realities, those who believe in the enduring importance of the UN should not seek to make the institution all things to all people but should instead adopt a laser-like focus on strengthening the organization's most fundamental function: preventing war.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

In Falk and von Sponeck's telling, the UN has demonstrated considerable innovation, even during the Cold War, despite the constraints of that era's superpower rivalry. This was especially true under Dag Hammarskjold, who served as secretary-general from 1953 until his death, in 1961, and pioneered new forms of preventive diplomacy. The speedy deployment of blue-helmeted UN peacekeepers during the Suez crisis in 1956 was a prime example of this early creativity.

By the 1990s, with the Cold War over and Moscow's veto no longer a hindrance to American primacy, the UN expanded its peacekeeping operations, which proved successful in places as far from the seats of power as El Salvador and East Timor. The organization also became an intellectual leader—it crafted, for example, the notion of human development as a counterbalance to the simple metric of per capita GDP.

For Falk and von Sponeck, this was also a period of lost opportunity, as the United States focused its energies on consolidating a new international regime favorable to global capitalism rather than on building the foundation of a UN-centered world government. A series of peacekeeping failures, from Bosnia to Rwanda, colored the lead-up to the turn of the century, by which time the world's post–Cold War enthusiasm for the UN had largely dissipated. The American invasion of Iraq without UN authorization marked a new low point for the organization, demonstrating its impotence in the wake of great-power aggression. Today, Falk and von Sponeck say, in the face of a "dysfunctional ultra-nationalist backlash," the organization is hobbled even more and has little political support

for much-needed amendments to the UN Charter, such as reforming the composition of the Security Council.

There are problems with the book's history. For example, the authors mistakenly describe the crisis in the Republic of the Congo, which drew in the UN in 1960, as being caused principally by "tribal conflicts and ethnic regionalism," when it was very much about attempts by white supremacists to maintain their dominance over Congo—in particular, its vast mineral riches—after the country won independence from Belgium. The authors are also mistaken in suggesting that Hammarskjold supported what they oddly describe as Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba's "radical economic nationalism." The two men were famously at odds, and at least a few of Hammarskjold's aides, if not the secretary-general himself, were complicit in Lumumba's overthrow in 1960.

Far more important, however, is what's missing from the authors' account. For nearly all the peoples of Africa and Asia, the history of the twentieth century was first and foremost a history of empire and their long fights for freedom. Over the late 1950s and early 1960s, representatives from newly independent nations—the "Afro-Asians," as they called themselves—transformed the UN, bringing it to the height of its ambition and vigor. The UN was the mechanism through which they asserted their hard-won independence and shaped and protected their sovereignty. For them, Congo was a test of whether white supremacy would be a mainstay of the postcolonial world.

Falk and von Sponeck correctly mention the critical role played by the UN from its very beginning in the struggle against racism globally and against the apartheid regime in South Africa in particular. But they are incorrect in suggesting that non-Western governments were more interested in the development of a fairer world economy than in the prevention of war. For the Afro-Asians, peace, development, and the realization of human rights were interdependent parts of a bigger project of equality after empire.

The Afro-Asians embraced the UN. In 1961, they were instrumental in the appointment of one of their own to secretary-general: the Burmese diplomat U Thant (my grandfather). In 1962, Thant, working closely with other Afro-Asian leaders, played a pivotal role (which is lost in most narratives) in the de-escalation of the Cuban missile crisis. His mediation efforts between U.S. President John F. Kennedy, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro marked the apex of the organization's work in war prevention. While the Security Council was often deadlocked, the secretary-general and his team of mediators were more active than ever across a variety of conflicts, from Cyprus and India to Pakistan and Vietnam. The UN's record of peacemaking endeavors, which were intimately linked to the ascendancy of what was then called the "Third World" majority, is absent from the book.

REFORM AND REALITY

Liberating the United Nations includes a deep dive into the authors' own experiences in the organization. Falk,

The Room Where It Happens? The UN Security Council chamber, New York City, July 2022

JEENAH MOON / REUTERS

for many decades a professor of international law at Princeton University, was in the early 2010s the UN's special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Von Sponeck, a career international public servant, was the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Iraq in the late 1990s; he resigned in protest over the harm that sanctions did to Iraqi civilians. Both demonstrate the many ways in which their efforts were thwarted by geopolitics—that is, the interests of the United States and other powerful governments. Behind their accounts is the central tension in the book: on the one hand, the authors' desire to see the UN become a kind of global government and, on the other, the political currents frustrating this aim.

Falk and von Sponeck are "puzzled" by the inability of the UN to "gain the political traction needed" to make itself the effective tool for peace that they believe it can be. They contend that over the decades, despite herculean obstacles, the UN has proved itself an "indispensable feature of a sustainable and positive world order." With more funding, "as well as greater forbearance by geopolitical actors and more appreciation by member governments, civil societies, and the media," the world body could again scale new heights.

The obstacle, as they see it, is an "outmoded form of 'political realism'" that "will require an ideological struggle" to overcome. Governments are trapped in their own geopolitical calculations and do not appreciate that the only answer to today's global challenges is a reformed UN at the heart of vigorous global cooperation. For this to happen, they call for a "progressive transnational movement of peoples," one "strong enough to exert a benevolent influence on governmental and

international institutional practices." Only with this kind of groundswell will the UN be able to address "such basic structural problems as predatory capitalism, global militarism, and ecological unsustainability."

The authors are certainly right that the UN has not only survived but succeeded in a number of sectors and settings. It has produced a body of international law unprecedented in history. Its humanitarian agencies would be difficult to replace. In the event of another pandemic, only the World Health Organization, for all its flaws, could coordinate a truly global response.

Falk and von Sponeck place front and center the need to update the composition of a Security Council that is still locked in a World War II–era constellation. There are few, if any, good arguments for denying countries such as India a position at least on par with that of the United Kingdom or for denying non-Western states greater representation more generally. In recent decades, the story of the Security Council has been of a body dominated by five rich countries deliberating conflicts in low-income countries. The unrepresentative composition of the five permanent members leads to a host of inequities, such as the biased appointments of senior officials, that run through the UN system. It is easy to see why enthusiasm for the UN in much of the world has steadily declined.

But any effort to fix the UN today will run against immense political headwinds. It's nearly impossible to imagine a package of changes to the Security Council's membership that could win support among its current permanent members. It's also unclear that any change to the composition of the Security Council, however salutary to the UN's legitimacy, would improve the organization's effectiveness. The only result may be new kinds of deadlock (albeit with perhaps more interesting debates).

There's also a more basic challenge: the plethora of alternative avenues for governments to pursue their interests, including bilateral agreements; regional organizations, such as NATO; and forums, such as the G-20. The UN's headquarters, in New York, was once the only place in the world where representatives of many countries could meet. There were few other summits. Over the late 1950s and early 1960s, the annual General Assembly meetings stood at the very center of global politics, with everyone from Kennedy to Khrushchev to anticolonial revolutionaries, among them Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, all playing their larger-than-life roles in a dramatic theater that gripped the planet.

Falk and von Sponeck conclude that U.S. unilateralism is what has been constraining the UN, with Washington unwilling to invest in the organization's renewal. But surely, it is not only the United States that seeks to act outside the UN. For smaller states, the UN may be the one arena where they have an equal seat at the table. But for others, such as the rising middle powers of the world, there's an ever-increasing menu of options.

MISSION: POSSIBLE

There's a deeper challenge still: the nature of the UN itself. Over the decades, the UN has developed its own culture,

language, and ways of working—invaluable products of the only attempt ever to build an institution that involves all humanity. But it has long been addicted to process over outcome. The organization's built-in need to reflect everyone's views, in every paragraph of every text—in a staff circular as in a General Assembly resolution—too often strips away meaning and value from even its best-intentioned efforts.

The manner in which the UN manages its people is another vexing issue. The organization includes legions of public servants, including aid workers and peacekeepers, who are dedicated to its lofty principles and perform heroically, often under the most trying circumstances. But few of them have benefited from good management. The most capable are rarely recognized for their skill and sacrifice. Governments, especially the great powers, insist on their own (often unqualified) nominees for the top jobs, creating a perversion at the heart of the system that undermines morale, as well as efficiency. An effective UN needs at its core a highly motivated civil service staffed by the most qualified women and men from around the world. It's an area of reform that receives almost no attention.

The default scenario is one in which an unreformed or slightly reformed UN continues evolving a smorgasbord of functions—protecting refugees, facilitating climate change negotiations, providing development assistance—doing well in some areas and less so in others. Its conferences, even if they do not necessarily solve global problems, keep alive dialogue on global issues, at times providing a platform for an array of international civil society organizations. The trouble with this status quo scenario is that by spreading itself thin, the organization is distracting itself from its main purpose of preventing war.

For the foreseeable future, the Security Council, the main body responsible for international peace and security, will likely remain unable to address the primary threats of the day, among them the Russian invasion of Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East, and disputes over Taiwan and territories in the South China Sea. Superpower tensions within the Security Council are nothing new—but they need not stand in the way of preventive diplomacy and mediation. Hammarskjold and Thant's most important peacemaking achievements took place during the Cold War, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the late 1980s, the quiet mediation of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar made possible several peace agreements that set the stage for the end of the Cold War itself.

In the absence of a dynamic, reformed Security Council, the key to future UN success is the secretary-general's role as the world's preeminent diplomat. Peace is the primary business of the UN. There are many conflicts that may well be resolved without any UN role. But the past 80 years demonstrate that the secretary-general, an impartial mediator representing a universal body, is at times indispensable. One who is sidelined on the issues of war and peace will have far less influence with which to lead on global challenges such as climate change and development.

The public expects the UN to head efforts to end war. Today, terrible new wars are destroying the lives

of millions and raising the threat of nuclear confrontation. It's a very different time than the 1990s, when all the great powers were content to dispatch peacekeeping operations to end internal conflicts. The world has returned to a period of warfare between states, exactly what the UN was set up to prevent.

Because there is little oxygen for reforming the UN, whatever oxygen exists needs to be deployed efficiently to restore and broaden the secretary-general's peacemaking role, which can address not only internal conflicts but interstate wars, as well. This will require building a team of experienced in-house mediators who have an intimate knowledge of what the organization can and cannot do. In the past, the UN achieved considerable success through the leadership of officials such as the Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche, who served both Hammarskjold and Thant and was instrumental in dozens of peace efforts around the world.

In this dangerous and uncertain moment, the secretary-general of the United Nations can explore and create opportunities for conflict resolution. Only the UN has the authority and credibility to play this role. And over the coming years, it may make all the difference between global war and peace.

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World BY ANNE APPLEBAUM. Doubleday, 2024, 224 pp.

World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order BY RITA ABRAHAMSEN, JEAN-FRANÇOIS DROLET, MICHAEL C. WILLIAMS, SRDJAN VUCETIC, KARIN NARITA, AND ALEXANDRA GHECIU. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 220 pp.

Two studies offer fascinating portraits of the increasingly sophisticated and networked world of autocracy, dictatorship, and tyranny. Applebaum focuses on the growing connections among hard-core autocratic regimes, led by China, Russia, and Iran and joined by Venezuela, North Korea, Belarus, Sudan, and others. These illiberal states vary widely in their ideologies but are building a larger web of financial, military, technological, and diplomatic ties in their common efforts to evade Western sanctions and stay in power. Applebaum argues that what separates these autocratic states from softer illiberal and authoritarian regimes, such as those in Hungary, India, and Turkey, is the ruthlessness and reach of their dictatorial power and their deep hostility to the Western-led democratic world. Russia is the linchpin in this emerging counterhegemonic system, pioneering the modern model of kleptocracy and dictatorship, organized for the self-enrichment of its leaders, and turning its invasion of Ukraine into a wider ideological and geopolitical assault on the liberal international order. Applebaum argues that Western democracies must reckon with their complicity in the spread of kleptocratic autocracy through offshore banking, money laundering, business deals, and ideological support from right-wing fellow travelers.

The authors of *World of the Right* vividly map the intellectual and political ties of the increasingly globally connected radical right. Focusing primarily on nationalist and populist movements in Canada, the United States, Europe, and Latin America, the authors argue that these seemingly disparate groups have evolved into a

global phenomenon. What they share is a common enemy: liberal elites, who from entrenched positions in the leading institutions of society and the administrative state, are conspiring to undermine sovereignty and traditional values. Such cosmopolitan liberals and technocratic experts threaten, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban put it, the "whole of Western civilization." Through a far-flung network of conferences, think tanks, and political party organizations, the extreme right has increasingly configured itself as a loosely organized transnational radical movement. Its emphasis on civilizational identity and antipathy to liberal internationalism creates opportunities for entanglements with illiberal states, such as China and Russia, that share the goal of dethroning Western liberalism and the U.S.-led international order.

The Dispersion of Power: A Critical Realist Theory of Democracy
BY SAMUEL ELY BAGG. Oxford University Press, 2024, 304 pp.

In this ambitious work of political theory, Bagg argues that defenders of Western democracy tend to struggle because they fail to grapple with underlying material disparities of economic and social power. Pro-democracy advocates typically emphasize the importance of the rules and institutions through which societies make collective decisions—representative elections, direct participation, and good-faith deliberations. Bagg argues that even when the institutions of popular self-rule function properly, democracy can be thwarted by privileged groups that gain outsize access to state power and divert a country's resources for their private enrichment, a threat that looms particularly large today. The book surveys the substantial body of research that shows how elites advance their interests behind the scenes at the expense of the public. Bagg insists that democracies must prevent state capture by the rich and powerful through constitutionalism, competition, antimonopoly laws, collective bargaining, and the redistribution of wealth and resources. These are already esteemed ideals in modern liberal-republican thinking. But if democracy is to survive, they must be better realized.

The Concertation Impulse in World Politics: Contestation Over Fundamental Institutions and the Constrictions of Institutionalist International Relations
BY ANDREW F. COOPER. Oxford University Press, 2024, 400 pp.

Cooper provides a masterful account of the history and logic of modern concert diplomacy. Informal groupings of states, such as the G-7 and G-20, are often seen as weak and inferior forms of governance when compared with the grand rules-based multilateral institutions built after World War II. But as Cooper shows, informal club-like gatherings of states, starting most famously with the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, play an indispensable and underappreciated role in fostering order and cooperation in world politics. Formal intergovernmental institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, have their virtues in

centralizing authority and laying the foundation for inclusive and universalist policy coordination. Smaller clubs, on the other hand, allow like-minded states to move quickly in the face of global crises. In some instances, such as the Concert of Europe, clubs of great powers seek order through the reinforcement of hierarchy and hegemony, while in other instances, such as the G-20 and the so-called BRICS (the group whose first five members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), new groupings of underrepresented states foster cooperation by circumventing old global institutions. If Cooper is right, club-oriented informal governance will grow in importance in today's era of spiraling global crises.

World Statehood: The Future of World Politics
BY HEIKKI PATOMAKI. Springer, 2023, 324 pp.

Peering ahead into the rest of the twenty-first century, Patomaki wonders whether it is possible for future generations to build a system of world government capable of grappling with planetary-scale threats. Combining insights from political theory, history, and a large dose of imagination, the book identifies the complex forces that might steer the world toward a more integrated and functional system of planetary governance—and the forces that would scupper such a project. As Patomaki notes, the idea of world governance is not new. Cosmopolitan thinkers in the eighteenth century offered early visions of a world political community bound by Enlightenment principles. In the aftermath of World War II, intellectuals and activists debated plans for a world federal union. Patomaki is skeptical that a world state will ever emerge from a constitutional moment that formally overturns the Westphalian system of sovereign states. But it would be equally naive to think that the grand intellectual revolutions that have shaped modernity have come to an end. The book convincingly argues that new forms of world political community are possible, but they will only emerge as people reach a larger understanding of their belonging to the planet and not just to countries.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

One From the Many: The Global Economy Since 1850
BY CHRISTOPHER M. MEISSNER. Oxford University Press, 2024, 352 pp.

Most histories of the world economy since the "first age of globalization" that began in the late 1800s revolve around the various domestic and international processes that led to global integration in the nineteenth century, disintegration in the 1920s and 1930s, and reintegration after World War II. Meissner focuses more narrowly on the economic forces and market developments that contributed to these contrasting outcomes. His narrative is clear and concise

while still covering nearly two centuries of global economic development. Against all odds, he ends on a positive note, arguing that if globalization could survive the "China shock" that hit many Western economies after 2000, the euro crisis of 2009–10, and the upheaval of Brexit in 2016, then it can survive anything. He concludes that global cooperation is the only feasible route to combating climate change, harnessing new technologies, and preserving the gains in living standards and welfare achieved in the "second age of globalization" that followed World War II.

Building a More Resilient U.S. Economy
EDITED BY MELISSA S. KEARNEY, JUSTIN SCHARDIN, AND LUKE PARDUE. Aspen Institute, 2023, 286 pp.

Nonpartisan analyses of the economic and financial challenges facing the United States are few and far between. This one, the latest in a series of annual volumes from the Aspen Institute, is a must-read in an election year. Its expert contributors focus on three issue areas: public debts and deficits, investment in the country's youth, and how to navigate shifts in the world economy. The authors identify neglected aspects of these challenges. Bringing the federal debt under control, for example, requires not only restraining spending and reforming Social Security but also addressing pharmaceutical prices that contribute to spiraling Medicare and Medicaid costs. Preparing the country's youth to compete in the twenty-first century entails overcoming pandemic-induced learning loss but also better targeting public assistance for low-income families. Reaping the benefits from globalization involves building more resilient supply chains but also repairing economic relations with China. These careful analyses are not the final word, but they are an important start.

How the World Ran Out of Everything: Inside the Global Supply Chain
BY PETER S. GOODMAN. Mariner Books, 2024, 416 pp.

Framed as an account of the massive supply chain disruption of 2021–22, Goodman's book is in fact much more. It uses vignettes from the COVID-19 pandemic to explain how breakneck deregulation promoted by self-interested business leaders and consultants who prioritized efficiency resulted in fragile supply chains, soaring profits for corporations, and high prices for consumers. This preoccupation with efficiency, manifested in the outsourcing of production and the minimizing of labor costs, led to a disregard for human rights violations in China and for the stressful conditions many American workers faced. In all those respects, the fallout from COVID-19 was a wake-up call. The author concludes that the ideology that captured both U.S. political parties for half a century—that efficiency matters above all—is giving way to an appreciation of the need to rein in corporate power, strengthen labor protections, and avoid the excesses and risks of unrestrained globalization.

Euroshock: How the Largest Debt Restructuring in History Helped Save Greece and Preserve the Eurozone BY CHARLES H. DALLARA. Rodin Books, 2024, 560 pp.

This book by the former managing director of the Institute of International Finance, the international bankers' lobby, is part blow-by-blow account of the Greek debt crisis that started in 2009 and part memoir. Dallara highlights how the Greek government possessed little agency; as a member of the eurozone, the country was represented by a group of European Union deputy finance ministers in debt negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and the private sector. Those deputies lacked a mandate from their heads of state, who were reluctant to contemplate restructuring Greek debt for fear that such a move would cause the crisis to spread to Italy and other heavily indebted European countries. Not until Greece and the eurozone were pushed to the brink did those heads of state, led by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, allow a restructuring of Greece's debt to get underway. Dallara's telling is informed by a rich historical account of the Greek economy and its troubled entanglement with international financial markets. The book is also enlivened by the author's reflections on his own time in Greece, starting in the 1970s, when he was stationed in the country as a navigator on a U.S. Navy destroyer.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

Prisoner of Lies: Jack Downey's Cold War BY BARRY WERTH. Simon & Schuster, 2024, 448 pp.

Along with many other Ivy League graduates who had just missed out on serving in World War II, Jack Downey enthusiastically joined the CIA to fight communism. Unfortunately, his first mission, in 1952, was part of a doomed scheme to encourage an insurgency in China. His plane was shot down, and he was captured. He might have been a candidate for a prisoner exchange were it not for the U.S. government's refusal to acknowledge his belonging to the CIA. As a result, Downey was stuck in China for 20 years, until the Nixon administration's rapprochement with China allowed for his release. Remarkably, Downey emerged from his long captivity as a balanced and still public-spirited individual, going on to marry and attend law school, eventually becoming a judge. Werth relies on Downey's own account of his ordeal, but he skillfully locates this intriguing story, with its interrogations, trials, and false hopes, in the wider context of U.S.-Chinese relations.

Collisions: The Origins of the War in Ukraine and the New Global Instability
BY MICHAEL KIMMAGE. Oxford University Press, 2024, 296 pp.

Kimmage, a historian and former State Department staffer, describes the twisting road from the end of the Cold War, when many observers hoped for a more peaceful and democratic world, to the current dire state of relations between Russia and the West. He takes readers through the crises over Georgia, Libya, and Syria and into the collapse of the presidency of the Russian ally Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine in 2014, the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea, and the full-scale invasion of February 2022. This is a story of failure, so it naturally leads to the apportioning of blame. Although the most fateful and damaging choices were made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kimmage also shows how Western diplomacy combined rhetorical overreach with tentativeness in ways that both irritated and emboldened the Russian leader. He isolates three assumptions left over from the 1990s that have now been shattered: that the new European peace could be permanent; that it could be managed by Europeans without a large American role; and that Russia could be consigned to the periphery of European affairs. *Collisions* is full of arresting detail and nuanced arguments that will keep readers fully engaged.

Up in Arms: How Military Aid Stabilizes—and Destabilizes—Foreign Autocrats
BY ADAM E. CASEY. Basic Books, 2024, 336 pp.

The clash in Western foreign policy between realpolitik imperatives and promoting liberal values comes to a head in the debate about supplying arms to authoritarian regimes. In this original and compelling analysis, Casey asks whether such military aid actually helped autocrats hold on to power. He examines how external backing shaped the domestic politics of dictatorships. The book contrasts U.S. support during the Cold War for regimes in Cambodia, South Korea, South Vietnam, and elsewhere with Soviet support for the likes of Mozambique, Yemen, and the Warsaw Pact countries. He finds that the way the United States delivered arms directly to foreign militaries, in keeping with U.S. views of proper civil-military relations, helped those militaries grow stronger at the expense of civilian leaders—an imbalance that would result in several coups. By contrast, the Soviet approach to military aid stressed preserving regime stability and keeping the army subordinate. It helped develop security services that made coups difficult to execute. This produced greater stability even as it also encouraged corruption.

Stories Are Weapons: Psychological Warfare and the American Mind
BY ANNALEE NEWITZ. Norton, 2024, 272 pp.

Newitz, a gifted fiction writer and journalist, is alarmed by how stories can become weaponized. She reports, for instance, being alerted to the issue in 2020 by the sudden appearance on Twitter during the Black Lives Matter protests of a wholly false story about the entire Washington, D.C., area being in lockdown. This wide-ranging and thought-provoking book covers propaganda, disinformation on social media, and everyday cultural output that perpetuates harmful stereotypes. Newitz turns to the likes of Edward Bernays, often described as the father of public relations, and to Paul Linebarger, who wrote a U.S. Army handbook on psychological warfare. The book offers a variety of examples of stories instrumentalized for political ends, including Benjamin Franklin's fake article from 1782 about a British officer receiving boxes of scalps from Native Americans, the creation of the superhero Wonder Woman in 1941 as "psychological propaganda for a new type of woman," and the use of social media in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, such as messages designed to dissuade Black people from voting by using an old video clip, decontextualized, that suggested Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate for president, was hostile to them. Once a familiar feature of armed conflicts, this weaponization of narratives has become an inextricable part of contemporary culture wars.

Why War?
BY RICHARD OVERY. Norton, 2024, 304 pp.

Overy is best known for his seminal histories of World War II, but here he asks a much more fundamental question, one famously posed by Albert Einstein to Sigmund Freud in 1932: "Why war?" Einstein was unhappy with Freud's answer that the "urge to fight and destroy" was deeply ingrained in the human psyche. If it could be shown that warfare was not natural, Einstein thought, and that war was largely a matter of social organization and political choice, then it was possible to imagine war's abolition. Anthropologists stepped in to insist that notionally "less advanced" societies could manage well without war. But that claim was overturned by later research that showed how such societies were still capable of lethal violence. Overy skillfully parses the development of psychological, biological, ecological, and anthropological theories of war before moving on to the various motives that have been identified as triggers of war, from struggles over resources and beliefs to the more traditional factors of power and security. He concludes that no single theory explains war. The only safe assumption is that humanity is not close to a warless world. Overy's impressive range and erudition match his ambition.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists, and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s
BY JOHN GANZ. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024, 432 pp.

A Great Disorder: National Myth and the Battle for America
BY RICHARD SLOTKIN. Harvard University Press, 2024, 528 pp.

Scholars and journalists searching for the roots of the appeal of Donald Trump and his "Make America Great Again" movement have found them in the early 1990s, when Reaganism suddenly collapsed, the New Right split from traditional Republicanism, and widespread anger and alienation among the American public became more overt. Two very different new books are among the best that focus on this period. Ganz, a Substack author and cultural critic, draws on the full range of his work. The prose is lighthearted, even as the subject matter is anything but. The book opens with the ascent of David Duke, a neo-Nazi and former Ku Klux Klan leader who won an open primary in 1989 for a seat in Louisiana's state legislature and went on to run for higher offices. It progresses through the political rise of the anti-immigrant firebrand Patrick Buchanan and the weird and unsettlingly successful third-party run for president by the businessman Ross Perot. Ganz also tracks the role of the right-wing talk radio host Rush Limbaugh and the lesser-known intellectuals Sam Francis and Joseph Sobran in the growth of radical populism. With democracy having overthrown communism, Sobran wrote, "we can turn to the problem of how to overthrow democracy." Ganz brings piercingly alive the "politics of national despair" that defined a decade strangely at odds with the years that immediately preceded and followed it—an ethos that resonates with the present and its "intensified anti-egalitarianism," "open embrace of corruption and criminality," and "closer popular identification" with great wealth.

Slotkin is well known for his trilogy on the myth of the frontier, which explores the central role violence has played through the American national experience. He uses myth to mean the stories "true, untrue, half-true" that define the character and underlie the culture of a nation-state. The first half of this volume explores what he sees as the four foundational myths of American history: the frontier; the founding of the country; the Civil War (particularly the nostalgic Southern notion of "the Lost Cause"); and World War II. The second half looks through this lens at the culture wars of the past 50 years, from the explosion of debt in the 1980s to Buchanan's populist presidential campaign in 1992 to white Christian dread of the loss of political and cultural supremacy. Trump's appeal, he argues, combines the "ethnonationalist racism of the Lost Cause, an insurrectionist version of the Founding," and "the violent vigilantism and libertarian economics" of the frontier. Unlike in Ganz's narrative, Trump is very much present, especially in an illuminating discussion of the January 6, 2021, insurrection. According to

Slotkin, the movement behind Trump cannot countenance compromise with the opposition; hence, "it can rule, but it cannot govern."

The Art of Power: My Story as America's First Woman Speaker of the House
BY NANCY PELOSI. Simon & Schuster, 2024, 352 pp.

Pelosi in the House
FILMED, PRODUCED, AND DIRECTED BY ALEXANDRA PELOSI. HBO, 2022, 109 mins.

A new autobiography and a 2022 documentary film explore the life and career of Nancy Pelosi, the U.S. representative and former Speaker of the House. *The Art of Power* offers glimpses of an extraordinarily—perhaps uniquely—gifted politician at work. Pelosi broke the "marble ceiling" in a tradition-bound, male-dominated institution through uncanny political instincts, an incredible capacity for hard work, and an energy level sustained over decades that few can match. She bore five children in six years and did not begin her congressional career until 1987, when the youngest was in high school. By then, she had risen to chair California's state Democratic Party while working as a volunteer. In often gripping, minute-by-minute detail, Pelosi recounts notable episodes from her two decades as Democratic leader or Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, including the prelude to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the crafting of emergency legislation to prevent a meltdown during the financial crisis of 2008, the cliffhanger passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, and the January 6 riots.

A revealing, intimate HBO documentary, made over 30 years by Pelosi's filmmaker daughter, enriches and validates the book. In one scene, a pale-faced, obviously fatigued Pelosi successfully ends a call, saying to the camera: "Here's what happens in a negotiation. You can't get tired. You can never get tired." Pelosi has no false modesty. She is candid—in both the book and on film—about her unusual ability to read her colleagues' often hidden intentions, her skills in persuasion and assembling coalitions, her toughness, and her notable courage and laser-focused determination to win. Her 20 years as leader of a fractured party in a closely divided House are a record of accomplishment unlikely to soon—if ever—be equaled.

The National Security Constitution in the Twenty-First Century
BY HAROLD HONGJU KOH. Yale University Press, 2024, 496 pp.

This volume reveals the benefits of Koh's many decades shuttling between stints in government and academia: a seamless blend of practical knowledge and scholarly depth focused on the broad set of issues that constitute national security law. These include human rights, immigration, war powers, intelligence oversight, international negotiation, and the making and breaking of international agreements. Although the Constitution divides authority over foreign policy among the three branches of government, Koh believes that, especially in a crisis, presidents have "institutional incentives to monopolize the response; Congress has incentives to acquiesce; and courts have incentives

to defer." He argues that the slippage of power to the executive has worsened in recent decades. The consequences are felt well beyond the realm of foreign policy by disrupting the checks and balances vital to the health of American constitutional democracy. He describes specific, detailed measures in a broad program of structural reform to restrain the president and correct the passivity of the other two branches.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Indulging Kleptocracy: British Service Providers, Postcommunist Elites, and the Enabling of Corruption
BY JOHN HEATHERSHAW, TENA PRELEC, AND TOM MAYNE. Oxford University Press, 2024, 328 pp.

This crisply written, deeply researched, and clearly argued book examines what the authors dub the United Kingdom's "corruption services industry." Three knowledgeable scholars detail exactly how "enablers" in a variety of industries in the United Kingdom quietly provide essential services to foreigners with ill-gotten gains. These enablers help the foreigners hide cash, re-list companies to protect assets, quietly purchase real estate, burnish reputations on the Internet, gain status by arranging gifts to charities, buy friends with contributions to political parties, track and investigate enemies, and silence critics by threatening expensive lawsuits. Most enablers act entirely within the law: they are respectable bankers and accountants, lawyers and real estate brokers, public relations and media professionals, university fundraisers and political activists, bodyguards and concierges. Yet their activities make the United Kingdom a major force in sustaining global networks of corruption closely linked to violent and repressive autocrats, especially in Russia and other former communist countries. The book is a model of relevant academic research and is essential reading for anyone who seeks to understand how money moves around the world in the twenty-first century.

The New Politics of Poland: A Case of Post-Traumatic Sovereignty
BY JAROSLAW KUISZ. Manchester University Press, 2023, 376 pp.

This book seeks to explain the rise of Law and Justice, the populist far-right party that ruled Poland from 2015 through 2023. Its conservative social values, its anti-EU sentiments, and the democratic backsliding that it presided over sparked international controversy and opposition. Kuisz, a policy analyst and scholar, argues that Poland suffers from a "post-traumatic" relationship with its own history, owing to its being conquered repeatedly by larger neighbors. This legacy encourages Poles to defend their sovereignty with particular ferocity. Yet Kuisz does not attempt to show that this tendency influenced voters or politicians who recently supported the far right. The book's real strength lies in the detailed and even-handed way it reviews the wide array of factors that contributed to the success of the extreme right: robust economic

growth, poverty-reducing redistributive policies, the support of the Roman Catholic Church, the generally conservative social values of many Poles, and divisions within an opposition that still had links to the communist era. The authors completed the book before the 2023 election brought an opposition coalition led by the liberal Donald Tusk into government, but this remains the best English-language guide to the last decade of Polish politics.

Out of the Darkness: The Germans, 1942–2022
BY FRANK TRENTMANN. Knopf, 2024, 816 pp.

This rich history traces the "moral transformation of Germany" from the depths of Nazism to its liberal present. Germans, Trentmann argues, turn "all social, economic and political problems into moral ones." The book begins in 1942 with a description of how individual Germans resisted the growing sense of their culpability for World War II by insisting on their personal innocence. After the war, many Germans recounted their suffering through fascist rule, Anglo-American bombing, and Soviet occupation and "ethnic cleansing." Through the 1960s and 1970s, Germans reversed course, taking public responsibility for the Holocaust. German foreign policy exhibited an uneasy combination of ethical consciousness (including eschewing war and providing assistance for refugees and poorer countries) and a willingness to stake a central role in the Cold War and support military action in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. As he reaches the present, Trentmann seems less sure whether the absence of a single compelling narrative today marks a lack of moral imagination or the rise of a more modest and mature political sensibility.

Putin's Exiles: Their Fight for a Better Russia
BY PAUL STAROBIN. Columbia Global Reports, 2024, 126 pp.

Russia has produced waves of exiles: liberal Decembrists fled in the early nineteenth century, Marxists and anarchists in the early twentieth century, and anticommunists through much of the twentieth century. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, over one million Russians have left the country, including tech workers and Orthodox priests. This slim volume paints an evocative portrait of their varied motives and attitudes, based mostly on colorful interviews conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia; Yerevan, Armenia; and remote Central Asian posts. Starobin tries hard to depict these exiles as idealists akin to the young Germans who fought for public acknowledgment of their compatriots' complicity in Hitler's crimes during World War II, and to the American antiwar protesters of the 1960s. But his admirably even-handed account does not banish the suspicion that many of today's exiles left to avoid the draft, protect their assets, or evade a crackdown on independent media and arts. Still more difficult to accept is Starobin's core argument that such dissidents could bring about the demise of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The more likely outcome, he finally acknowledges, is tragedy: like Russian dissidents in previous eras, many may

well end their lives in a prison camp or in distant exile.

The Natural Border: Bounding Migrant Farmwork in the Black Mediterranean
BY TIMOTHY RAEYMAEKERS.
Cornell University Press, 2024, 240 pp.

Written after five years of ethnographic research in the Italian regions of Basilicata and Puglia, this book is hampered by its chatty, jargony, self-referential prose—yet the underlying story is important. It describes a southern Italian rural world defined not by vibrant traditional family and communal life but by the exploited labor of West African migrants. The downward pressure on prices through the concentration of wholesale distribution and supermarket chains means large-scale commodity production, such as tomato growing, is today possible only under conditions few European workers would tolerate. But the public will not accept spreading migrant workers throughout the countryside, never mind affording them the same rights as Italian laborers. Instead, violent gangs and ethnic networks have organized the lives and work of these migrants. The Italian state and nongovernmental organizations also jointly run some more formal agricultural camps with the aim of both ensuring the humane treatment of the workers and surveilling and restricting their behavior to the satisfaction of politicians and employers. Migrant workers receive low wages and must endure racial discrimination and fraud. Their experience reflects the dark underbelly of food production not just in Italy but in many wealthy democracies.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

Embracing Autonomy: Latin American–U.S. Relations in the Twenty-First Century
BY GREGORY WEEKS. University of New Mexico Press, 2024, 200 pp.

Weeks joins a growing group of scholars recognizing Latin America's powerful agency in inter-American diplomacy. But while Latin American governments hope to widen their room for maneuver or "autonomy"—a slippery concept that Weeks fails to fully clarify—few have sought to outright reject the United States. The costs of striving for "radical autonomy" are prohibitively high, as the United States' treatment of Cuba has demonstrated. Weeks shows how the hot anti-American rhetoric of some Latin American leaders is usually followed by more pragmatic policies. Especially in the Caribbean basin, many leaders feel a strong affinity toward Washington and prefer alignment to antagonism. For its part, the United States remains the most influential power in the region, but Washington's greater flexibility and tolerance of political diversity—and its recent self-restraint in ruling out aggressive military or covert responses—allows Latin Americans more latitude for bargaining on specific issues of national interest. Predictably, Weeks laments that chronic divisiveness among Latin American governments dilutes their potential negotiating strength.

Our Comrades in Havana: Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe, 1959–1991
BY RADOSLAV YORDANOV. Stanford University Press, 2024, 354 pp.

Yordanov consulted more than 20 archives across Eastern Europe, as well as in Russia, Cuba, and the United States, to craft this superbly-constructed history of Cold War diplomacy. The evidence he culled from colorful diplomatic correspondence supports the notion that tensions and doubts dogged relations between Moscow and Havana. The Soviets and their Eastern European colleagues never fully trusted Cuba's impulsive nationalist leader, Fidel Castro, even as he often served their purposes, particularly in pulling the Non-Aligned Movement closer to Moscow's "anti-imperialist" orbit. The Eastern European capitals chafed at the costs of subsidizing Cuba's inefficient economy and hoped that Cuba's admission to the Soviet-led trading union would help rectify Havana's mismanagement. Initially, the Soviets and Eastern Europeans urged their Cuban comrades to copy their models of centralized socialist planning, only to later criticize Havana's leadership for failing to counter the consequent bureaucratic resistance to reform. Interestingly, U.S. intelligence assessments about Cuba often closely tracked those of their Soviet and Eastern European counterparts.

North American Regionalism: Stagnation, Decline, or Renewal? EDITED BY ERIC HERSHBERG AND TOM LONG. University of New Mexico Press, 2023, 296 pp.

Inspired by the successes of the European Union, in the optimistic 1990s the United States, Canada, and Mexico launched the visionary North American Free Trade Agreement. But rather than inaugurating an era of ever deepening regional integration, NAFTA proved an inspirational high point. As NAFTA promised, intraregional trade and investment flows rose dramatically, but nationalist tensions have since undermined efforts at effective and durable trinational cooperation on contentious issues such as immigration, drug and arms trafficking, and the energy transition. The strengthening of multilateral institutions, so vital in the integration of the European Union, has also lagged badly among the three neighboring states. Co-editors Hershberg and Long smartly go beyond supranational institutions, considering not only top-down executive branch initiatives but also transnational dealings between social actors (such as corporations and nonprofits) and subnational actors (state and provincial governments), and assessing the influence of more subjective notions, such as national identity and the acceptance or rejection of neighboring political systems and cultures.

"The New Polarization in Latin America: Sources, Dynamics, and Implications for Democracy." *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 66, no. 2, May 2024.

This outstanding special issue of a leading scholarly journal explores recent trends in political polarization in the Western Hemisphere and worldwide. Polarization is hardly novel in Latin America—the 1960s and 1970s, after all, witnessed traumatic democratic breakdowns and violent authoritarian takeovers. By contrast, the new polarization typically occurs among actors within the democratic arena. The top-notch contributors recognize that definitive generalizations offering explanations for economic disparities, cultural divides, and political conflict across many countries are difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, some insights offer grounds for hope. With just two exceptions (Nicaragua and Venezuela), democracies in Latin America are proving to be resilient and enduring, even if they are weak by some measures. Modest polarization may actually strengthen democracy by forcing debates and encouraging public participation. The authors suggest positive measures to prevent divisive debates from leading to autocratic rule, such as keeping democratic guardrails in place, building broad-based democratic coalitions, and fostering leadership that can craft campaign narratives that cut against polarization.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

Dear Unknown Friend: The Remarkable Correspondence Between American and Soviet Women
BY ALEXIS PERI. Harvard University Press, 2024, 304 pp.

Peri's book was inspired by an extraordinary stroke of luck: she discovered, forgotten in a Russian archive, thousands of letters between Soviet and American women dating from 1943 to 1953. The Soviet government initiated the correspondence in early 1943 with the aim of soliciting American aid for its war effort, and the Red Army's triumph in Stalingrad in February that year inspired many American women to get involved. This epistolary exchange was never private: both states organized and supervised it, and the Soviets undertook all the translations. Most of the Americans involved were housewives, whereas the Soviet women, often bereft of their men owing to tremendous war casualties, tended to emphasize their professions and jobs in the correspondence. Some of these unlikely friendships lasted several years, with pen pals moving beyond personal experience to explore their differences. Although Soviet letter writers defended socialism and collective solidarity and their American counterparts praised Christianity and the American dream, their discussions remained amiable and intimate, even amid the increasingly fierce confrontation of the Cold War.

Legitimating Nationalism: Political Ideology in Russia's Ethnic Republics
BY KATIE L. STEWART. University of Wisconsin Press, 2024, 312 pp.

Through research conducted between 2014 and 2017 in three of Russia's ethnic republics (Buryatia, Karelia, and Tatarstan), Stewart examines the ways in which regional identity fits into the Kremlin's scheme of nation building and efforts to buttress the legitimacy of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime. Stewart's fieldwork, which included attending holiday celebrations and visiting museums and local monuments, revealed some elements that challenged Moscow's overarching nation-building narrative. For instance, a regional history textbook in Tatarstan mentions "the illegality and violence of the territory's absorption into Russia" in the sixteenth century. That students in Tatarstan could read an account so critical of Russian imperialism was not an oversight of the Russian state but part of its plan. Stewart argues that the Kremlin successfully broadened the sense of national pride and belonging in ethnic republics by allowing a modicum of diversity in viewpoints. But by the time Stewart was finishing her book, that permissiveness had vanished, and Putin's regime had shifted toward emphasizing the centrality of ethnic Russian identity. Constitutional amendments in 2020 proclaimed Russian to be the language of the

"state-forming nation," relegating the Tatar language in schools in Tatarstan to an elective subject.

The Gulag Doctors: Life, Death, and Medicine in Stalin's Labour Camps
BY DAN HEALEY. Yale University Press, 2024, 368 pp.

Drawing from archival collections in the Russian North and Far East, as well as on doctors' memoirs, Healey describes the drama of being a doctor in the Soviet gulag's labor camps in the 1920s through the 1950s. He shows how doctors and nurses were caught between the cruel power of camp administrators and the imperatives of their own professional ethics. Whereas administrators wanted to maximize the productivity of the prisoners, doctors sometimes showed compassion to the inmates who were exhausted by hard labor, severely malnourished, and sequestered in unsanitary conditions. The lack of medical resources commonly reduced professional assistance to what was called "hospitalization"—an opportunity to spend a few days in a warm ward with clean sheets and a somewhat better diet. A special chapter is devoted to the work in the camp morgues: inexplicably, despite a blatant disrespect for the dead, who were often buried unclothed and in mass graves, the gulag administration demanded that every dead prisoner receive an autopsy. Healey traces the lives of his characters after the gulag and through the end of the Soviet Union, when some of them chose to share their ordeals with the public.

Monuments for Posterity: Self-Commemoration and the Stalinist Culture of Time
BY ANTONY KALASHNIKOV. Cornell University Press, 2023, 216 pp.

In his thorough historical exploration of memorials and magnificent edifices in Stalin's Soviet Union, Kalashnikov argues that the frenzy of monument building and grand architectural projects was driven less by propaganda and more by the regime's desire to immortalize itself for future generations. The Soviet government spared no human or material expense in pursuing these projects. Even during the fierce battles of World War II, the state continued to build ornately decorated metro stations in Moscow and, in the early postwar years, erected the iconic "Seven Sisters" high-rises amid utter devastation, famine, and an abominable housing shortage. The author's point that these grand edifices were intended to last for centuries, if not eternity, and define the Soviet Union's future is somewhat obvious, but his more intriguing argument is that an obsession with commemoration compensated for the anxiety caused by the dramatic upheavals of the early Soviet decades and the enormous losses of World War II. It's not surprising, therefore, that Soviet commemorative constructions often resemble public buildings in Nazi Germany, as well as some democratic countries that had experienced collective disillusionment in the interwar period and sought to recover from the carnage and devastation of World War I.

Tamizdat: Contraband Russian Literature in the Cold War Era
BY YASHA KLOTS. Northern Illinois University Press, 2023, 330 pp.

Combining cultural history with literary analysis, Klots chronicles the phenomenon of *tamizdat*, the smuggling of manuscripts out of the Soviet Union for publication in the West. Klots primarily focuses on gulag literature, which began to surface soon after Joseph Stalin's death, in 1953. Although Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in the Soviet Union in 1962, most other gulag-related works were deemed unpublishable within the country and found their way to the West. Klots explains that Solzhenitsyn's famous novella was acceptable because its peasant protagonist, with his "life-affirming pathos" and ability to find "work enthusiasm" even as a gulag prisoner, made him a positive hero compatible with the strictures of socialist realism. The manuscripts, spirited out by Western diplomats, journalists, and academics, ventured beyond the control of their authors, who were locked behind the Iron Curtain. This led to inevitable editorial flaws, but more damaging to the reception of this literature was a significant cultural divide: the experiences and language of *tamizdat* authors felt alien and often incomprehensible to early Western publishers, editors, and critics, many of whom were émigrés who had fled Russia decades earlier.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East
BY MOHAMED ZAYANI AND JOE F. KHALIL. Oxford University Press, 2024, 316 pp.

Digital information and communication technologies have upended virtually all aspects of life in the last 30 years. Zayani and Khalil trace the profound if uneven impact of this technological revolution across the Middle East. New tools often seem to offer societies the chance to leapfrog developmental stages. The much-lamented dearth of landline telephones in 1980s Egypt, for example, was overcome by the virtually universal adoption of mobile phones in the following decades. Technology also challenges time-honored social and political hierarchies, as the use of Facebook and Instagram by antigovernment protesters across the region has shown. Examining the effects of online platforms, as well as hardware such as satellites and fiber-optic cable, the authors soberly conclude that rich and poor countries alike cannot resist these technologies, as tempting as it may be to try. New technology is a double-edged sword; governments are damned if they wield it and damned if they don't.

The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East
BY STEVEN A. COOK. Oxford University Press, 2024, 208 pp.

From his perch at the Council on Foreign Relations as a long-standing analyst of U.S. Middle East policy, Cook provides a bird's-eye view of the origins of American involvement in the region during the Cold War and of the audacious aspirations unleashed by Washington's apparent victory over Moscow. Once concerned only with guaranteeing access to the region's oil, ensuring the security of Israel, and checking Soviet ambitions, U.S. policymakers mistook the triumph over the Soviets as an opportunity to transform the Middle East by promoting peace and democracy. A litany of presidential blunders ensued: Bill Clinton's failure to secure an Arab-Israeli settlement; George W. Bush's catastrophic campaign in Iraq; Barack Obama's dithering about supporting popular uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Syria; Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal; and Joe Biden's misreading of the lay of the land when his administration declared the region "quieter today than it has been in decades" on the eve of the catastrophic war provoked by the October 7 attack on Israel. In considering the future, Cook tries to walk a thin line between hasty U.S. retreat and American overinvestment, but his call for "judiciousness, discretion, balance, and efficiency" serves better as a description of his own book's qualities than as watchwords for a new regional policy.

The Ghosts of Iraq's Marshes: A History of Conflict, Tragedy, and Restoration
BY STEVE LONERGAN, JASSIM AL-ASADI, AND KEITH HOLMES. The American University in Cairo Press, 2024, 274 pp.

A stunningly lyrical evocation of the marshes of southern Iraq and the people who call them home, this book follows the life of the irrigation engineer Jassim Al-Asadi. From his childhood in the wetlands to his university education in Baghdad (which included a stint in Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's prisons) to his lifelong efforts as an advocate and activist to protect, save, and eventually restore the landscapes and livelihoods of the region, Al-Asadi's life follows the arc of modern Iraqi history. He witnessed the devastating battles of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the ruinous 1990 Iraqi invasion of and subsequent retreat from neighboring Kuwait, the failed uprising in the early 1990s against Saddam's government and the reprisals of a spiteful regime bent on draining and destroying the marshes, and the chaotic collapse of infrastructure in the wake of the U.S. invasion in 2003. Despite all these upheavals, the love of the people of the marshes for their remarkable homeland is undiminished. Weaving poetry and environmental science, political analysis and ancient history, mythology and hydrology, the book is at once an edifying and captivating tale about a region threatened yet again by human failures, now in the form of climate change.

Shouting in a Cage: Political Life After Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa
BY SOFIA FENNER. Columbia University Press, 2023, 280 pp.

Drawing on the experiences of the once vibrant and vital nationalist parties of Egypt and Morocco, Fenner traces the decline of mass movements that won their countries' independence yet deteriorated into largely impotent ornaments of autocratic regimes. Shorn of popular backing—they are reduced to "shouting in a cage"—the modern parties are usually assumed to have been co-opted by rulers who ply their members with material incentives in return for docility. But as Fenner shows, this explanation does not always ring true; there is little genuine evidence of such payoffs, and both the Wafd Party in Egypt and the Istiqlal Party in Morocco have exhibited flashes of independence that do not serve the purposes or needs of the regimes. Instead, she argues, these parties are committed to a "romantic narrative" in which they see themselves sustaining hope for democracy in the future, relying in the meantime on a small number of families to produce successive generations of hopeful thinkers. It is a plausible account, illustrating the constricted space for the opposition in autocracies that are themselves built around small circles of family and friends.

Reading Herzl in Beirut: The PLO Effort to Know the Enemy
BY JONATHAN MARC GRIBETZ. Princeton University Press, 2024, 408 pp.

From 1965 until the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Palestine Liberation Organization sponsored a research center housed in Beirut. The Israelis eventually seized the center's library, only to return the collection in a prisoner exchange the following year, whereupon it seems to have disappeared during the PLO's exile in North Africa. The library's catalogs were preserved, however, and Gribetz has found and read much of the center's work and met a number of its surviving researchers. This fascinating book is an exploration of the collection, which was largely devoted to books about Judaism, Zionism, and Israel, from translations of texts from Arthur Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea* to a deep analysis of the Talmud by a member of the center's research staff to maps of Israel's road system. Gribetz paints a picture of serious and creative scholars who, although hardly disinterested, deployed excellent language skills, a deep dedication to learning, and genuine curiosity. Gribetz is too careful a scholar to overstate his claims, but he concludes that the center's sober, critical approach to knowledge production likely contributed to debunking conspiracies and tempering dogmatism among supporters of the PLO.

Asia and Pacific

ANDREW J. NATHAN

China's Age of Abundance: Origins, Ascendance, and Aftermath
BY WANG FENG. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 272 pp.

By shifting attention from commonly used GDP data to consumption data, Wang presents a fresh picture of China's four decades of high-velocity economic growth. When Chinese leaders began to usher in reforms in the late 1970s, the average person ate 20 pounds of meat per year. Now, the average person eats closer to 100 pounds of meat per year and obesity is a growing problem. Before the reforms, many Chinese people bought one set of new clothes and shoes per year; the country now tops the world market for luxury fashion. Wang traces similar changes in housing, furniture, home appliances, transportation, overseas travel, computers, and phones. This world-beating record, which represented the emergence of an enormous new middle class, owed much to the cheap labor of workers from the countryside who were often denied legal urban residence in China's household registration system. They served as inexpensive labor in farming, manufacturing, construction, and gig work, a capable and talented underclass made in large part by public health and primary education programs put in place well before economic reforms. Wang says the rate of change in lifestyles is now slowing because of the dwindling reserve of rural labor and a less favorable international environment. But tightened political control could, he warns, "once again send China down a road of economic stagnation and social suffocation."

Institutional Roots of India's Security Policy
EDITED BY MILAN VAISHNAV. Oxford University Press, 2024, 336 pp.

Vaishnav and his contributors find pervasive "capacity gaps" afflicting India's key security institutions—the army, navy, air force, paramilitary and border forces, intelligence agencies, and police and investigative agencies. The problems include understaffing and weak personnel management; ill-conceived training; inefficient procurement processes; reliance on weapons platforms that come from too many different foreign suppliers; turf wars not only among but even within service branches; an ambiguous nuclear use doctrine; and weak civilian oversight. With only two aircraft carriers, the navy is not strong enough to establish dominance in the Indian Ocean. The air force flies an unwieldy mix of aircraft from France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, with few of domestic manufacture. Mutual distrust hampers cooperation between the domestically oriented and externally oriented intelligence agencies. Human rights abuses mar the performance of poorly trained army units in Kashmir and of paramilitaries and police units elsewhere. India is an emerging U.S. security partner that aspires to the role of a leading global power. But this informative book shows that it still cannot deal well with long-standing

security challenges from China and Pakistan on its borders or insurgencies and communal violence at home.

North Korea's Mundane Revolution: Socialist Living and the Rise of Kim Il Sung, 1953–1965
BY ANDRE SCHMID. University of California Press, 2024, 352 pp.

To promote recovery after decades of colonial subjugation and the turmoil of the Korean War, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's regime promoted a set of urban programs called the New Living in the 1950s. Like other devastated societies, North Korea had a shrunken population and shortages of labor and housing. To push women to marry and bear children, the government built small apartments suitable for nuclear families, equipped them with Scandinavian-style furniture, publicized feminine hairstyles and clothing, and created legal obstacles to divorce. At the same time, however, it tried to push women into factory, office, and construction jobs, with limited success. The population rose by a staggering 46 percent in the short period covered by this book, and North Korea's economy grew faster than South Korea's. But the regime was also busy nationalizing private enterprises; building a state-owned heavy industry sector; collectivizing agricultural production; creating its unique, discriminatory class-status system known as *songbun*; and fostering the supreme leader's cult of personality. If the policies of the early years placed regressive demands on women, they look like a happy dream compared with what the regime did to families in the years that followed.

Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar
BY ELLIOTT PRASSE-FREEMAN. Stanford University Press, 2023, 366 pp.

Accustomed to the violence and neglect of the Burmese state, its citizens seldom claimed their rights during the period of ostensibly democratic rule that lasted from 2011 to 2021. Instead, most of them expressed dissent by practicing what Prasse-Freeman calls "refusal"—banging pots and pans to symbolize driving out evil spirits, posting photos of women with facial injuries to remind people of police torture, hanging women's sarongs in public in violation of modesty norms to taunt soldiers, and repurposing traditional curse ceremonies to call out corrupt officials. After the military retook power in a 2021 coup, refusal evolved into open resistance, and since the book was published, armed opposition groups have grown strong enough to threaten the military's grip. Refusal, in Prasse-Freeman's telling, is a culturally coded behavior that takes different forms in different countries. Properly decoded, it reveals how close a population is to revolt.

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The Chinese Computer: A Global History of the Information Age
BY THOMAS S. MULLANEY. MIT Press, 2024, 376 pp.

Most people who compose texts in Chinese characters no longer use brushes or pens; they use QWERTY keyboards. They do so through a more complicated version of the autocomplete software now familiar to people who write in English on computers or cellphones. Mullaney's spirited narrative, half detective story, half history of technology, is a sequel to his equally fascinating book on the invention of the Chinese typewriter. It reaches back to the late-nineteenth-century problem of how to send Chinese characters by telegraph, extends through a mid-twentieth-century project to analyze which brushstrokes appear most often in Chinese characters, and ends with the near future, when computers will instantly offer writers not one or two Chinese characters at a time, but whole phrases, once the writer types just the first few letters of the first character's sound. It is already faster to compose text in Chinese characters than in an alphabetic language, a startling reversal of the long-standing belief that the Chinese written language could not survive in the modern age.

FOR THE RECORD

The article "America Isn't Ready for the Wars of the Future" (September/October 2024) suggested that Azerbaijan's military seized the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. In fact, the seizure was completed three years later.

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—Stephanie Solomon, Chief Revenue Officer

THE ARCHIVE

July 1928

"Our Foreign Policy: A Democratic View"

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

During the 1928 presidential campaign, Franklin Roosevelt—then months away from becoming New York's governor—took to our pages to lament what he saw as rising isolationism among Americans. With the right leadership, he argued, the United States could "regain the world's trust and friendship," and his essay laid out a strategy for doing so. Roosevelt's fellow Democrat, Al Smith, would lose the election to Herbert Hoover. But when Roosevelt became president four years later, the foreign policy he would put in place would in many ways fulfill the vision he had outlined in Foreign Affairs.

Since the summer of 1919 our country has had to face the charge that in a time when great constructive aid was needed in the task of solving the grave problems facing the whole earth, we have contributed little or nothing save the isolated Naval Conference of 1921. Even here the ground gained was not held. The definite sacrifices we made were not productive because we assumed that a mere signature was enough; no machinery was set up to finish the work. This is a negative charge. On the positive side, we must admit also that the outside world almost unanimously views us with less good will today than at any previous period. This is serious unless we take the deliberate position that the people of the United States owe nothing to the rest of mankind and care nothing for the opinion of others so long as our seacoasts are impregnable and our pocketbooks are filled.

An analysis of our own history disproves the accusation that this selfish spirit is the real American spirit. In the debates during the war of the Revolution and in the long discussions immediately preceding the adoption of the Constitution it was plain that careful thought was being given to every conceivable form of government in the hope that what the United States finally adopted might serve as a pattern for other peoples, especially in regard to the spirit that should govern the relations of one state with another. The words of the Declaration of Independence itself invoke a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind."

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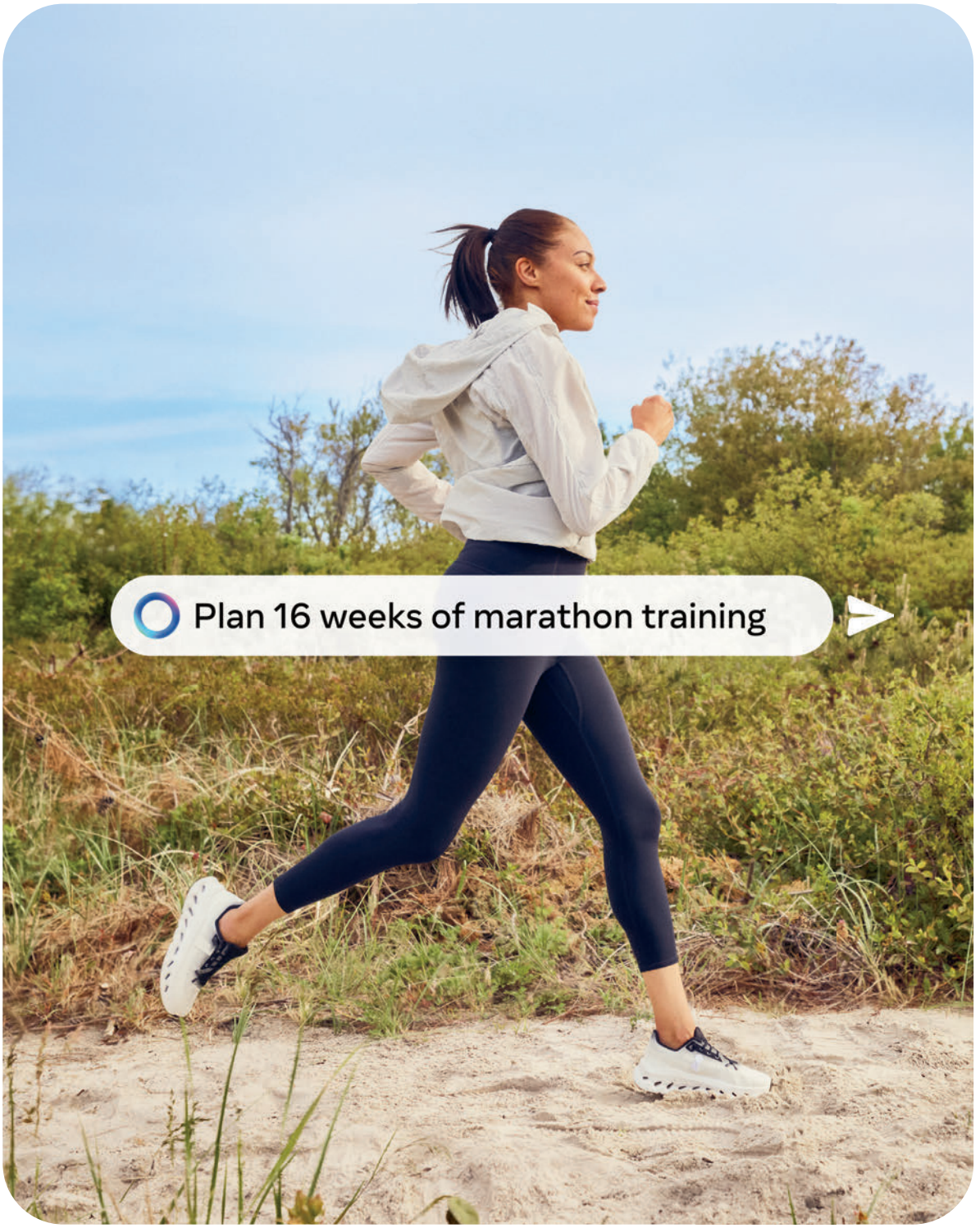

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